

THE TRIAL OF SALLINIQUAI

A prequel to
The Salliniquai Chronicles

STELLA FLETON

THE TRIAL OF SALLINQUAI

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REVIEWS

Join Juggernaut, Smudge-Face, and Sally as they try to work out what exactly happened THAT weekend, and what the hell is an orballoon anyway?!

Stella effortlessly draws you into the world of the Empress, who is so ready to draw in the Aquarian age, yet still clueless on the reality of the Earthly realm.

What adventures will follow her impetuousness as she learns four deeply spiritual lessons in the mortal realm? Read on and find out!

Stella's first novel is a fast-paced, mystery that leaves you wanting more. Her attention to detail means you can listen to the music, and pick up any book mentioned for yourself, allowing you to expand your own knowledge and wisdom.

The delightful way in which she weaves in Pagan themes, and her favourite places gives the book a spiritual and other-worldly feel yet leaves you feeling you could join the girls for their pizza party, you just have to knock on the door!

A must read for 2024!

Charlotte Pardy MA
Pagan Priestess and Psychotherapist
The Mother Wound Whisperer

"A fantastic and spellbinding story ..."

Philip Carr-Gomm
Author of *Druid Mysteries*

Marvellacious! The Salliniquai Chronicles has unique fantasy realms with fresh concepts and extraordinary characters. If the seeker's quest in THE CELESTINE PROPHECY (James Redfield) resonates, and if you enjoyed the multicultural dynamics of WHITE TEETH (Zadie Smith) then, you will love The Salliniquai Chronicles.

A. T. Flowers
Author of *The Serenity Experience*

The Trial of Salliniquai

DEDICATION

For Rachel Doris Bernard
My strength, my spirituality, my Mum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A huge thank you to those whose feedback and support
inspired me to keep going.

Ben Fletton, Anna James, Kristin Hammel, Kate Oram, Lucy Knight,
ATF, Sue Trudgian, Kandyce Walters, and Joanne Walter.

CONTENT WARNING

This book contains adult themes, and scenes that some readers
may find distressing, including; violence and threats of death.

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Knowing how a story ends means little until one knows how
terrifying the journey was and the courage it took to battle
countless, life-threatening odds to get there.

The Alchemist

The T references in THE SALLINQUAI CHRONICLES series refers to a secondary level of detail in Sallinquai's epic adventure relating to characters, scenery, conversations, shenanigans, revelations, official procedures, and such. These excerpts are published in *The Books of Malsimily Translations. (Vol 3)*

The Omnipresent Timekeeper

PART ONE

SALLY plays
the GAME of DEATH.

Prologue

Sally and Salliniquai.

In the Human Physical Realm...

A violent twist. A sharp turn. A bone-breaking tumble in a body as light as a feather... and at the same time, as heavy as a leaden weight.

Sally Vincent-Payne jerks spasmodically, her muscles stiffening and wrenching tight.

Sally gasps, trying to catch a breath but there is no air to breathe even as it whistles past her ears in a frightfully deafening roar.

Sally screams wildly as she falls, and falls, down and down into darkness. Into death.

*

In the magical Realm of the Empress...

"But... this is only a game. Isn't it?" The Awakener's deep voice echoes around the Cradle's cavernous chamber, the words seeming to scramble and tumble over the ever-present roar of the enormous, indoor waterfall.

"It is called the game of death for a reason." The Alchemist points out. Their wispy robe shows glimpses of their naked body through the fine, feather-light layers as they stand before a silvery smooth, silken symbol of Venus. "That reason being so she who comes can play the Game of Life."

The Timekeeper's head lifts, and their brows knit together when their magical rings click, and chime, and communicate in ways no other but they understand.

"She whose wiley ways spell trouble as she *lives* not plays, the game of life." They quietly correct. "The goddess of femininity herself... Empress Salliniquai. But before this incredibly delicate situation becomes further complicated, she must..." Their grey-green eyes brighten to a silver glow and they stop talking mid-sentence. "One moment. It seems the Elevated One requires our assistance. At once."

Heavily-ringed hands lift the hood of the dusky, there but not there, seen but not seen cloak covering their brown face and purple-black hair in smoky shadow. In an instant, they shimmer away.

The Awakener turns to the graceful Alchemist, catching a soft, indulgent smile on their full lips, and a knowing twinkle in their deep green eyes. "Alchemist. Pray tell, am I missing something?"

"My dear Awakener..." They say with a hint of a smile. "Things are about to get interesting. Very interesting indeed..."

The omnipresent Timekeeper

1

In the magical Realm of the Empress...

Time and translations.

"The time translation has started, Elevated One. The flashback links are forming now. Infusion shall begin on the evening before it all kicks off... right... about... there, while she sleeps," the Timekeeper says as they deftly slide their fingers over a heavy ring of a metallic, burgundy hue. It doubles in size and a small, opaque orb of a silvery-purple hue appears hovering before them. It fades into transparency revealing the face of a young girl with honey-coloured skin, a gap-toothed smile, and sparkling emerald-green eyes.

The Timekeeper draws back and their robe, appearing solid when they hover in place, is layered in smoky shadows as they move, giving an ethereal quality to their movements. The time aspect of the magical rings slow as the translation element initiates. The projection ceases, and the ring abruptly returns to its normal size.

The Elevated One's brows shoot up in surprise at the strange *kicks*

off reference, but whilst in the midst of important business they shrug it off and turn to the Timekeeper.

"Which object did you choose to infuse the Hereditary Kee?" They ask, their words clearly articulated, their tone commanding. "The collar, or the orb?"

"We chose the orb." The Timekeeper answers in a calm, matter-of-fact tone.

"Once the process begins, how long before the infusion is complete?"

"Around nine hours."

The Elevated One considers a moment. "From the morning, then?"

The Timekeeper bows their head slightly, and speaks deferentially.

"It is as you say, Elevated One."

Satisfied with their response, the Elevated One turns back to constructing the spell to assist the Empress on her quest. A lock of golden-black hair falls outside the finely woven hood of their otherwise slick, leathery robe, and they brush it behind their ear with a long, elegant finger. The potent scent of Raynorlorium (*lemons to you earthly folk*) wafts around the chamber from the spell casting.

"So, if she does this," the Elevated One says. "While we cannot reverse it, we can be certain of her safe return." A statement rather than a question.

The light cast from the altars before them accentuates the Timekeeper's edgy face with its sharp, elongated features.

"*When* she does this," they correct meaningfully. "We have seen to it by way of the clown and the brothers."

The Elevated One tips their head slightly, indicating their acceptance of the Timekeeper's actions. More words are exchanged and once the magical business is concluded, the usual honouring is spoken as they separate, hands clasped precisely in the prayer position.

"For the love of the Empress." Says the Timekeeper.

"For the love of the Empress." The Elevated One responds.

The Timekeeper turns away and their hands lower, but secretly, two of their fingers continue to work slinky and slow, influencing the energy of the scene. Since they must ensure the Elevated One acts accordingly

during a later event, they shroud the entire meeting in a hold-time spell, taking the memory of the meeting from them.

It is a necessary step; they reason, and well within their full authority to take. Their magic leaves no trace, unless they want it to, and in this instance, the Elevated One is none the wiser as they watch them go with a hint of mild curiosity in their eyes.

As time functions differently in the magical Realm of the Empress, the search and initiation process took exactly nine seconds to complete.

2

Salliniquai gets her way.

In a fantastical place beyond human understanding, a brilliant, emerald green orb glides smoothly through a sky of a silvery-green hue. The orb is transporting the First Daughter of House Triumphant; Empress Salliniquai, to the Geodes of the Elevated One.

Moving towards a magnificent sun that never sets but turns inside a huge, gloriously bright, symbol of Venus, she passes over her self-created realm flushed with pleasure at the sights of pure wonder. Giant, smoky Rain bows rise and thump down into the ground. The jagged, uneven points of the treacherous field of ice diamonds, jut sharply out of its sea of ice. A field of purple night blooms sway invitingly in the breeze, their mesmerising effect hidden. Trees with massive, mattress-sized leaves reach towards the sky, and a seemingly endless and vast upright ocean with no visible barrier holding it back, stands as an incorruptible, impossible, unbreakable gateway to the Distance realm and the realms beyond.

Salliniquai's Empresserial chime, and the sound of the never-ending

wind are constants within the realm, along with powerful, deep-rooted magic; the signs of which are everywhere and normal.

The orb slows on its approach to the three, majestic amethyst geodes, and floats towards the largest before slowly lowering to the ground. The orb's brightness dims, and Salliniquai steps out, glancing around nervously to see if the Elevated One is present.

No sign. Good, she breathes, relaxing a little.

She has arrived a whole sun turn early for her next lesson, just as she planned, but she must stay alert and watchful for the slightest sign of their return.

Her robe is made of an indeterminate, softly floating substance more liquid than material, and she casts a striking figure with her naturally regal posture, and deep-rooted composure. She is of royal lineage with an entitled manner, and the soft, ever-present lavender glow of her skin indicates the presence of immeasurable, powerful magic being kept in check by her will alone.

Having grown frustrated with always having to do what her guardians say without question because it is for the *good of the whole*, right now she doesn't feel an ounce of guilt for her sneaky actions.

Sending her orb into the unseen with a mere thought, she approaches the Elevated One's huge, inky-black karm, Sho-linga, who is sitting on her haunches beside the entry; large, lazy eyes blinking slowly. She can't allow the karm to alert the Elevated One to her presence, so as she passes, she reaches out to gently stroke the side of the beast's furry head reassuringly, and gently wills her to close her eyes and rest. The huge karm, who will always be a kitten in her eyes, begins to gently purr, then she settles her head onto her paws, lays down more comfortably, and shuts her eyes.

Hurrying across the empty, hollow interior of the geode towards the raised dais built into the curving, crystallised wall at the rear, Salliniquai climbs the centrally located steps and angles left towards the circle of travelling earth. Pausing a moment, she gazes longingly at the open flower portal, expelling a satisfied sigh as she waits for the Awakener to appear.

In her last lesson with the Elevated One, while she nodded in all the right places as they gave instruction, her mind soared with excited expectation keeping her concentration lost in the clouds. It was difficult keeping her expression innocently neutral, as she secretly planned her escape.

She hasn't forgotten her obligation to prepare for the Offering at the Distance. Nor has she dismissed her charge to challenge the emperor. Ordinarily, she would never jeopardise the spiritual cohesion of the three realms of nature by not giving *everything* of herself to complete her charge to usher in the Aquarian age, in which she will plant unique seeds in earth time to germinate and bring forth a Matriarchal society on earth. But for once, just *once*, she wanted a part of her life to be spontaneous and led by her heart.

She was restless to experience falling in love and wished to share a life with a human man now. She was mature enough, wise enough, and ready to prove herself worthy. So, why wait? Not that she needed to prove anything to anyone anyway, because she is Empress Salliniquai of the Malsimily, and regardless of her inner, secret desires, she remained firmly committed to her charge. Still, what harm could it do to have a little fun now, rather than at some other sun turn? She wasn't breaking any rules. Not *really*. Not important ones, anyway, and the unquestionably loyal Awakener will be there throughout to watch over her. It was only *a trial*, after all.

The sound of bubbling waters and splashing from the travel well at the other end of the dais, along with the strong scent of Raynorlorium, alerts her to the arrival of the Awakener.

A glittering, golden orb emerges from the well, streaming bright light in sharp rays across the shaded, purple and lilac-hued interior of the geode as it rises majestically over the well's stone edge, floats clear, and then slowly lowers to the ground. The orb dims, and the Awakener steps out, sends it back to the unseen with a small hand gesture, then hurries over to the Empress.

The Awakener is a tall, trim, androgynous being with waist-long, silver-black hair worn in two long plaits that fall forward over their

broad shoulders. There is a pleasant, sturdily reassuring air about them, and they smell faintly of fresh, damp grasses.

Their determined stride takes them smartly across the dais and drawing back their hood, they turn their long, thin face and bright, piercing eyes to the Empress, who turns to acknowledge their arrival.

"You remain determined to progress your plan, Empress?" They ask, in a voice a few octaves deeper than one might expect. It was a rhetorical question, for it is clear by the determined look on her face that she was.

The Empress nods curtly, then before the Awakener could voice their pointless objections again, said firmly, "I command you to help me," knowing they cannot refuse a direct command from her. No one can.

In stark contrast to Salliniquai's undulating robe, the Awakener's plain, practical, forest green robe appears dull and uninteresting in comparison, until they go outside. Out in the open air, the robe assumes a chameleon-like quality that blends them seamlessly into their surroundings, and shields their energy and magic from the fields. This is very useful during the lethal, high-risk training sessions with Salliniquai.

Whilst they more often than not, concede to the wisdom of the other three master teachers, the Awakener is staunch in their duties and dedication to the Empress. They already spent a significant amount of time trying to reason with her and dissuade her from going, but in the end, they must obey her commands as did the others. They spend a few moments exchanging a few words.

"But I wish to try it now before the Elevated One returns," Salliniquai says in a childishly petulant tone she knows will tug at the Awakener's already frayed resolve.

She often plays up to the Awakener, the only one of her four masters she can have a bit of fun with even though her training with them is by far, the toughest, most dangerous and lethal of her lessons. Still. She likes playing tricks on them, affectionately calls them her plaything, and often frustrates them with her antics.

Glancing over, she sees the divided loyalties in the Awakener's pinched expression. Their light-brown face is set in a disapproving, but

otherwise placid frown of concern, and she feels a momentary pang of regret for the conflicting emotions she senses warring within them. They were trying their hardest to do their best for her as an independent, demanding young woman, *and* as a royal Empress of the Malsimily, as well. Not an easy task with someone as hot tempered and impulsive as Empress Salliniquai.

Her attention shifts back to the flower portal and she acknowledges the fact that she cannot fault the exceptional efforts and steely dedication of her four masters. They have and still do support, discipline, and train her exceptionally well, despite her somewhat trivial grumbles. But fun is out of the question with the Timekeeper; they are far too severe and enigmatic. The Elevated One is all work and no play, and the Alchemist can intuit and sense her energetic state as quickly as they sense their own, which defeats her wickedly teasing sense of humour, as her jokes often went over their head.

She had no reason or wish to dish out commands—until now. Now, she feels restless and restricted, like her wings have been clipped. She is eager to test her strengths and Empresserial powers in the human physical realm, and this time *nothing* is going to stop her.

"The earth's timeline is perfect to test the qualities of magic and mundane. Have you no faith in me? In my powers?" Her tone is authoritative, her eyes flashing with challenge as her powerful gaze fixes on them.

"We have no doubts regarding one's power in one's own realm, Empress." The Awakener patiently replies. Knowing the risks, they try hard not to show their fear for her. "But once there, you will have no powers! Such a tentative situation not to be trifled with without..."

"Trifle, you say?" Salliniquai splutters, her tone exaggerated. "*Trifle?* I have no intention of trifling. I simply want to grow up as a human woman..." *so she can fall in love with a human man.* "...Before I go on to complete my charge to battle the emperor for the right to usher in the Aquarian age. I *know* you know the correct spell, Awakener," she insists stubbornly. "Why resist my command when it is futile?"

The Awakener's broad chest heaves as they sigh in exasperation. They could have said it was because she was going against the *express instructions* of the Elevated One, but instead they say reluctantly,

"It is true we know how to initiate travel. However, we do not recommend it." With a slightly pained expression, they add "We cannot guarantee the outcome due to aspects of the ritual only the Elevated One can perform. Also..."

"Oh, be *still*, Awakener." Salliniquai's forehead creases in frustration. "I am not looking for guarantees, only life!" She throws back, her anger rising. "It is my power alone supporting life in all the realm, is it not?" She does not wait for an answer but continues as though the Awakener has agreed with her. "I therefore, *command* you to open the way right now, just for a time." She tilts her head slightly, her expression softening as she looks up at them shrewdly with a manipulative, pleading gaze. "Just enough time for a teeny, tiny trial at first. Just for two or three human days. A tiny little blip in time. Then, should I succeed and return safely, you can send me back to experience one full life."

The Awakener hesitates for a long moment while Salliniquai waits impatiently. They respond as she expects, submissively.

"As you wish, Empress. Be warned however, that (*High Malsimily, translation in progress. This section of the translation has been transferred to The Triumphs of Salliniquai to prevent the intrigue surrounding an important future event being revealed too soon...*)"

A thumbnail-sized symbol of Venus made of smooth, tiny emeralds, studs the centre of Salliniquai's forehead. Murmuring a brief, complicated incantation, the Awakener reaches out and places their palm against it and presses down with a measured degree of pressure. Fingering the Venus talisman hanging around their neck with the other hand, they infuse magic into her symbol of the feminine, transforming it elementally into transparency. Carefully, Salliniquai removes one of the huge, purple petals from the flower growing out of the travelling circle of brown earth, and lays it just beyond the edge of the circle.

"There," she states firmly, standing back and inclining a brief, satisfied

nod in the Awakener's direction. "With this here, my return is ensured."

Stepping gingerly into the centre of the flower, she sits in the middle of the soft, delicate petals, excitement flooding through her. The remaining petals instantly close around her, and after a few minutes of quiet stillness, her physical form transforms into a misty, ethereal figure diminishing in size as she falls through the orangey-brown stem.

Like a shooting star, Salliniquai travels to the human physical realm. Earth.

*

Inside the amethyst geode a few seconds later, the most senior of the four masters, the Timekeeper, shimmers into the seen beside the Awakener. Raising their heavily ringed hands sedately, they push back the hood of their robe and in their smooth monotone, which takes on an echoey quality when speaking enigmatically especially, they break the heavily ominous silence filling the geode.

"The Empress has journeyed to the human physical realm?" They ask.

"She has." The Awakener responds, clasping their hands before them. "We explained about the (*High Malsimily. Translation in progress ...*) But unfortunately, the timeline was not as aligned as she thought. With what she had in mind, we had to..."

"Intercept? Groovy." The Timekeeper interrupts. "This was expected of course. The Elevated One envisioned a rebellious act such as this. They are the most clued-up being in the history of clued-up beings, ever, when it comes to the behaviour of the Empress." They say in a tone of admiration as they hover closer. "Having pre-empted the current situation, and since she has no magical abilities there, we infused the cycle of nine into her timeline as a means of support earlier. It will activate the Matriarchal Hereditary Kee, and once aligned to the chosen human host, visionary and sensory memories shall gradually reveal the nature of the Realm and the Empress."

The Awakener stares at them perplexedly, thrown by the strange terminology. *Groovy? Clued up?* What are they talking about?

"Why was this necessary?" They ask after several seconds have passed.

The Timekeeper backs away slightly, and moves their hands behind their back out of sight. The odd, fantastical behaviour of the rings were sometimes distracting to the other beings entrusted with the education and welfare of the Empress.

"We reviewed the broader picture," they explain. "Her knowledge of the three realms of nature shall be... um, useful when the Third Way comes forth. Besides, they were minor interventions. Their importance shall not be apparent until... um, a later date."

The Awakener's eyes tighten slightly as they watch the Timekeeper closely. The two, barely perceptible pauses in their explanation were quite unusual. They have never known them to hesitate when explaining anything before, so either they were holding something back, or they meant to say something entirely different and then changed their mind.

One of those ominous, earthly sayings, perhaps?

The Awakener is used to this to some degree, for it is true to the enigmatic nature of the Timekeeper. With such a complex responsibility, they understand why the choice of host could not be left to chance.

"We realise these actions were required. As for translating her journey?" The Awakener looks over at their companion, and raises a curious eyebrow at their suspiciously brighter countenance.

"It is our responsibility to translate her adventures, yes. Some of the earthy references, strange as they may be, are relatively easy to include. Even so, many have no translation in True Malsimily, so a close approximation of the missing text shall be given in its place, if necessary." The Timekeeper appears excited by the prospect.

"For ease of human understanding?" The Awakener suggests.

"It is as you say." The Timekeeper agrees, their features settling back into their usual stern expression. "We combined the orb energy trigger with the cycle of nine as well."

The Awakener nods slowly. "In the three mystical books written by a specially chosen and spelled author, we understand?"

"That is so. The Elevated One worked with us on that particular arrangement." The Timekeeper begins to back away and their hands return to hang at their sides, held away from their body slightly so they can work. "For the love of the Empress, then," they say, drawing their hood forwards over their head. Their face retreats into shadow as they turn and shimmer away.

The Awakener watches them go, still a little curious about the new expressions they voiced.

"For the love of the Empress." They murmur into the empty, cavernous space.

*

Guided by the Awakener, who has let the Empress believe they can be manipulated as easily as putty in her hands, an overly smug Salliniquai searches for an appropriate host for her Empresserial energy, unaware that the Elevated One has already chosen a trial host for her. Knowing whatever happens during her short jaunt to the earth will be entirely in their hands, she confidently focusses her energy into finding a host as strong, as fearless, and as determined to succeed as she is.

Who she finds will not be the womanly host she hopes for, however. For in their wisdom, her masters ensured she was sent to a particular host. A young girl with qualities which are a perfect fit for Salliniquai's stubborn, immature nature. The young girl, called Sally, will provide the best test of Salliniquai's skills during her first live taste of humanity.

3

The missing memories.

Rowanshire, England. Sunday 1st March, 2020.

Scared out of her wits, stomach churning sickeningly, Sally is trapped in a dream more frightening than anything she has ever known. In the dream, her strained, wretched scream burns through her lungs at a volume she never believed herself capable of, with stinging force. It stretches on for so long, the pain in her throat is almost at breaking point.

Because of her failure, she is falling through an oppressive, unfriendly darkness called *the unseen*—a space within a space with no boundary and no end, that seemed to go on forever.

As she twists, and tumbles dizzily, a great disappointment rises within her, along with her terror for the creature waiting to devour her if she isn't already dead when she hits the ground. The air is a chilling, high-pitched whistle rushing past her ears. Tumbling this way and that, her shocking scream pierces the otherwise deadly silent surroundings.

Miraculously, after what seems like an age, a slim glimmer of hope rises in her heart when a faint, familiar voice calling her name, catches her attention. It was coming from a long way away, but turning her attention to it automatically slows her fall. With every ounce of her will, she desperately latches onto this sudden lifeline. Her scream dies away and she gasps herself awake breathless and sweating, her eyes bulging with shock as she anxiously looks around. She is lying in bed curled in a tense, tight ball.

Tentatively, she stretches her legs out under the bed covers, and lies still for a long moment with her eyes shut tight. She struggles to force the dreadful dream from her mind by wishing it away.

When she eventually opens her eyes, her anxiety and confusion deepen as an odd, spine-tingling chill shivers down her back.

"Damn," she murmurs, rubbing her temples gently. "What...?" Her confusion mounts as she realises that immediately after wishing the dream away, it responds to her words and disappears like a puff of smoke taking the events of the entire weekend and the details of the dream, with it. Her mind suddenly feels strangely empty and quite worriedly, blank. Thrown by this oddity, she is relieved to hear her mother's familiar voice again, slightly subdued as it carries through the door.

"Sally?"

"Mm..." she responds groggily. Not fully awake, she wishes only to languish in her beds reassuring warmth a few minutes longer.

"Sally?" Her voice is louder this time, and she speaks her name in sing-songy *time-to-wake-up* tone.

"Yeah?" She manages, through her sore throat. She swallows deeply, finding her mouth inexplicably dry, and reaches for the glass of water on the bedside table. At least, that's what she meant to do, but she can't move. An invisible weight seems to be pressing down on her, and fear knifes through her once more.

What's happening? Is she somehow, paralysed? She wonders, unable to speak.

Her mother's voice drifts through the gap in her bedroom door.

"Are you getting up today, hun?"

Hearing no reply, and seeing no movement from under the bedcovers, she raps smartly on the door and pushes it wide open, disrupting and dispelling the magic holding Sally fast. Sally gasps in a huge breath as relief washes over her.

"Morning, hun. I've been calling you for ages. I've never known you to sleep so deeply." Her mother comments, noticing nothing out of the ordinary as she bustles over to the windows to draw open the curtains.

Grateful for her mother's appearance, Sally expels a deep breath relieved to find she can move again. She yawns, groans, and stretches her body out like a cat, then rubs her sleep-crustured eyes. She squints at her mother's silhouetted figure as pale light spills into the room directly into her face. She mumbles a lazy,

"Morning, Mum." But her voice is a husky, empty echo.

"You're awake then. Why didn't you answer me?"

"I did. I've lost my voice."

At the sound of her raspy whisper, Simone glances over her shoulder at her, eyebrows lowering in concern. She walks over and leans down to lightly touch the back of her hand to Sally's forehead.

"I'm alright. I'm not sick." She insists, nudging her hand away.

"I hope not. Your voice is so raspy I can barely hear you." Her frown deepens. "You can't be coming down with a cold the day before we travel."

"I'm not, mum. I'm alright," she manages to say in a confident whisper. Then confusion takes hold. "Tomorrow? We're... going to Saint Lucia, tomorrow? But I thought..."

"I'm not surprised about your throat..." Simone cuts in wryly, a knowing look in her eyes. "Not after all the screaming I heard at the party. You screamed yourself hoarse the last time you went to the Dome, remember? Maybe you did it again?"

"Party? What party?" She asks, tensing.

Simone doesn't hear the whispered words, having moved back to the window to look out over the estate.

A party, and the Dome? Sally thinks, unable to remember anything

about either. *What is she talking about?*

Seriously worried she might be coming down with something that will stop her travelling the next day, she forces a reply to her lips.

"Yes... maybe you're right, mum," she croaks, trying to sound healthy. She turns over to face away from the window, so her mother can't see the fear she is determined to hide.

"Are you coming to the shops with me?" She asks, glancing around the tidy room.

"Um, I'm a bit tired. Do you mind if I don't?" She mumbles hoarsely.

"No, course not. Stay in bed if you like. It's our last chance to shop, though."

"I've got everything I need," she replies vaguely, folding the duvet down. She rolls back over, and raises herself up to lean on one elbow. "Nanny's gonna be alright, isn't she?" She asks carefully, concerned she is trying to protect from the truth.

"Of course, she will. Once I'm there to take care of her." Her confident response carries no hint of falseness, and is reassuring. "I'll give you a shout when I get back then," she says cheerily, reaching down to tickle the toes of her now uncovered foot. "A honey and lemon tea will soothe your sore throat. I'll put a bag in a cup, and you can make it when the kettle boils, alright?"

"Hey!" Sally snorts, snatching her foot back.

Simone laughs and ambles towards the door. She pauses to speak in a hushed tone. "If you put your music on, keep it low, okay. Your dad's working in the study this morning."

"Alright."

Lifting her hand in a half-hearted wave, she snuggles back under the covers, and yawns once more as her mother disappears out the door, closing it behind her.

*

As if shutting the door dispatches her concern for Sally, Simone is thinking about her mum as she heads down the stairs.

Twelve days ago, her mother, who lives in Saint Lucia and is a spritely seventy-three years of age, stumbled in the street and broke her hip. It was an unfortunate, inconvenient accident since the three only recently returned from the island after attending a wedding there.

After receiving the call and agreeing to go back, Richard, asked why she was responsible for caring for her mum in Saint Lucia, when several family members lived there?

"Because..." she explained. "If it is left to the others, who all have busy lives, her care might be handled in a slip-shod, hap-hazard manner, and I don't want her to feel like an inconvenience." Richard rests an understanding arm over her shoulders. "Dad needs me back as soon as possible because mum needs a lot of support, and I want to vet a few carers. We *have* to go back, Rich." She tells him, anxiously.

Richard rarely sees Simone anxious, and it concerns him. As a strong, confident woman who is devoted to her family and takes pride in her career and life achievements, she is happy in her work, always well organised, and she *never* got anxious.

Is something else troubling her? He perceptively wonders.

When pressed, she admits her mum is not her only concern. Though the accident was a horrible thing to happen, it happened in time to give direction to something she had been pondering in the back of her mind. The thought that perhaps leaving Saint Lucia a few weeks ago was a mistake, since hearing rumours about the dangerous virus that has crossed oceans and was spreading across the world. Now, they have a reason to get out before the rapidly spreading virus becomes a serious problem in the UK.

"I'll book our seats right away then." Richard said, giving her arm a reassuring squeeze. Then, getting right to it, he booked three premium economy seats on open tickets.

Simone wondered vaguely if she was overreacting a bit. Bird flu, and other viruses have spread before. She couldn't imagine this situation as any worse than those, and things turned out alright once they got the

bug or whatever it was, contained. What made this time different? She wonders, then immediately answers her own question.

This time is different because through the worldwide sporting grapevine she is a part of, she's gotten disturbing reports from friends around the world, who are shocked by how fast the virus was spreading in the sporting community alone.

Their good friends, Marvin and Julianna, who were brother and sister, will be surprised to see them back in Saint Lucia so soon, and Andrew, their son, will be over the moon to have Sally back to hang out with. So, it was all good. If the flu situation does become a worry, it is better to be on a small tropical island where colds are not that common due to the continued warm temperatures, and only a fraction of international travellers visited to the country, compared to the thousands travelling through England. Maybe they will be beyond the reach of the bug. She can only hope this is the case. Still. If the worst happens, it is much better to be in sunny Saint Lucia, than stuck in freezing cold England.

*

Later that evening, Sally overhears her parents talking in the lounge, Richard winks at his wife before wondering aloud whether to go without her. As expected, she bursts into the room red-faced, adamantly refusing to be left behind. Going to the sofa, she nudges them apart, sits resolutely between them and grabs one of their hands in each of hers as if a united front is enough to stave off the suggested separation.

Sally loves Saint Lucia, and never tires of telling her friends how great it is, and how strange it is that it feels like home. She claims it is the best place in the world, and, she admits on several occasions, if she could live there permanently, she wouldn't hesitate.

Before and after she was born, the Vincent-Payne's always went to Saint Lucia for their annual summer holiday, so she grew up spending six weeks of every year immersed in the island's culture, the blessedly hot tropical weather, and quickly learned to embrace the laidback lifestyle.

She felt like a free spirit with lots of open space to grow, laugh, and play when she was there. Not that she did not grow, laugh, and play in England, it was just a different kind of fun.

"I can help look after nanny, Mum. Please don't leave me here," she pleads, squeezing their hands. A vivid picture of her grandparent's house in the sleepy town of Soufriere, springs to mind. Their home is one of her favourite places on the island. "What if I have a party and things get out of control or something," she asks innocently, though all three know very well she can be trusted not to be so irresponsible.

Richard coughs out a laugh. "That sounds almost threatening, my young padawan." A glancing smile quirks the corners of his mouth. Leaving her at home was never an option, of course. Not at her age.

"Alright." Richard seemingly concedes after a long, agonising moment. He was enjoying making a meal out of keeping her on tenterhooks. "I've told you before it's rude to eavesdrop..." She lowers her gaze, abashed. "Let's hope the school agree to your having this extra time off." He says firmly, glancing at Simone over her head.

"They'll be fine under the circumstances." She reasons, aiming a sly, reassuring wink at Sally. "She can bring her schoolwork with her."

While her parents arranged everything, Sally checked the next-door neighbour could take care of her cat, Serenity. Popping in to feed and water her once a day was no inconvenience, and with a cat flap in the back door, she could come and go as she pleased. Since she did the same favour for them when they went away, it was no biggy.

4

Friday 28th February, 2020.

The Orballoon.

Back in the bedroom on this bright February morning, Sally was caught in a daydream while staring up at the larger-than-average, strangely coloured, perfectly round balloon gently drifting in and out of the stream of sunlight filtering in through the window. It is attached to one of the drawer's knobs by a long white piece of string, and the strange, almost otherworldly, silvery purple colour reminds her of... something. Her brow furrows. She almost grasps it... *But no... that can't be right.*

Her lips twist to one side as she considers the orballoon. She catches herself.

Orballoon? What a funny thing to call it.

Puzzled, she stares at it from across the room, head tilted to one side with the most bizarre idea forming. Had she and the orballoon at some point, changed places somehow. *Almost... like...* the thought fades as she studies the two printed pictures on the surface of the slowly turning

balloon.

The first is a huge, smiling face with everything but the nose, lips, and chin covered by a large, wide-brimmed, floppy purple hat. The second is a whole boy, who by the way he hugs himself seems to be shaking with laughter. Both are vaguely familiar, and she reaches for the answers to the teasing question in her mind.

Are they... Saxon and... Noxas? She tentatively wonders. Then, *yes, these are their names.*

The impossible thought that she knows them almost as well as her two best friends, Smudge-Face and the Juggernaut take hold in her mind, but she shakes it off as an impossibility.

How can she know them, and from where?

Sally is of course, unaware of the balloon's triple-layered purpose. For it is not just a regular balloon. No. This magically-enhanced balloon is the key to a mysterious lock. A magical guide of sorts, and a conduit between two unique realms. One magic, one mundane.

Closing her eyes, she lies still, trying to think. A minute later, she sits bolt upright and stares at the balloon once more as disconnected scraps of information land in her head.

It's the orballoon from the party, she remembers. A gift from that funny-looking clown...

Reflectively considering the peculiar character, she recalls his wide, mischievous grin, his penetrating, no nonsense gaze, and that he smelled strongly of Raynorlorium. While she remembers this much, everything else about the weekend remains fuzzy-ish.

Throwing the bedcovers aside, she gets up, goes to the window, and opens it a few inches. A gust of freezing cold air blasts in and she breathes it in deeply to clear her head a bit. After a couple of seconds, she lets out a frustrated sigh, frowning once more.

Why can't she remember anything about the weekend? What made her lose her memory, and what exactly had she forgotten?

Everything from Friday morning onwards, she answers herself, chewing the corner of her bottom lip. *That's not good. Maybe last night, by some mad coincidence...*

But no, she remembers going to bed the night before thinking of Saint Lucia, and everything was fine. An accidental blow to the head, then? She knew from the Telly about being concussed, and the confusing after-effects that came over people. But, no, it couldn't be that either because she felt fine, her parents were not acting differently towards her, and she remembered all the details from their recent holiday—like being a guest at a flash wedding party with famously cool people. And not just any old famous people, but extraordinarily gifted musicians her mum and dad knew *personally*.

The famous wedding guests were from the band *Deep Silver Lining*, a world-music band with a solid reputation for original music built up over three decades, and a huge fan-base. Her parents' first date was to one of their concerts. They had all their albums, got free VIP tickets whenever the band played locally, and described their music as brilliantly thought-provoking.

She'd lost count of all the stories her parents told her when they were feeling nostalgic. Stories about a bunch of them growing up on the Cobblestones estate in Rowanshire years ago, the trouble they got into, and how their friend, Luke Phelps created a band at the ridiculously young age of fourteen. Only a year older than she was now.

She shakes her head, marvelling at his having such a big dream, and the dedication and drive it must have taken to make it come true. What was it like when ambition overtook everything else and became a single burning force that is the true purpose of one's life? Were her best friends starting comparable journey's now? With their considerable talents, yes, she could see similarities there.

At the party, Snowboy, the lead singer, gifted her a travel guitar. He actually *gave* it to her, and then he and keyboard Trevor signed it! *Totally* radical. The guitar is the perfect size for her, and not only will she treasure the gift forever, she will do it proper justice by learning to play it as well.

Chewing over those specific details, she eventually decides that no, she isn't going mad. It might be a mental block of some sort, she supposed,

but then how did that account for the cuts and bruises on her body that have appeared overnight? No, this was something else. Something strange was going on, and not knowing what, was frustrating beyond belief.

Sally has no idea she was hosting the energy of Empress Salliniquai for just over forty-eight hours, and took part in a dangerous trial.

5

A call-to-arms.

Sally leans on the window ledge with her chin resting in her hands. A couple of cyclists are walking their bikes through the estate, leaving wheel tracks in the slushy snow. Birds flit from tree to tree, and children having snowball fights scream and cry out joyfully. She bites her lip again, deep in thought, but as hard as she tries, she can't remember any more details. Wracking her brain with this puzzle will drive her up the wall. *Nothing* about the situation made sense. How can she get to the bottom of this?

Deciding the situation is way beyond her own common-sense abilities, she thinks of her best girlfriends. Without them to bounce her crazy ideas off, she knows she will struggle to figure things out. Especially with her dithery-like way of thinking. The three of them can piece together the weekend's events and unravel the mystery of her memory loss together, couldn't they?

She tries to ignore the dull aches taking hold of her body. Injuries gained from activities she can't remember. The two most painful,

halfway down her left thigh and one close to her right heel, throb with a worrying intensity, the pulsing becoming more acute the longer she stays on her feet.

Reaching down, she pushes the waist of her pyjama bottoms aside, and groans at the long, rasp-like scrape on her thigh. Several dark bruises mark her arms and legs, and her shoulders are unusually stiff and tight. A couple of rough blisters have appeared on the pads of one of her hands, and two of her fingers are swollen and tender when she gingerly applies pressure.

Just what did the three of us get up to? She wonders, her face twisting in confusion and uncertainty once more.

Putting aside her strange injuries for the moment, she turns to face the balloon, stares at it for a few seconds, then reaches up to gently stroke her fingertips along the smooth skin. She is halfway through the motion when the balloon unexpectedly bursts with a loud, ear-splitting bang, which sends the essence of Empress Salliniquai and the four lesser lesson Kees—crucial elements of her sacrificial charge, back to the Realm of the Empress, while on earth the Matriarchal Hereditary Kee takes hold, and is fully infused in Sally.

She sucks in a sharp breath, jumps back in surprise, and flattens a trembling hand against her chest just as a stinging ripple of heat surges through her with enough force to make her take a step back and grab the back of the ladder-backed chair in front of the desk. The sensation is weird, but she isn't afraid because somehow, it feels okay. Thoughtful, she considers the change within her. It is like something vital and perhaps... sophisticated within her had been lying in wait, dormant until then. She thought she heard the distinctive, fading sound of a wobble board vibrating three time after the balloon burst, but she can't decipher where it came from before it fades away.

Drawing a sharp, hissing breath, she winces at the sting in her heel as she ambles back to the bedside. When the backs of her legs touch the bed, she drops down and rubs her fingertips across her forehead, considering what to do.

"Sal? What was that noise?" Her dad's concerned, slightly suspicious

voice reaches her from the study. *God Bless the mothers*, one of his favourite songs by Deep Silver Lining is playing in the background. The lead singers sultry voice is deep and soulful.

"Did you blow something up?"

She giggles. "It's alright, Dad." She calls from inside the room. "My orballoon burst, that's all." The words come out in a harsh whisper.

"Sally?" She can tell by his voice that he is in the hallway now, poised to ascend the steps.

Going out the door, she stands at the top of the stairs so he can see her, then mouths the words *I've lost my voice*.

"Oh, that's right," he nods. "What's all the banging about? What are you up to?" He asks, eyeing her over the rim of his DSL mug.

"Nothing! Sorry. My orballoon burst." She repeats. "Can I invite my mates around to study for a bit? We won't be noisy, I promise," she adds, as loud as she can manage.

"Yes, alright." He agrees. Turning from the doorway, his attention returns to his business inside.

Sally returns to her room, sits on the bed, and stares down at the jagged balloon pieces on the floor. Hearing the thin tinkle of Serenity's bell collar, her gaze shifts to the window as the cat meanders in with nimble steps, her tail held straight and high. She wonders vaguely if the cat is returning from a night out prowling around in the dark, or from an early morning hunt as she takes her usual route to the bed, picking her way through the items on the dresser, leaping down onto the chair, padding across the floor, and then jumping onto the bed. Her wet paws leave a trail of smudged paw prints on the surfaces, and her newly washed, butter yellow duvet cover as the cat snuggles into the rumpled duvet and begins to wash herself.

"Thanks, Serenity. Anyone would think this is your bed." Sally scolds mildly.

Her eyes snag on the cat's collar and she squints at it, remembering something.

Serenity's collar! It saved me from...?

But the memory dances away before she fully grasps it, leaving her

mind spinning with confusing, disassociated thoughts.

"Oh, why can't I remember!" She fumes, slamming her hands down on the bed to either side of her, startling the cat. She winces, her face screwing up with pain as her swollen fingers throb. *I should get some ice on this*, she thinks, cradling the hand gently. Then she sees that Serenity is poised to bolt, standing stiffly with her tail fluffed out and bushy as she watches her mistress closely. "Sorry," she whispers, leaning over to stroke her reassuringly.

Serenity—an agile, sassy, extraordinarily cute silver-grey Bengal tabby, has the common pattern of black spots and stripes, sweet, angular features, and beautiful yellow eyes. She pushes her muzzle into Sally's hand, and her affectionate stroking calms her.

Grabbing her phone, she opens her contacts and speaking to the Juggernaut first, makes an offer she knows her friend cannot refuse.

"Come for a second breakfast, Jugs. I need a favour." Then she calls Smudge-Face. "I need you, girlfriend. How soon can you get here?"

"Give me half an hour."

"Cool. See you then."

She had to shout whisper that she'd lost her voice, and the call was not a prank to them both, before they took her seriously. This is understandable since they'd fallen foul of prank calls in the past, with embarrassing outcomes none of the three wished to repeat.

As she waits for her friends to arrive, Sally thinks of all the great things she enjoys doing when she is in Saint Lucia, and how glad she is to be going back there the next day. She daydreams about Saint Lucia a lot, and often stares through the window up at the sky for ages, imagining she is involved in some exciting adventure. She hugs herself with joy as a small, secretive smile appears at the thought of hanging out with her best friend, Andrew, a boy she is starting to see as *more* than just a friend, and his two cute puppies.

Will we go back a third time this year for our usual holiday? She wonders, sighing wistfully.

Her features soften, and her emotions steady when she thinks of

Andrew. She is bursting to tell her friends about the kiss? Her *first* kiss. But she hadn't had the opportunity yet, not with Smudge's party being the sole focus of their lives since she got back. She is keeping it to herself for as long as possible to savour the sweet secret, and the question he asked her before she left, because her friends will no doubt tease her to death about it when they find out. No, she decides. She'd keep it secret a bit longer, until she was sure of her answer.

Having momentarily forgotten about her memory loss, she leans back against the headboard, and considers how different her life would be if she lived in Saint Lucia...

*

She knew loads about the island known to most adults as *the Jewel of the Caribbean* because they have family there and it is like a second home.

As a third-world country, Saint Lucia relies heavily on the tourist industry, and has a robust expat population. There are decent supermarkets, several small malls, and other big shops in the capital and other areas. There are large, luxurious hotels, small guest houses, and villas for rent. All kinds of businesses, and restaurants and food outlets—some based in cobbled-together huts, provide a wide range of tasty grub. Big, flashy beach bars compete with tiny little rum shops which are little more than a shack with a rough counter erected as a bar for customers.

Known to be an exotic, tropical paradise, it is the world's top wedding and honeymoon destination and has held the mantle for several years, she enthusiastically brags to her friends, repeating how the island is so beautiful with tons of sandy beaches, hidden coves with gently lapping water, and shallow bays where the crystal-clear water is cool, and the sand is soft and warm underfoot.

"You can swim all day, have a beach BBQ anytime, eat fluffy fried bakes, slurp down ice-cold icicles, enjoy mango-flavoured ice cream, and sunbathe."

It is a safe place for children too, so her mum and dad do not have to

wonder what she is getting up to, or watch her every move. Hanging out with the local kids all day and late into the evenings was good fun, and her parents trusted her and the kids she hung out with to be responsible when getting into their island adventures.

For the last five years, while her parents were engaged in lovey-dovey activities during their two weeks of quality time together, she went to Andrew's house down in the south of the island close to the airport, which was way better than any packed-out-to-the-max, flashy hotel. Their house was in a place called the Lavender Valley, and this was her favourite place on the island, mostly because they had a swimming pool all to themselves.

"Coconut and coconut milk is used for all sorts of things over there, like in turnovers—a pastry, and tea, and to season curries, or to add a kick to fruit punches, smoothies, and cocktails." She tells her friends who listen with rapt attention, mouths watering. "The natural juice from a green coconut is like a drink from the divine," she passionately gushes. "I actually feel healthy when I'm there, without trying, you know? When I'm not there, I miss the taste of raw sugar cane, I miss lababad—a biscuit hard enough to break teeth. And I miss having warm local bread with a salty, fried fish called ballaloo stuffed inside for breakfast. The whole town can hear the fishermen coming, because they blow a massive horn, or a conch shell as they drive or wheel a barrow around, so everyone knows to come for their fish."

The two spend a lot of time playing *guess where they're going* as they watch the steady flow of planes taking off from the short runway, and try to identify the coloured flag on their tails, straining to see them through cheap binoculars. One of the neighbours in the valley owned the stables in the next bay, and they visit the horses almost daily bringing apples and sugar as treats. After a ride along the beach, they help to rub them down.

Her friends were a bit jealous of her exotic, long-haul holidays, and always listened with rapt attention to her escapades. Hannah's sister Melissa, a budding hairdresser, was particularly impressed by the hairstyles she returned home with, compliments of Skitter; a reputable

beautician.

6

Gifted girlfriends.

So, getting back to the mystery of her memory loss and crusty voice, Sally realises that remembering all of this proves she isn't suffering from brain damage. Once her friends arrive, they will figure out what happened over the weekend, and why she can't remember any of it. They usually manage to work things out between them because the three are a great team. Even her dad thinks so.

Richard Vincent-Payne has always claimed his daughter is the linchpin of the trio of young girls, calling her the balancing element in their three-way friendship. When she thought about it later, she saw he had a point.

Juggs, was a bolshy, outspoken, often tactless girl with the single-minded goal of becoming an Olympic champion. Tall, long-limbed, and gangly, she was up for anything providing it didn't interfere with her punishingly strict training schedule, and as a Leo, she was fiercely loyal and determined. Whenever she spoke of her future, she began the

sentence with... *When I'm an Olympic medalist...*

She is the pride of their year in sports, and in her first year she successfully won her way onto the under-14's netball, hockey, and swim teams. Her parents had their own awards, medals, and trophies for their sporting efforts, and she was determined to follow in their footsteps. While they hadn't gained an Olympic standard themselves, she'd grown up hearing about their accomplishments, and strived towards becoming a sporting champion herself.

The professional athletics idea took off after her tenth birthday when she discovered she did not have to choose only one or two specialties; but could do ten if she were a decathlete. Athletics quickly became her sporting choice, even though there was no decathlete competition for girls.

"There might be by the time I'm ready to compete," she replied, claiming confidently that, "Seven sports are not enough to test me."

Still, she would grudgingly settle for the heptathlon if she *had* to, she eventually agreed.

When she was twelve, she joined the best athletics club in Rowanshire, eager and ambitious to get started on her Olympic career. With a natural love of sports and an early recognised talent as a potential professional sportswoman, she was earmarked for great things. Her life had a singular purpose, and achieving her ambition looked promising.

Now Smudge-Face, her other bestie, could not be more different from Juggs. As an easy-going, dreamy Piscean, she was a trendy, thoughtful girl with a friendly, bubbly nature who was obsessed with art. She has a quiet, sometimes wary disposition around strangers, and is happy so long as she can express herself freely through her art.

Talented in the way she saw things with her arty eyes, her unique lens often confused others when she spoke with words of artistic flavour. Whatever visions she saw and drew from memory, became colourful creations that almost leapt off the pages, and her friends were proud of her, and her creative gifts.

What her dad suggested then, was indeed true, as their interests were so vastly different. The friendship was built on trust and loyalty, born out of knowing each other all their lives, and by their parents being friends for most of their lives. The girls bounced off each other nicely with lively, endless energy, and were also incredibly mature for their age.

The three girls spent most of their free time hanging out at Sally's, as her house was a neutral place compared to the others, and they took turns hosting sleepovers at least once a month.

Jugg's house was generally quiet, but her bedroom was an untidy mess and she was always, quite suspiciously, always in the middle of tidying up when they got there, with various sports kits, games equipment, and other stuff laying everywhere ready to trip them up. Still, they didn't mind, and the three would muck in to tidy up and make it a teen-friendly space to hang out in.

In comparison, Smudge-Face's house was rather noisy and exciting, with family members always busying about. Whenever they spent time in her loft room, which was huge with a long window that stretched across the entire length of the room, she often came away with some smudge or stain on her clothes, so she was glad they usually hung out at hers.

Sleepovers were lively affairs when they were at Smudge-Face's house. Her dad, Roger, was a senior fireman and her mum, Avilone, was the Chief Executive of a small children's charity and shop. Her fourteen-year-old twin brothers, Dyon and Douglas, were boisterous, teasing pranksters. But generally, only with each other. They were addicted to PlayStation, and the girls often heard them arguing and fighting about who was cheating or losing from her room above.

"Oi, you jammy sod!" or "Hey, *that's cheating!*" They'd yell.

Sometimes, if Smudge-Face was in a particularly obsessive painting mood the boys played with Sally and Hope, holding knockout competitions with various games.

Her older sister, Melissa, was eighteen years old and worked weekends at her aunt's salon while studying a course in Hairdressing and Salon Management at the local college. With ambitions of opening her own

salon one day, she'd been practising on the three girls for years, trying out simple, traditional, or elaborate hairstyles on them.

"Not a hairdresser, but a hair *stylist*," she repeatedly states firmly, in case the girls forgot the difference in status. This was followed by her usual boast of, "When Aunty Janet takes me on full-time next year, I'm gonna be better than any of the other trainee stylists in the place. By then, I'll have worked with all hair types."

It was usually a shaped, decorated afro, or hair extensions on Smudge-Face. Corn rows, simple buns and twists on Sally, and a complicated blow dry or a style using oversized curlers or sponge ties on the Juggernaut, who usually wore her hair in a scruffy, hastily tied pony, or a simple plait down her back.

There were a few disasters, but Melissa quickly rectified them and the girls continued to trust her with their hair.

"It's criminal what you subject your hair to, Jugs." She would sigh whenever she was working on her long, thick, gingery-blond tresses. "All that chlorine from swimming will irreparably damage your hair. You are still using the shampoo and conditioner I recommended, yeah? It's literally your only protection from regular exposure to those harsh chemicals."

"I am Mel, I promise. I don't want to end up with limp, ratty hair, either. Since you recommended that shampoo, I use it religiously."

"Excellent. Good girl."

*

When they stayed at Sally's, the evening was always calm and organised. Watching an educational documentary was a parental condition, and this was cool with her because she enjoyed them. She'd grown up watching documentaries, and had three favourite presenters she watched repeatedly.

David Dimbleby, presenting *The Seven Ages of Britain* and *The Picture of Britain*. Everything David Attenborough presented and produced on nature and the protection of nature, and then, as she was

interested in astrology and astronomy, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, on the nature of the universe and planets.

These were not the AI-generated programs most of her age group raved about. She didn't get much out of fast-paced, action films with OTT special effects, sporting highlights, talent shows, and whatever other trash TV used as a sly way to dumb people down. That kind of rubbish dulled the senses, she and her friends agreed. Though it didn't stop them going to the cinema on the Saturday's when half the school were going, regardless of what was showing.

While she agreed with her parents that she would learn more from watching those documentaries than in some lessons, she was a good student overall, and ranked at the top of all her classes because she had a keen intelligence, respect for authority, and broad interests.

As far as she was concerned, those programs were way more interesting and explained things better portraying historical events in a way she can actually understand, as well as information on how all sorts of strange creatures survived in the world.

She supposed she was the linchpin for her parents as well. A comforting position she liked being their only child and that. Not that they needed a linchpin. They were so lovey-dovey, it was embarrassing. Still, if there was such a thing then she was it, just as she was with her two best friends who go by the names of Hope, and Hannah, respectively.

*

Having made the arrangements, Sally snatches up the balloon scraps, tosses them in the bin, then washes, dresses, and goes down to the kitchen to prepare a jug of juice and enough toast to feed the five thousand.

Back on her bed, after licking the deliciously warm butter off her undamaged fingers, she reaches into her bedside table drawer and takes out the book she got from Hannah's mum's charity shop during the summer holidays.

When she first saw it, the cover was fascinating and lovely with a strange, smoky appearance and a secret element that (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*).

Looking at it now, she sees it has changed, dramatically. There is another mysterious element to it she can somehow visualise and read, but (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*). As neither of her friends mentioned this when she showed it to them in the shop, she realises only she sees its magical quality.

The book resonates with her *especially*, bringing with it a deep hope she hadn't realised was vitally important to her until she picked it up. It is the hope that in time, all will become right and fair in the world.

Blinking rapidly three times snaps her out of her thoughtful reverie. Now she is refreshed and fed, she revisits the inexplicable, yet undeniable shift within her, now accompanied by an illuminating clarity about something important that is still, rather frustratingly, beyond her ability to grasp.

Over the weekend, she'd stumbled into, no, she was *drawn into* something that was extremely odd, and impossible to dismiss. The subtle widening of her perspective was a direct result of her mysterious adventure, and the catalyst for her journey into adulthood. A transformative series of events that fortified her spiritual integrity, her imagination and intellect, and promised to revolutionise her life. It is awe-inspiring how in a matter of moments or in her case, over a weekend, things can change so dramatically that they completely alter one's convictions and worldview.

*

In the magical Realm of the Empress ...

"She won't believe it was a *mad coincidence*." The Timekeeper remarks, a tad derisively, glancing over at their companion. "This girl is smart. An exemplary choice, Elevated One." They say with admiration, their misty form shifting ethereally as they bow slightly. One eye glows silver as their fingers continually twist the assorted, magical rings. "We must disperse now to attend the Awakener." The Timekeeper pulls their hood over their head, and starts to shimmer away.

The Elevated One turns slightly from the altar, halting their actions for a few seconds to nod while keeping their attention focussed on their task.

7

Three minds are better than one.

Sally is quietly considering the book's cover, when the front door she left on the latch opens hard enough to crash against the wall rattling the hinges. Shoving the book into the drawer, she winces and shakes her head as the Juggernaut's heavy, determined footsteps trundle up the stairs, announcing her arrival.

Trust her to come barging in. She should have said to come in quietly, she belatedly thinks.

Hope's fresh, freckled face has a healthy glow, and her untidy, gingery-blonde hair is unbound and damp from her swim at the gym. She immediately helps herself to a piece of toast, enthusiastically devours it in three quick bites, and takes another. Plopping down on the bed next to Sally, she scoots back to lean against the wall and strokes a hand none too gently down Serenity's back. She lightens her touch considerably when Serenity throws an irritated gaze her way. As a girl with seemingly untold energy, Hope did everything enthusiastically.

"So, what's up, Bubblelicious?" She asks, then grins. "Mum and Dad

were well impressed with those pics you sent me. The ones with you and Snowboy, especially. I've literally only gotten round to showing them off."

Hope's parents, William and Daphne Hallerton, were introduced by Simone at an annual sporting conference years ago. The Hallertons get up every morning at 5.30 am to go to the gym, followed by a hearty breakfast at home, and then they all leave for work or school.

Hope is eager to add extra training sessions to her busy schedule since getting in to the sports academy. Though she has far to go, her life is all mapped out starting with competing against other schools on sports day, then competing at the county level, then at district level and as she gets older, at national and international levels, followed inevitably by... the Olympics. It is her dream to be the best, and she talks about little else.

"So, how did you lose your voice?" Her head is angled to one side, and her cheeks bulge with bread as she speaks, dabbing at the corner of her mouth delicately. Whatever else Hope is—untidy, full of beans and bolshy, she has impeccable manners and only a few snobby preferences.

Before she can answer, light, running footsteps racing up the stairs announce the arrival of Hannah, aka Smudge-Face—a petite, quirky girl of West Indian origins. She enters the bedroom and flings herself into the wide, wicker seat on the other side of the bedside unit. Laying her large art bag on the floor beside her, she pours herself a beaker of juice, then turns to her friends.

"Hiya Hope. What's the emergency, Sal?" She asks, adjusting her glasses with a forefinger. "I hope we can solve whatever mystery this is before you jet off tomorrow, you lucky thing. I'm *sooo* jealous." She grumbles enviously.

The girls often joke that Hannah was born with a paintbrush in hand, since she's been drawing and painting for as long as either one can remember. With a fantastic eye for detail, especially with faces, she is never without a sketch pad and drawing essentials. Her fingertips have smudges on them, which transfer to her face when she touches it. Hence

the name, Smudge-face.

When the three girls discussed their career dreams, as they often did, all agreed Hannah would one day be a famous artist with her own studio, or some architectural designer of fabulously strange, quirky buildings. Hannah is clearly another very talented girl with a great future ahead of her.

When Roger and Avilone Alexander realised their seven-year-old was obsessed with painting and her art was here to stay, they cleared out the loft and moved her bedroom up there, which gave her extra space to spread her art paraphernalia around, while reducing the risk of paint smudges and whatnot decorating the walls and surfaces all over the house.

Her parents provided her with the necessary supplies as she got older, from colouring books and sketch pads, to paint pallets and easels. She was a member of the school art club, subscribed to a junior art magazine, and two of her sketches were on display at the school's annual junior exhibition since they began their first year of secondary school. She is attending a school of art for ten days in the summer holidays, and is looking forward to it with the same level of enthusiasm Hope displays.

Sally sighs enviously as her friends chat briefly. They are not just talented in their chosen fields, but child geniuses with clear ambitions, and a maturity way beyond their years that will keep them true to their dreams.

The two are not her only friends, of course. There were a few others like Lacy, Lorna, and Leanne from gym club. Sisters who everyone in town knew because of their quintuplet status. A sad expression momentarily crosses her face as she thinks of their past and recent losses. While the first sister, Lucy, died thirteen years ago moments after being born, Lilly, the deaf sister, died only a few months ago in a horrific car accident that shocked and devastated the whole school, and the local community.

As Sally was an only child, her best friends were the closest she got to having sisters, and the accident only made her value them more.

With the trio of best friends now complete, she gets up to close the door. As she leans against it, she explains her predicament in a harsh, forced whisper.

"Something strange... I mean... something scary has happened, and I don't mean losing my voice." She hesitates, watching their faces closely as they strain to hear her. "I can't remember what happened over the weekend." She states, her raspy tone serious.

Hope is chewing on a piece of toast, and Hannah has stopped rummaging in her bag to look up at her as she ambles back to the bed. "Funny dreams which feel real somehow, might have something to do with it. It's driving me mad." She sighs heavily, her shoulders drooping. Her friends stare at her blankly for a moment, then exchange puzzled looks. Sally rolls exasperated eyes at them. "I need you to jog my memory by explaining what we did from the time we left school on Friday?" Her gaze shifts between the two. "Hannah, you're good with details..." She becomes thoughtful. "Actually, it's was a bit patchy that morning as well. Something..."

"You've forgotten *everything*?!" Hope booms. "The whole weekend was totally rad, Sal, aside from almost getting into trouble because we met late in the park." She reaches for more toast. "It was a wicked weekend from start to finish, wasn't it Smudge?"

Hannah's answering nod is a little vague, and distracted.

"What do you mean when you say your dreams feel real?" She asks, getting straight to the most unusual point her friend made. Her large, almond eyes are fixed on her with intense curiosity.

"I've had a few flashbacks, but it's all mixed up. Some of it doesn't make sense, and then, there's these..." She pulls back her sleeves one after the other to show them her arms, then reaches down to lift the hem of the long skirt she has on, showing them her bare legs. The girls bend close for a better look, and then exchange troubled glances. "I need to know how I got them." She says, wincing a little. She sits back, folds her legs beneath her and pulls a large, yellow smiley-faced emoji cushion onto her lap.

"You look like I do after a tough week of hockey and netball practice."

Hope chuckles, tickling Serenity under her chin, gently this time. "You should really get some ice on those fingers, Bubbs." Hope wisely suggests.

"I will, later."

"No, now..." Hope insists, getting up and heading for the door. "Trust me, Bubbs, I know all about injuries and stuff like that... I'll get one of your mum's ice packs from the freezer..."

Hannah drops back into the wicker chair.

"We hung out straight after school on Friday, and most of Saturday. We didn't do anything to make those bruises, though. Do they hurt much?" She asks, her face twisting a bit as they study the large purple bruise on her arm.

Hope returns with the ice pack wrapped in a tea towel. Placing it gently across her knuckles, ties it off and Sally at once notices how soothing the cold press is.

She tentatively presses a bruise on her leg with a finger. "I think it happened when I was asleep, and yeah, they do hurt. Not enough to tell my parents or anything." She asserts, her voice low.

"What?" Hope's head snaps up. "How can you get hurt in your sleep?" Her mouth is full of toast and her words sound stuffy as she speaks, gesturing with a crust. "Unless you were sleepwalking and fell down the stairs or something."

"I thought of that, but as neither my mum or dad said anything about a fall..." She trails off, frowning.

"Don't stress out. We'll get to the bottom of this intriguing mystery, Bubbs." Hannah says confidently, folding her hands in her lap. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Feeling much better now her friends are with her and on the case, Sally takes a deep breath, and closes her eyes.

Now we can sort out... Well, whatever needs sorting out, she thinks, as she tries to relax and remember. Opening her eyes, she starts to speak...

*

Yes, she was late meeting them in the park that morning. She quickly recounts what she thought made her late...

She was standing in front of the window in the middle of a most unladylike yawn, stretching her arms wide with her eyes closed and her face twisting ugly, when she hears several barks of laughter drifting up from the lane below. Her eyes fly open, and with a horrified gasp she drops down into a crouch.

A group of schoolboys, some she recognises, are throwing snowballs at each other directly in front of her house. Pushing and shoving, they make a hell of a racket as they travel along the lane.

"Shit." *Did they see her?* She hisses in a panic. *Were they laughing at her?*

She hears a dull whomp, and looks up in time to see a snowball fall away from the window. Two more splatter against it, and slide down.

"Damn, they *must* have seen me." She cringes, glances down at her nightdress, and scowls at its childish style—pink and frilly with a bunch of cute kittens on it. She rolls her eyes, shaking her head a little.

When the sounds of laughter finally fade and she judged the coast to be clear, she rises slowly peeking over the sill, then relaxes expelling a heavy breath of air, grateful to see the boys are now, nowhere in sight.

An hour later when she is dressed for school and still fuming at Juggs, she sees a change to the image on the front of her favourite book and wanders over to take a look. Picking it up, she clutches it to her chest like it is a precious item she holds dear...

Time... passes.

Suddenly blinking rapidly three times, she finds herself staring at the clock and frowns, head angled to one side—something she does when she is confused or considering something important. Time has somehow run away from her.

"You're gonna be late, Sally." Her mum called from the bottom of the stairs, prompting her to hurry.

"Damn!" She mutters, snatching up her stuff. Casting a final, sweeping glance around the room, she rushes out the door.

With a warmer than expected sun casting its strengthening heat upon the day, the snow and frost is disappearing fast along with the picturesque scene.

It is still pretty, if you ignore the piles of slush pressing against the curbs, she thinks as she roughly shrugs on her heavy parka coat. Throwing a *see you later* over her shoulder, she heads out the door.

With the pavements almost clear of ice, she runs through half of Ashington park to meet up with Smudge-Face and the Juggernaut. She is only a bit late, and while desperately trying to catch her breath, she relates the shameful thing she thinks made her late.

She leaves what happened with the book out of her explanation, however, since she doesn't actually know what happened. There was no point distracting her friends with the mysterious nature of her special book.

*

"I remember grabbing my schoolbag, and rushing out thinking I was boringly average compared to you two. I wish I knew what I was good at." She grumbles lightly. It was an old complaint expressed many times.

"Don't stress. You're good at blowing the biggest, bubble-gum bubbles in the history of big bubbles, ever. That's something, at least." Hope offers glibly.

Hannah chuckles, but Sally glares at Hope unamused. She was well known around school for blowing huge bubble gum bubbles. The gap between her two front teeth which occasionally causes her to lisp, gave her an advantage, according to Hope.

"Be careful what you wish for." Hannah murmurs. It's one of the sayings the three often quote, usually in jest.

"So, on Friday," she haltingly continues, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "After the school bell, I grabbed my stuff and then went to meet you two."

"We met in the hall, remember?" Hannah prompts, chewing on a second piece of toast. Her drawing pad lies open on her lap, she has a pencil poised to draw in one hand, and an assortment of coloured pencils and stubby crayons, on the floor beside her.

8

Birthday preparations.

Friday 28th February, 2020.

At the sound of the school bell, Sally gathers her things off the desk, grabs her bag and ambles into the hall with the rest of the class. Unwrapping a piece of bubble gum retrieved from her blazer pocket, she welcomes the sweet, tangy flavour as it bursts richly around her mouth, tantalising her taste buds.

Hannah falls into step beside her, and they walk along the packed hall with other students, occasionally calling out a, "See you Monday," or "See you later," to some. Making their way noisily out into the bright afternoon, they reach their agreed meeting place and wait for Hope.

"It's my dinner party tonight!" Hannah gushes, her bright eyes scanning for Hope in the crowds of girls exiting the school's main building. "Now we're the same age, Hope has to stop going on about my not yet being a teenager." She bounces impatiently up and down on the balls of her feet, then stands on tiptoe trying to see over the heads of

everyone, her gaze shifting from one set of doors to another.

Sally laughs and rolls her eyes as she hooks her arm through her friend's.

"No, really?!" She drawls, with a long-suffering expression. "It's not like it's all you've talked about for the last month or anything." She glances over her shoulder towards the school's main double doors. "Can you see her yet? My mum said she'd wait for us by the ... oh look, there she is." She exclaims, pointing. They both wave a hurry-up gesture, then start strolling towards the gates, giving her time to catch up to them.

"Tonight's the night, girlfriend." Hannah gushes again, in a sing song tone.

"Nooo, really!?" Sally repeats. "You're like an over-excited three-year-old."

"Ha, ha, ha, very funny." She says flatly, unamused by the old quip.

"What's funny, Smudge-Face?" Hope asks, coming up behind them and draping her arms over their shoulders. Towering over Hannah, she almost knocks her over as her large sports bag slips off her shoulder and whacks into her back.

"Hey, watch it, Juggs." Hannah cries, frowning with annoyance.

"Sorry," she says, awkwardly rearranging the bag. "Now the most important member of our little trio is here, let's go disco," in her usual take-charge manner. Shifting her bag to her other shoulder, she moves around to the other side of Sally to link arms, and they dodge through crowds of school girls, towards the gates.

The three are an odd little group at school—accepted by most, and kept at arm's length by others, they are a trio on the periphery of the usual cliques and gangs.

"Are you sure your birthday isn't tomorrow, Smudge-Face? Maybe you were born on the twenty-ninth of February and are only three-and-a-half years old, tiny little thing that you are." Hope suggests, grinning broadly.

"Nope, it's my thirteenth birthday today," counters Hannah proudly, rising to the bait. "I made the twenty-eighth by the skin of my teeth."

"Or by the sweat of your mum's labour." Hope throws back,

chuckling.

"I was saved from being teased for the rest of my schoolgirl life for being a three-year-old." She says, as they come upon the gates.

"We know the math," her friends chorus flatly—their usual response to the running joke of her age.

Hannah initially refused the idea of a party in the afternoon, claiming that thirteen was too old for that sort of thing. "Can a few of my friends come for tea after school instead?" She asked.

"I don't see why not. Maybe in fancy dress?" Her mum suggests. "To make it a bit more fun. You can have a dinner party, rather than a tea party."

"Um..." she contemplates, undecided.

"It's more grown up, Han," she adds persuasively.

"Hm ... yeah, alright. A dinner party it is."

"With a buffet dinner?" Her dad interjects, as he walks into the room. "Your cousins will come a few hours later. Feeding them all will be easier to manage if they can help themselves. That sound alright, Han?"

"Yep. Cool and the gang."

He chuckles at the phrase he often used himself, finding it sweet that Hannah and her friends adopted it too, even though they knew little of the eighties disco band, and thought the music *totally cheesy* when their parents were partying to what they sentimentally called, Old Skool disco and Handbag House.

*

The girls were in good spirits. School was over, and the eagerly awaited party weekend had finally arrived. Hannah's Heroine-themed Pizza Dinner Party had been the hot topic of conversation for weeks. She invited ten of her school friends, including Sally and Hope, and promised all sorts of fun, and boys, meaning her brothers, who half the older girls at school fancied.

"There'll be lots of grub and a two-tiered, chocolate-orange birthday cake." She gushed. "Mel has to go out later, but she's gonna take pictures

of us at the start so I can do a painting afterwards."

It is the height of winter, a time when the country was usually under a bitter, cold snap. Hannah always complained about having to spend her birthday shivering, and was delighted to be graced with such mild weather, for once. It would stay this way for another day or two, so the dinner party was set up under a gazebo in the garden.

She'd said family and friends were expected later, and it would probably turn into a house party with the grown-ups taking over. Then revealed that while they boogied away to their old school music late into the night, she and her cousins would hang out at the top of the stairs instead of going to bed, badgering older brothers or sisters into sneaking the odd soft drink or snack up to them.

*

Hope's eyes light up when she sees Simone waiting by the car, because she is one of the coaches at the sports academy.

"Fantastico!" She cries, giving Sally's arm a firm squeeze. "It's your mum."

"So, I see." Sally replies drolly, wincing slightly at her tight grip. She arches her brows at Hannah, who simply shrugs.

Hope is more excited about talking sports than she is about Hannah's party, and she rushes to sit in the front seat with Simone, rather than sit in the back with her friends.

*

In the bedroom, Sally hoarsely continues.

"Of the party, I remember getting to your house, Han," she reaches for a piece of toast which is now cold and soggy, but still nice as it is drowning in butter. "We changed into our party clothes and..."

"To jog your memory, we should start with something easy. Do you remember what you changed into?" Hope interrupts, reaching for another piece of toast. She offers a scrap to Serenity, who sniffs it with disinterest, then lowers her head back onto her paws.

They reached Hannah's home in ten minutes, and the girls hurried straight into the house. Removing their shoes at the door, they fling a collective greeting over their shoulders to Hannah's parents who are busy preparing the table, setting up the gazebo, and laying everything out for the party, and rush up the stairs to get ready.

"I seem to remember..." Her head tilts slightly as she looks towards the window. "Yeah, I wore my all-in-one Cat woman outfit."

"That's right."

She chose Cat Woman because she adored cats, and loves every portrayal of Cat Woman she's seen. At the sleepover on her thirteenth birthday, her parents agreed the three films they could stay up to watch. *Batman Returns*—the nineties version with Michelle Pfeiffer playing Cat Woman. *How To Train Your Dragon*—a funny, animated film, and *Cat Woman* with Halle Berry. They saved the one with Anne Hathaway; *The Dark Knight Rises*, for another sleepover.

While Smudge-Face liked Halle, and Juggs preferred Michelle, she couldn't decide who she thought portrayed the role best—a streak of indecisiveness that is totally Libran according to her book on astrological signs. All three were deserving of the Bad-ass, Women Avenger label.

At gym club, when she nimbly danced with ribbons or along the bench or beam, she pictured how light and graceful Serenity's movements were, and tried to copy the way she nimbly padded across the backs of chairs, the high back fence at the end of the garden or across

the stair railing, head and tail held high and her little paws taking small, close steps—always perfectly balanced, and sought to copy her balanced elegance.

At other times, when she was lazing about daydreaming, she loved having Serenity curled up in her lap, purring or asleep while she gently stroked her back. She was soothing to be around, always slept so soundly and yet, should she hear a suspicious, unfamiliar sound, her ears would prick up and swivel, her eyes would open and she would be ready to pounce on any insect or tiny intruder fool enough to invade her mistress's human domain.

Smiling indulgently at the thought, she returns her attention back to the day of the party.

Hope, to no one's surprise, wore a sequined, fashion tracksuit with a fake, oversized Olympic medal around her neck, while Hannah, also unsurprisingly, dressed as an artist. Her costume was a wide, paint-smeared apron over a tank top, a long gipsy skirt, and flip-flops.

"I thought I was a bit underdressed until I saw what you two had on."

"What about the costumes the others wore?" Hannah asks, adjusting the angle of her sketchbook across her lap.

9

Hannah's Heroine-themed Pizza Dinner Party

The guests were dressed in representations of popular, no-nonsense heroines like an Amazon warrior woman, a Viking Valkyrie, and a Cow-girl—complete with a lasso, cowboy hat and chaps. One came dressed as a dark Angel, complete with a halo and wings. She looked cool rather than cute, somehow. Another was the good witch Maleficent, another a hedge-witch, dressed in shades of green with a tall, pointy hat and a long, green cloak. The last girl dressed as Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer from Star Trek, and finally, Dyon and Douglas appeared dressed as the Men in Black, complete with sunglasses, black suits, and water pistols.

As soon as they arrived, they wasted no time and aimed their pistols at the girls. The sounds were ear-piercing as they were chased around the garden—a mixture of screams and shouts cutting across the music. It was a *great* party, she now remembered.

By the time her school friends were preparing to leave, around two dozen relatives and family friends had joined the party. The lounge was

suddenly full of people, loud music, clinking glasses, yells, and screams, and laughter.

"Don't forget to take a goodie bag." Hannah's dad shouts over the music as the younger guests continue to run around enjoying themselves.

The three frazzled chaperones, various parents who arrived earlier, struggle to keep order and make them stop playing so they can go. Obviously, they are reluctant to leave, and keep hiding and dodging reaching arms, and stern, exasperated gazes.

While Hannah was busy being the centre of attention, and Hope—never one to turn down a challenge, battled Dyon on PlayStation, Simone turned Sally around and shoo-d her towards the front door.

"Did you thank the Alexanders and say goodbye to Hannah? Where is your school bag?"

"Yep. It's over there by the presents. I can collect it tomorrow. Oh, I didn't get a goodie bag!" She cries, making to go back into the lounge. Simone's restraining hand on her shoulder stops her.

"I'll get them both. Go find your coat, then meet me by the front door, alright?"

"OK," she agrees reluctantly, unable to tear her gaze away from her friends still hanging around the now crowded lounge, dining area and garden.

When she arrives at the open front door, a rather flamboyantly dressed clown steps in front of her, barring her way.

"*You!* I choose you." He bellows, thrusting out a black gloved hand to offer her the most fabulously coloured balloon she's ever seen.

His smile is ridiculously wide as he stares down at her with a sly, sideways glance, then tips her a friendly wink. Startled by this loud declaration, she glances around, expecting to find everyone staring at them and laughing, but no one is paying them the slightest bit of attention.

"Uh, thanks," she murmurs cagily, grasping the loop at the end of the string. She looks up at the clown's heavily made-up face, wondering why Hannah didn't mention a clown attending. "What sort of clown are

you? Did you just get here? How come you arrived so late?" She asks curiously while thinking at the same time that,

Clowns are for little kids' parties. No self-respecting thirteen-year-old would have a clown at their party.

"Me? Why, I am a smart clown, Sally. Which means I am not a traditional clown like the ones at little kids' parties." He says in a stage whisper behind the hand he raises to his face as he leans close. "I am the Leap Year clown. The only one. And I always appear on this date in the leap years to issue one extraordinary invitation to a courageous, quick-witted, clever person. To one who in the future, will be remembered for their contributions to the welfare of the world, literally." His voice lowers, and he sounds a bit sad for a moment. "As such, this is my last search for the latest rising star, that being you."

"Me?" She gasps incredulously, taking an involuntary step back. The balloon bobs against the doorframe, and she yanks the string down sharply to keep it safe from any balloon-bursting edges.

"Yes, you." He insists, his voice taking on a camp, sing-songy quality. "I've found many smart, grown-up youngsters like you, Sally." Straightening, he looks her over from head to foot, and seemingly satisfied with his inspection, he squints at her a moment. "It appears I've arrived just in time, Empress," he casually murmurs.

While the clown is talking, Sally's impressed gaze checks out his funky outfit. Though he has the usual false red nose and thick, exaggerated make-up, he wears a black, three-quarter-length waistcoat that flares out when he moves, showing a bright orange, silk lining inside. Underneath this, he has on a pale orange shirt with a ruffled neckline and ruffled cuffs, baggy black jodhpurs, and a bright orange bowler hat.

Sally finds herself warming to the cool clown, and agrees with his statement about his not being the usual type. He is wearing one of her favourite colours too, orange. Then, something he said which she almost missed, snagged her attention.

"Empress? What do you mean, Empress?" She asks.

The clown bobs his head, seemingly in reply to her thought.

"Why, thank you. Orange is my favourite colour and oh, my bad. I

meant I arrived in time to be *impressed*." His gaze slips away from her face as he fusses with one of his sleeves, not making eye contact.

So, while hosted in a human body, the memory of her true nature escapes her. Interesting, the clown thinks.

"Good luck at the party!" He booms suddenly, with a grand expansive gesture.

Sally nods distractedly, her gaze fixed on the large, perfectly round balloon bouncing against the top of the doorframe. She is suddenly unable to tear her gaze away, mesmerised by its unusual mix of dark purple, and dark silver blending fluidly into each other, as though dancing to a secret, magical tune.

"Balloons are for kids too. Although, this one is... especially pretty..." she pensively muses. When her gaze falls away from the balloon and she looks for the clown, she finds her mum standing by her side instead, and the clown is nowhere to be seen. They shoulder their way outside, and as Simone steers her through the youngsters bunched outside the door, the party sounds fade away behind them.

"Look, mum. Did you ever see such lovely colours on an orballoon?!" She asks, completely fascinated. It is hard to hear anything clearly over the din. "What did the clown mean by wishing me good luck?"

"Mr. Brown? I don't know, hun." Simone replies distractedly. "Maybe it's his way of saying goodbye."

Sally's purple and silver balloon is the last thing on her mind while her thoughts are stuck on the topic the adults were discussing for most of the evening—the new flu bug going around. While some spoke with concern and others with dismissive shrugs, she was unnerved by it.

When Sally draws the balloon down by its string, she notices two printed pictures on it. One is the figure of a cheeky-looking boy, laughing, and by the way his eyes are squeezed shut and the rest of his body positioned, it is clear he is laughing so hard he is literally holding his sides to stop them from splitting. The other, is the head of a smiling fellow wearing a huge purple hat with a wide, floppy brim so large, only his smiling mouth and chin show beneath the rounded curve. Both are about six inches in size and curve around the balloon's surface.

"I've never seen an orballoon like this one, mum. It must be one-of-a-kind. I'm way too old for it but... I'm keeping it. No one else has an orballoon like this one, not even Hannah."

Oh gosh, what if it was meant for her as a surprise birthday present, and the clown gave it to her by mistake? She wonders, hoping she's wrong.

"That cool clown over there wished me luck." She begins, stretching her neck as she points. "Oh, he's gone."

Simone glances at the balloon. It looked like a normal balloon to her. "Mr. Brown must have saved it especially for you."

"But why me?" She seemed to be asking herself this rather than her mum. "When I stroke the skin, I feel like..." She frowns and tilts her head, troubled by her inability to articulate her feelings, then corrects her mum. "It wasn't Mr. Brown mum; it was a *Clown*."

"That's nice, babe..." Simone murmurs, still somewhat distracted. She unlocks the car and opens the rear door for Sally to get in.

"Shall I secure that somewhere?" Simone asks, reaching for the balloon.

"No!" Sally is surprised by the explosive intensity of her tone as she twists away and takes a step back. She holds the balloon in her arms possessively, as if afraid of being parted from it. "No, thank you," she says more coolly, with a small, awkward smile. "It's so big, I'll sit in the back with it."

Simone quirks a perplexed eyebrow, rolls her eyes, and mouths a quietly drawn out, *O... kay*, before getting in the front seat.

*

Back in the bedroom, Hope interrupts.

"Hold it." She leans forwards, her face screwed up in confusion. "What's an orballoon?"

"What?" Sally frowns at her, surprised by the question.

"You said the balloon the clown gave you was an *orballoon*. Where did the name come from?"

Uncertain, she replies vaguely, "I... think that's what the clown called it."

"Oh, right." Hope exchanges a furtive glance with Hannah, whose expressive eyes mirror her curiosity.

"Or..." Sally chews her lip as she considers. "Maybe because it is shaped like a perfectly round orb. Anyway... as I was saying..." She shifts her position on the bed to get more comfortable.

*

Sally holds the balloon tight against her chest throughout the short drive home from the party. She likes how it expands around her fingers while encircled in her arms, and the soft feel of its surface against her cheeks when it bobs against her face. She did not, however, like the stretchy, squelchy sounds her fingertips makes as she draws them gently across the surface. It reminds her of nails scraping against a chalkboard, relentless and sharp, which always makes her wince.

She appears enchanted as she stares at the cheeky boy's face.

Did he just wink at her? She suddenly wonders, equally amazed and disbelieving.

No longer laughing, his smiling eyes are fully open and staring right at her. They start to glow an amber yellow, then his pupils change to spirals, spinning around and around until they reduce to a single point in place of normal pupils.

Noticing Sally is a lot quieter than usual, Simone glances at her in the rear-view mirror. It wasn't like her not to be excitedly rehashing every moment of the party.

"Are you alright, Sal?"

"Uh-huh... fine." Her response is low, and calm, but not out of the ordinary, quietly spoken or not.

"Good. Tie it up in your room, alright? Somewhere safely out of reach of Serenity's sharp claws."

Nodding slowly, she agrees. "Okay." While keeping her eyes strangely fixed on the eyes of the boy on the balloon. "I'll tie it to the top knob of my chest of drawers, near the window," she suggests. "It'll be the first thing I see when I wake up, and the last thing I see before I fall sleep."

"An excellent suggestion. Almost home now, love." Simone says, mulling over an earlier conversation...

While the children were enjoying the party, the adults were discussing the flu, which concerned her more than she was openly admitting. She'd thought the new virus was too far away to affect them in England. Except now, it was February and this virus, called the coronavirus or covid 19, had spread to Italy, other European countries, the US, India, South America, and other areas. While some were treating it as serious, others were not.

Could the news be making more or less of it as usual, sensationalising the story? Or, was it simply another relatively harmless form of bird flu?

She didn't know what to think. It was a wait-and-see situation until statements were forthcoming from a reputable government source. She decides to speak with Richard about it when Sally has gone to bed.

10

Thirteen going on thirty.

Back in the bedroom ...

"Then what?" Hope prompts, chewing on more toast.

"Well, I remember the ride home. I was thinking enviously of how lucky you two are for having definite ambitions again."

*

While her friends stood out in their respective fields with firm plans for their futures, Sally couldn't figure out what she wanted to do or where she wanted to go in terms of her life. She must figure out what her best talents were, and learn not to dither so much when faced with a choice. Reasonably capable of most things, she was alright at sports like netball and gymnastics, rubbish at arts and crafts admittedly, but great at communicating, interacting, and talking with people, so she has been told. Intelligent, and inquisitive, with a curious nature, she is good at

figuring things out. Unfortunately, she has not yet discovered the full value of these, or that they are good natural skills to have.

*

A note from the Timekeeper...

Unlike most teenagers, Sally has a natural talent for seeing a situation from more than her own perspective. Quick-witted and intuitive, she acted on what felt right, regardless of who or what is being challenged or decided. Confident and friendly, she asked direct questions, and listened carefully to the answers—details and information she subconsciously filed away to be used or shared when it became relevant.

As a Libran, her sign is represented by a set of balancing scales in the zodiac. As such, she can easily, and objectively assess a situation from both sides. Seeking balance in all things, Librans strive to create win-win outcomes in discussions and debates. Or, they themselves become the element of balance—a linchpin.

While Sally can turn her hand to most things, sees the bigger picture well, and is interested in obscure topics beyond the usual range of ordinary childhood interests, she is as curious as a cat to know how things survived in nature, how animals were cared for by people, what made people act the way they did, and what made foreign countries and cultures so different from her own country and culture.

She was into the usual teen stuff like new tech, music, and fashion. A master of puzzles, riddles, and board games like snakes and ladders, backgammon, and chess, and she was in the school drama club.

*

But what should she do with all of this ... stuff? What good was any of it if she didn't know how those skills were used? Why did her interests flit from one thing to another, and why was her future so unclear? It's so unfair, she fumes in frustration.

A conversation with her parents, managed to lessen her anxiety.

"It's normal not having a clear path at your age, Sal." Her dad begins. "As mature as you three are..."

"Normal like three thirteen-year-olds going on thirty." Simone laughingly splutters, nudging her gently.

"You're only thirteen, Sal," Richard continues as he sprinkles parmesan cheese over the plate of spaghetti before him. "There's plenty of time to think about your future. Your friends are exceptionally talented in their respective fields, I'll admit, but you're a people person."

"Yes, love. You make friends easily, and can turn your hand reasonably well to practically anything." Her mum says as she twists a forkful of spaghetti in a spoon, then sloppily eats it. She dabs at drops of tomato sauce on her chin with a napkin.

"But my friends have serious ambitions to achieve something specific, while I... dither." Her mouth curves downwards slightly.

"Yes, that is true," her dad agrees. "But give yourself some credit." He says with a measured look. "Yes, it seems amazing knowing what you want to be at a young age, but their level of passion and determination to see their ambitions through, is unusual. The downside may be that those interests are all they know, and all they focus on."

Sally listened thoughtfully, unsure if she agreed with him.

"You're talented in other ways, trust me." Simone says.

"You have a good, kind heart. You stand up for your friends, and after watching the three of you together, you connect the other two. I mean, think about it. If we all didn't already know each other, would you three even *be* friends? You've saved them from only focusing on one thing, and possibly missing out on everything you should enjoy while you're still young," he continues, tucking heartily into his bolognaise. "You're gifted in bringing people together, initiating interesting conversations,

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and you take the time to consider situations from the point of view of others as well as your own perspective. Those are all good skills." He twirls his glass of red wine in a circular motion, then takes a sip. "Some people have no idea how to interact comfortably, or break the ice with strangers. Not many your age or even some adults can easily see the world from another's perspective, or can start a conversation with whomever they meet without struggling."

Sally leans her elbows on the table, her chin resting in her palms.

"Listen, when you get older you'll have a world of options before you. These skills might not seem to be leading you anywhere now, but if you hone them well they will open doors to many choices and opportunities you can pursue. You can choose from many exciting fields of work or start your own business."

"He's right, babe," Simone assuredly agrees. "You haven't found your niche yet, but in time you will. Your friends don't have such wide options when you think about it."

"Hm, yeah, maybe," she reluctantly agrees, still a little unsure. "I suppose when you look at it that way, I do have a few skills going for me."

"Rather..." Richard agrees.

*

A note from the Timekeeper...

Her parents are correct in their assessment of the girls' friendship, and her unifying position. As her friends were so obsessed with their ambitions, she's the one who plans their non-sporty, non-arty, leisure activities. She knows that if left to their own devices, Hannah would be holed up in her loft painting all day, Hope would be off training somewhere, and she wouldn't get to see them except in school.

As the most bookish and studious of the three girls, Sally is knowledgeable about lots of things, has a great memory, and her interests are diverse. With her understanding of life and how things

work in the adult world, Hannah and Hope joke about changing her nickname to Wiki, short for Wikipedia, when she grows out of chewing gum—a far more suitable name that is forever relevant, just like the names Juggernaut and Smudge-Face, they collectively proclaim.

*

Back in the bedroom...

"Then what happened?" Hannah asks, chewing on the end of a pencil. "You said something about a party?"

"Yeah. That night, I dreamed about a party."

"What, my party?" She pulls a coloured pencil out from where she'd shoved it into her hair above her left ear, and touches the point to the page of her book.

Sally slowly shakes her head. "It was another party. A special... sort of... leap year party."

"What about the clown you saw? There wasn't a clown at my party, Sal. What was this other party like? Maybe things are a bit mixed up in your dreamy head, and you saw him there?"

"Show her what you've drawn so far." Hope suggests. "It might jog her memory a bit."

Sally leans over to look at the sketch pad. From her descriptions, Hannah had drawn the clown from the party using thick coloured pencils, almost precisely as she described him.

"That's spot-on, Smudge." She looks away, thoughtful. "I remember seeing him at the other party as well, and..."

"You mean, you *dreamed* of seeing him at Han's party." Hope corrects. "We didn't see him, so it must be imagined." She insists. "Although..." She continues slowly, looking a trifle confused.

"... Although, you wouldn't have noticed anything since you were so busy cosying up to Dyon." Sally throws back.

A red flush heats Hope's face and for a moment, maybe for the first time ever, she is literally lost for words.

T H E T R I A L O F S A L L I N I Q U A I

"Yeah, that's right, Juggs, we sussed you two out, long time." Hannah teases, as they both stare at her with their brows raised daring her to deny it.

"There's nothing to *suss* out." She replies hotly. "It's not like that."

"Yeah, whatever." Hannah causally intones. "We're digressing form the real story. Tell us about the party." Hannah says pointedly pressing the pencil vertically to her lips in the universally recognised sign for silence, and conveys the importance of doing so to Hope with her eyes. "Was it as crazy as my party was?"

Sally gets up and ambles over to the window.

"It was at least a hundred times *crazier*, Smudge."

11

Saxon and Noxas

Held in a wildly decorated, cavernous warehouse, the party was indeed unusual. A giant, golden banner hung across the ceiling declaring in massive bright blue letters,

It's Leap Year!!

Glittering streamers, balloons of all shapes and sizes, and shimmering paper chains are draped every which way, sparkling and flashing brightly. Confetti of all colours sporadically bursts forth from unseen openings to shower the crowd of laughing, screaming children below.

Looking around curiously, it takes her a minute to notice it is late at night, and there are ten times more boys and girls here than at Hannah's party. Those she can see she doesn't recognise, because they are all wearing things to hide their faces; masks, hoods, various hats, or thick make-up.

Her face brightens with surprise and a wide, dimpled grin as she stares down at herself. Magic has transformed her long-sleeved, plain faux leather catsuit into a sleek, stretchy, all-in-one. She touches the snug

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hood around the back of her neck beneath her bushy pony, feeling two points sticking out. *Like cat's ears*, she thinks. Long, swishing tassels attached to a belt at her waist, hang to her knees at her back and front, and the legs of her suit are tucked into long brown boots of a stretchy rubber with a cushiony softness within. She strokes her palms down the fabric of the cool, sophisticated outfit. *I'm starting to like this dream*, she thinks, smirking a little.

Wondering where the chaperones are, she stands on the room's threshold scanning the crowd before her. Her gaze finds the smart clown at once as he towers over the children, who seem...? She hesitates, struggling to find the words to describe the mad scene.

It was pandemonium.

She is almost deafened by the dreadful, metal-rock music blaring offensively out from numerous hidden speakers at a volume that defies sensory logic, and makes her ear drums twang along with the pumping baseline beats.

Some of the children are dancing—if you can call it that, in a wild, uncoordinated fashion. To one side of the room, a dozen youngsters are having a food fight while a dozen others spray paint the walls with faces, flowers, the sun, the moon, and other things. Others are running around spraying water pistols at everyone else, and the loud, continuous cries, shouts, screams, laughs, grunts, and lots of *Ob's* exclaimed in sharp, high-pitched voices over the racket of bad taste music, feels painful to her sensitive nature.

The sensory overload coming from all sides, is a disorienting thrum ratcheting through her body, with the cacophony of sounds and the chaotic visuals blending into a confusing mess in her mind. Try as she might, she cannot grasp what anyone is saying, as no proper words are spoken, only shouts, snorts, bellows, and laughter by everyone all at once.

"Where are the adults who should be watching everyone?" She muses to herself; her fists planted firmly on her hips.

Maybe they can turn the sound down. Or off, for that matter, she thinks with a wry smile.

"Hello there, Sally." She flinches at the loud, cheery voice speaking from directly beside her. "You're late! But welcome to our Day Before Leap Year Day party!"

She turns to stare at the boy at her side, recognising him instantly.

"Welcome to your, what? You've lost me." She frowns. "Aren't you the cheeky-looking boy on my orballoon?"

"Cheeky looking?" He stares at her, perplexed, then shrugs casually as if agreeing with her. "If you say so, then yes, I am cheeky-looking. Very, *very* correct! I am so glad you recognised me. My name is Saxon." He bows slightly as he touches a palm to his chest.

"Saxon? Hello, Saxon." She shakes his outstretched hand.

"Do you know you are here by special, *special* invite?" He asks, then resumes before she can answer. "We've been waiting for you for a long time, Sally. It's been four long, *long* years since the last leap year."

"You've been waiting for me? But why?" She jerks around and cringes suddenly as an ear-piercing scream accompanied by the sound of glass shattering against the ground, reverberates out above all the other chaotic sounds.

Saxon ignores the noisy disruption. "This is going to be a fun, *fun* party, Sally!" He gestures around them, indicating everything, seemingly unphased by the continued ruckus. "There's ice cream and cakes, games and toys, and other children to play with, see?"

"Who are they? I don't recognise any of them from Hannah's party or from school. Do you actually *know* them all?" She asks, looking around suspiciously, then adds. "And I don't play with toys."

"No, of course you don't, silly me and yes, I do. *I do!* Every single one. We are all friends here to have fun. Come on, Sally, let's go and play. *It's a leap year!*" He sings gaily, gesturing expansively with an infectious, happy disposition.

"Alright," she agrees, swept up by his enthusiasm. Though she remains a tad wary.

She follows Saxon through the large space, dodging past children dancing and playing, past a long line of tables piled high with platters of all her favourite meaty foods: sausage rolls, turkey stuffing, pigs in

blankets, crispy chicken strips, fish finger and bacon bites, and bowls of crisps, fruits, and pretzels. French sticks with a selection of fillers, jugs of juice, and large bottles of fizz filled one table. A large, chocolate-orange cake with thick icing rests in the centre of another, with thirteen unlit candles standing tall on top. While everything is arranged on pretty, spotlessly-clean tablecloths with frilly edges, splashes of dripping blue liquid, sticky red smears, streaks of brown, which could be chocolate, and bits of food from the food fight, is stuck to the wall beyond the tables.

"What shall we play?" She asks, carefully stepping around the chunks of food and ripped party decorations strewn all over the floor.

"I'll show you. We have a special leap year game you *must* play! It is challenging but fun. Then you can stay, *stay* in the party house forever! If you finish the game correctly," he grins, nudging her in the ribs with an elbow.

"We?" She looks around. "Do you mean you and the clown? What do you mean by staying here forever? I don't want to stay here forever, not with this dreadful noise. What is this game that can be finished correctly or incorrectly? What if I can't finish it at all?" She asks as they meander through the room with care.

"Such a smart, *smart* girl." He wags a finger at her. "A clever girl like you, of course you will," he returns confidently, intentionally sidestepping her questions. "It's one of your favourite games too. Come see, you will enjoy it, I promise!" He insists, leading her to a large, egg-shaped hole in the wall. A narrow ladder is fixed to its edge with six steps led up to the opening.

"What's this then? Where does it go? How do I play?" She asks curiously.

"Questions, *questions*, so many questions, when there's no need. Just grab onto the ladder there." He points. "Climb up, and go through the opening." He points again. "Then simply follow the lighted feet through the curtains straight ahead of you. It is now two minutes to midnight, and you have a certain number of hours to reach the final..." Saxon stops talking and turns around. The girl has hesitated behind him

seemingly reluctant to do as he directs.

Sally feels slightly mistrustful of Saxon. For all his smiling and jolly, playful manner, he seems to be rushing her. There is something decidedly secretive, or maybe sly, about him, and the whole situation feels... ominous.

Ah ha... Yes! Ominous. A word she has used correctly for the first time. *That's one to me, dad,* she thinks.

In a word game she regularly plays with her dad, she picks seven words out of the dictionary and then has to use them in their proper context sometime that same day. Ominous is one of the words she chose... She hesitates, unable to remember. *Recently,* she imagines.

Crossing her arms firmly, she stands on tip-toe and stretches her neck to look through the opening. It is dimly lit inside, and the only light she sees comes from a giant clock face on the other side. She glances over her shoulder, eyes scanning the room. The other children continue to play noisily, chasing each other around, eating and dancing as though nothing is out of order. The sight is reassuring. She notices Saxon watching her, head tilted questioningly.

He's probably wondering why she's dithering, she thinks.

Take care, Sally.

The whispered warning skitters into her mind, weaving across her inner vision.

He is devious. Do not trust him...

She feels a slight tugging sensation on her wrist, and glances down at it to see a string tied around it. She feels another tug and turns to see where the taut string ends. It stretches right across to the other side of the room, and is attached to the hand of the big-faced fellow from her balloon. He is standing near the door, waving a gloved hand at her. She grins, then waves back as the balloon string pulls tighter.

"It's my orballoon, Saxon." She exclaims gleefully, her gaze switching from him to the other, and back. "He has my orballoon! I can't go without it. I must get it first before I..." Her voice takes on a tone Saxon knows all too well, and his lips tighten slightly. "He is... calling me." A pleasant warmth emanates from the big-faced fellow, and a command

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unexpectedly pops into her head.

"Come to me, Sally, at once!" Recognising the voice from the whispered warnings, it is a voice she knows she can trust.

12

Telepathic communication.

Turning away from the egg-shaped hole in the wall entirely, she winds the string around her fingers and as she crosses the room, the big-faced fellow encouraging her on. Smiling widely, he beckons her over to him in the way sailors pull in their ropes on a ship, working their hands over each other.

The children automatically drift out of her way as she moves past them, her gaze locked trance-like upon the big-faced fellow.

Behind her, Saxon sighs as he stares at her back, resigned and frustrated. His smile fades completely, and he mutters crossly.

"Brother! How irritating. I almost, *almost* had this one! One more minute and she would have been in the game when the clock struck twelve, announcing the arrival of the leap year twenty-four hours." His brow lowers. "She would have played the long game, which is far more interesting and enjoyable. But now you will prepare her for the short game instead. It's better than nothing, I suppose." He shrugs, somewhat half-heartedly, his expression grim. "Sally, come back!" He calls, but his

shout is unheard. "As always, once Noxas catches their eye, they are his until he lets them go. So, the game will not begin tonight, but I will see you tomorrow, Sally. Then maybe you'll stay with us forever," he mutters. He is turning away when his brother communicates with him telepathically, his cautious, warning tone stopping him in his tracks.

"That will not be so, bro. In your rushed efforts to get her involved in the game, you have yet to realise who we have here. Look again. *Feel* her energy."

A long silence ensues while Saxon begrudgingly closes his eyes, and inclines his head frowning slightly. His expression reforms into one of mild disbelief, then understanding.

"Holy heavens! She is a descendent of the... of the... Venus Matriarch." He silently gasps a trembling breath in disbelieving shock. She is... Empress Salliniquai of the True Malsimily! But... but..." he splutters. "How... can this be?" He giddily sends back. His face is now flushed with unexpected excitement, and a trace of fear. His wide-eyed stare shines with a deep respect, for she is a spiritual being of the highest order.

"It seems fitting, as this is our last opportunity to save and protect the children chosen to lead during the new Aquarian age, along with the Rowanshire Nine, and others."

"Yes, very fitting. Perhaps this is also why she keeps referring to the balloon the clown gave her as an orballoon."

"The orb shape must have jogged the Emperesserial memory of her orb, somehow."

"Quite possible, yes. If so, then all of this is happening according to the Divine plan. The rules of the previous games may be different this time. We should watch out for these. Perhaps there is a good reason she is here now on the cusp of our final leap year, right before the great suffering sweeps across the human physical realm. That reason, as always, must be for the good of the whole."

"I agree, brother." Noxas says, turning and tipping his head. His gaze meets Saxon's across the room. "Strange that she cannot remember herself as... herself. That is unusual, is it not?"

Saxon shrugs. "Hm, perhaps. Although she is far older and far wiser than us all, she has incarnated in the body of a young girl. Perhaps this is why."

"So then, Sally will play the short game on this occasion."

"That is a given. Still, to be honoured by the energy of the Empress during our very last venture into the human physical realm, can be no incidental accident, bro."

"Agreed. The great suffering is close now. It's a shame so many people's creative dreams, ambitions, hopes and whatnot, will soon end due to this dreadful, *dreadful*, contagion."

"Many hopes will be dashed as the world faces a monstrous threat that will change, delay or *end* the lives of thousands, maybe even millions worldwide." Saxon says with grim finality. "Brother, I feel quite depressed. I think I'll cheer myself up by trying some of that chocolate-orange cake." Abruptly spinning on his heel, he heads towards the table piled high with party food.

Meanwhile, in a slightly hypnotic daze, Sally winds the string in loops around her palm as she follows it to its end. The closer she gets to the big-faced fellow, the harder it is to see him as he seems to be slowly fading. When she is just a few steps away, a trio of boys noisily cross her path, and she had to stop or they would have barrelled straight into her. When she looks to where the big-faced fellow had been waiting for her, all that remains is her balloon, floating gently, attached to the string wrapped around her wrist. When she tugs on the string, everything abruptly vanishes, and smoky clouds appear and surround her. She is suddenly as light as a feather, floating around in a strange magical energy field.

"Wow!" She gushes in wondrous awe, eyes wide and staring. "Where am I? Wait. Am I *inside* my orballoon?"

"Oh, come now, Sally, you know exactly where you are! You just do not believe it." A gentle, soothing voice responds. "Even in your dreams, the sensation is not new to you." Having kept some of his awareness on them, Saxon shoots Noxas a warning thought.

"Careful, brother, careful."

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"Where are you? Why are you hiding?" She asks, glancing around the smoky enclosure. "How can I be inside my orballoon?" She hears a deep, rolling chuckle as the big-faced fellow's head materialises beside her, huge and dramatic.

"You see. You are just as smart as we imagined!" He says, with a happy, satisfied look. He introduces himself. "I am Noxas. I am to prepare you for the short Leap Year game. It is one I know you can win as proof of..."

"Careful, brother, careful."

"Alright, alright. Don't get your jodhpurs in a jive." Noxas telepathically japes.

"So, this is all just a dream?" Sally grins. "I'm *dreaming*!?" She says conclusively. "It's a very odd dream, Noxas." She admits while floating upside down in the purple and silver haze.

"Aren't they all? However, let us not think about that for the moment. I had to get your attention before you went through the Egg-trance. You have much to commit to memory on this night before the Leap year day begins tomorrow."

"Egg-trance? What's an Egg-trance?" She was trying to see his eyes but couldn't whilst floating about.

"The Egg-trance is the doorway to the Leap Year game. The game you will play tomorrow night."

"Oh, I see." She glances away in thoughtful consideration.

"Let's not think about that either for the moment. Just know I believe in you. I *know* you can do this!" His huge lips curve upwards beneath the rim of his hat. He chuckles again. "Parties are so much fun, aren't they? Lots of fun and games?"

"Yeah, they are," she agrees. "But what's this special game I'm to play? Will I like playing it? I hope it's not some silly old game for little kids."

"Oh yes, it is one you are particularly lucky at playing. The Game of ..." he pauses dramatically, and a low, decidedly mysterious chuckle rumbles in his throat. "You will see tomorrow. The game begins tomorrow."

"What *is* the Game? Tell me what it is or I'm not playing!" She demands crossly. Her brow wrinkles in a stubborn frown, her lips purse

defiantly, and she crosses her arms in front of her chest. While floating upside down however, her defiance only amuses Noxas. He chuckles, shaking his head from side to side.

"Hm... Unfortunately for you but fortunately for us, it is far too late for that sort of empty threat, Empress..." His voice takes on an authoritative tone. "I am here to make sure all that happens, happens fair and square as it happens. Still, that's the spirit, young Sally! The kind of spirit needed to win this hazardous, dangerous game."

"Dangerous? Erm, hang on a minute. Did you say, Empress?" She was growing confused with his double talk. "Why did you call me Empress?"

"Challenging, I mean, not dangerous, no, and I said to *Impress*," he lies quickly, lowering his head so the rim of his hat covers his entire face. *He must be careful. She has no awareness of her true self in this realm.* "The Clown chose you to play, and *no one* can stop the process once it has begun. So, you *will* play tomorrow."

"You haven't told me what the game is, what the stakes are or anything. How can I prepare to play a game I don't know and have no reason to play? I mean, what happens when I win?" Her confident assumption of winning the game makes Noxas's smile grow wider under the hat's rim.

"If you win, you get to stay with us under our protection, and will no longer be part of the human world. Until..."

"You mean..." She hesitates. "You mean, I'd never see my family or friends again?"

"You will see them again..." *If they survive.* "... but not until it's safe to do so."

Safe? She was beginning to regret her initial excitement about playing a game through interactive dreaming. Could what Noxas be saying be true? Not seeing family and friends ever again was no reward for winning a game. Maybe they might change their minds and choose someone else to play if she acted up somehow.

"What if I lose?" She asks, hoping it means she'd be released from the game but mentally preparing herself for a different answer anyway. His response is blunt and to the point.

"If you lose. You perish."

"Perish?" She swallows deeply, holding his gaze steadily. "Die, you mean?" She frowns doubtfully. "How can I die when this is only a dream?"

"How indeed?" He murmurs, somewhat enigmatically. "Don't dwell on that aspect of the game. Nothing is set in stone, especially not for you, Empress." Seeing her arch look, he quickly resumes. "I mean, I digress."

She frowns suspiciously, realising his every response is quite carefully measured, and enigmatic. But she isn't stupid. This is the third time he's referred to her as Empress. The clown did the same thing too, then both pretended they hadn't.

There's more to this than meets the eye. I wonder what is really going on?

She chalks up using the word *enigmatic* in its proper context, then remembers something else the clown said, and asks,

"Why me, anyway? Why was I chosen for this... honour? There were others at Hannah's party, so why choose me?"

Noxas's giant head cocks to the side. "I believe you meet certain, special criteria. But that is a question for the clown, or the Time..." cutting himself off, he deflects, saying instead. "Um, maybe you will get to ask it later if you play. Besides, things are already set in motion, and there is no... going... back." He emphasises these last words in a tone of finality, and she sees a steely, no-nonsense look in his eyes before they become hidden beneath the wide brim of his hat once more.

"Isn't it a bit unfair to lose my life regardless of if I win or lose?" Sally grumbles. "Why would I even bother to play?"

"You bother because one cannot un-bake a cake once the mix is in the oven." Noxas's huge floating mouth replies, and she knows he is studying her closely. "The outcome is not necessarily set, and there is another strong, spiritually important element in this I do not have time to explain. For now, you must not let anything distract you from doing your best to win, regardless of what is gained at the end of it. The important thing to know is it is your performance *during* the game that

will determine the outcome. It is not simply about winning or losing." His words are confident, and persuasive.

"No, really?" She sardonically throws down, seriously regretting getting mixed up in this mysterious business. What started as a surprising bit of fun now felt like she was being unfairly set up to fail. Was she doomed, whichever way it turned out? She was clearly being manipulated into staying with them, but can think of nothing worse than being trapped with all those unruly, wild children forever, or even for five minutes. Unfortunately, it appears she has no choice but to play. Once she is in the game, she might find another way to return to the real world. She sucks a deep breath and drawing herself together, says finally,

"Alright. I'm in. What do I have to do?"

Having watched her facial expressions as she worked out her options, Noxas smiles with approval as he leans in closer and speaks softly.

"Now, listen to me carefully. It is vitally important that you do *exactly* as I say, Sally." She leans towards him, eyes rapt with attention. "Concentrate on my voice, Sally. You have important things to remember..." Her eyelids droop as she is held steady within the magical field, and her facial features smooth out, becoming relaxed and serene. "There are three things you must bring from your world into ours. You *must* remember exactly what to do with them for you will take up your quest as of tomorrow night. You must complete the game before the stroke of midnight on Leap Year Day, and I can only help you at the end at the time of the final leap. Now, listen carefully, and *remember...*"

13

A day out to remember.

Saturday 29th February.

The day dawns bright and clear with mild temperatures continuing as the forecasters predicted. As the sun slowly rises in the east, it shines hazily through the few grey clouds scattered across the sky.

In her untidy, predominantly purple bedroom, Sally wakes up with no memory of the dream. Glancing up at the balloon floating above her dressing table beside the window reminds her of party the night before, and she suddenly remembers all the exciting things she will be doing with her friends on this day. Thinking of those activities, she leaps out of bed and rushes into the bathroom to get ready.

*

Back in the bedroom...

"Things get a bit fuzzy here. What did we do on Saturday?" She asks, turning from the window to look back at her friends.

Hope ambles over to the dressing table, picks up a small brush and returns to the bed. She starts combing it briskly through her pony tail to smooth out a knot. Sally laughs and snatches it out of her hands.

"For God's sake, that's the karm's brush. Use this one." She picks up a larger, human-sized brush from the dresser and throws it to her. Hannah chuckles softly; head bent low over her pad.

Catching the hairbrush, Hope straightens. "Does the job just as well." Then she hesitates. "The karms brush? What's a karm?"

"Cat, it's the cat's brush, I said."

"Nooo, you said it was a..."

"Oh damn!" Hannah howls suddenly, then apologises profusely. "Sal, I've dropped my juice, sorry. Can you get a cloth or something?"

"Oh god, it's all over the rug," Sally cries, leaping up and rushing out to get a cloth from the bathroom. As soon as she leaves the room, Hannah turns to Hope and fervently whispers. "Hey, don't challenge what she says for now. We must get to the bottom of this before she forgets it all. We can ask about her funny references later. Alright?"

Hope stares at her, a puzzled expression in her eyes. "But I only asked about..."

"*Alright?!*" Hannah stresses her teeth clenched.

"Alright, *alright...*" Hope throws her hands up. "I don't see what the big deal is, but okay."

*

THE TRIAL OF SALLINIQUAI

Notes from the Timekeeper...

Karms...

Let us take a moment to explain a few unusual points of interest within this story. Since becoming infused with Empress Salliniquai, Sally has begun to cross-reference details from the three realms of nature. When she used the term karm instead of cat, she was referring to a creature found in the Land of Ludonia; the realm of the subconscious, the Realm of the Empress, on the Planes of the Malsimily, and in the human physical realm, for the two are one and the same.

The origins of the Malsimily, the Empress, and the un-matched skills of the Narrator...

Since the dawn of time, the eternal beings of the Malsimily—a unique entity referring to a great people, magical wonderlands, a triple-layered language, and elements from the spiritual realm, have been instrumental in upholding spiritual integrity across the known, and unknown universes. These ruling, mystical beings, have intervened in the Earth's journey many times to prevent it from succumbing to spiritual destruction.

For the Malsimily, time is not as humans understand it, but time as it exists in the spiritual realms—a vast, eternal collective of which we are one of nine Timekeepers.

Part of our charge is to watch over and guide all seeded beings; the Empress in this case, supported by the Knightly Legends and three master teachers. As a seed of the True Malsimily, Empress Salliniquai has a soul at peace with itself, and in her realm she is the embodiment of harmony, the Goddess of Gaia, and the mother of all.

In their superior wisdom, the Malsimily sent Salliniquai—a being of the purest good blessed with extraordinary imagination, formidable magical powers, and exceptional creative abilities, to balance the spiritual essence of the three realms of nature. This was a charge of the

highest order in which her arrival and governance would ensure the protection and spiritual eternity of all living souls in all three realms.

In the triple-layered way of Malsimily, her charge is three-fold.

First, she is to evolve her nature within her self-created realm in preparation for completing a challenging journey across her magical lands. Second, after making said journey, she is to sacrifice herself to the Distance realm, and third, she must challenge the emperor on the Planes of the Malsimily for the right to usher in the Aquarian age.

It is our responsibility to translate her epic journey because no human can understand Malsimily in its designation as a complicated, triple-layered language.

If truth be told, at the start of this recitation we were far too busy watching and waiting to ensure the paths of time ran true, to become involved in all the pesky little dramas humans tend to get themselves embroiled in.

But then, quite unexpectedly, during our lengthy observations we grew fond of the Earth's people (*not at all our usual behaviour*). The human potential to nurture and love is so great we became impossibly caught up and intrigued. And then later, as time passed and we observed people further, we literally became hooked.

Because we have thought-amplifying, mind-reading powers, we know all the thoughts of the beings whose energy signatures originate from the realm of the Empress, by which we mean the knights of the Brotherhood of the Nine, and the empresserial hosts.

Still. Our omnipresent, umbrellica-soy magic is more potent in the human physical realm and extends to all humans. We can therefore, focus on those connected to our charges in bonds of love and friendship, anyone viewed as an enemy, anyone involved in the creation of the great suffering, and all who... well, it is easier to simply say, almost everyone. And as interesting and arresting as some of their stories might be, we will only translate the details pertinent to Empress Salliniquai's story.

We have observed many humans' hopes and dreams as they reach for the stars in refreshing innocence. Millions respect all forms of life, and

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an untold number treat their fellow men and women with compassion, tolerance, and kindness. Many open-minded individuals are attuned to the true nature of the world and the true purpose of life. And actually, we feel quite blessed to have observed the true face of humankind.

*

Back in the bedroom...

Hope reluctantly confirms her agreement just as Sally returns with a large, soapy wet cloth, and immediately starts to roughly dab the rug with it.

"Here, let me do it. I spilt it." Hannah insists, taking it from her. "Go on with the story." She leans over to clean up the spill sinking into the rug.

"Okay, thanks. Where were we?" She ambles over to the bed and sits down again. "What exactly did we do that day?"

"Well, um... let's see. We spent the morning swimming at the Dome, which was *totally* radical. Maybe you got bruised in there?" Hope suggests.

The Dome is a huge water park a short bus ride away, with pools, slides, tunnels, fountains, and waterfalls.

"After that, we went to the mall." Hannah adds, flipping a page of her sketch pad over so she has a clear sheet in front of her again.

*

The girls spent the rest of the morning, and some of the afternoon hanging around popular eateries like Ice-cream Dream, Rumbles Rolls, and Henderson's Hamburgers, their youthful laughter and chatter filling the air.

"Yeah, that's right. I remember being at the mall and..." She hesitates. "Did we go to the cinema as well?"

"We did. How can you forget that? Considering you sat in the back

row with Roy Jenkins." Hope says a bit too casually, her face a mask of shocked disapproval.

They'd gone to the cinema with half the girls and boys from three local schools. Lots of popcorn got thrown around, and while the older boys larked it up trying to out-do each other in ways boys of that age always seem to childishly do, the older girls try to act as cool as the Kardashians.

"What! I never did. Did I?" Sally shockingly denies—a distasteful look crumpling her face. Roy Jenkins was a big show-off who all the cool girls fancied. She levels an intense stare at Hannah, searching for confirmation.

"Don't lie, Hope." Hannah says reproachfully. "Ignore her, Sal. She's messing with your head. Roy is an idiot. You know we all think so."

"Hm..." Sally grumbles, her unease apparent. "A couple of times during the day, I got a funny feeling that made me anxious. It felt like something strange was about to happen, and I had to prepare for it. An important challenge..." She trails off, unable to adequately explain the feeling then or now. Not in words. She sensed only that something was drawing near which would involve her doing something that night. It nagged at her all day, but as she was enjoying herself with her friends, the thoughts retreat to the back of her mind, staying out of reach until night approached.

"Hm, the plot thickens." Hope murmurs intently, her eyes glinting with eager anticipation as she bunches up her shoulders and rubs her hands together. Hannah sends her a warning look, but she pretends not to see.

14

The deathly game of snakes and ladders.

That night, in the darkness of her bedroom, Sally's night light cast its projections of the zodiac signs across her walls and ceiling. Reciting all the zodiac signs with their symbolic representations like a lullaby, often lulls her to sleep. Serenity, lying stretched out at the bottom of her bed, is also sleeping, her ginger and white furry tummy rising and falling with each breath, while her whiskers twitch sporadically.

Abruptly, Sally sits up and turns woodenly to stare at the face of Saxon, the boy on the balloon. His strange eyes twirl and spin in spirals, drawing her in. In a slightly hypnotic trance, she gets off the bed, retrieves her school bag and takes out her pencil case. Opening it, she pulls out three, extra-thick, coloured pencils. Laying these on the bed, she takes the empty goodie bag from where it hangs over the back of her desk chair, and lays it down beside the pencils. Hooking her fingers gently beneath Serenity's collar, she fumbles with the catch, releases it, and places it beside the other items.

She looks at the balloon again. Saxon's face smiles down at her as it

bobs from side to side, then as the balloon turns, the half-covered face of Noxas, his lips wide beneath the rim of his hat, smiles down at her too.

For nine long minutes, she stares at the balloon transfixed. Then, remembering his instructions, she scoops the items up and throws them directly at Noxas's stretched face. Miraculously, the objects do not bounce off it, but are swallowed up inside.

A lightening bright flash of light throws sharp shadows across the room as a gust of wind, strong enough to blow her back a step, whips around her for several seconds, its origins unknown. Serenity is blissfully unaware of the short, compact tornado, and remains undisturbed by the winds gusting around the room. Moments later, all becomes calm again.

Sally blinks three times rapidly. Still in a daze, she backtracks to the bed and slips under the duvet. In less than a minute, she is fast asleep and once again, she dreams...

*

Back in the bedroom...

Hope leans forward and repeats rubbing her hands together.

"Right. Now we are getting to the juicy bit. This game you had to play."

Hannah has finished a rough sketch of Sally in bed with a circle of astrological signs floating above her head.

"Keep the descriptions coming," she says. "I'll have your mysterious story in pictures by the time you finish, in case you forget again."

Sally sighs gratefully. "Excellacious. Thanks, Smudge." She looks momentarily thoughtful as she prepares to continue.

At the strange reference, Hope looks to Hannah who stares back with a mild, cautionary look, her unspoken communication urging her not to say anything.

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Back at the party, Sally now stands before the eggtrance, a mysterious, strangely alluring portal to a different world. Hardly believing it to be true, she grasps the second to the top rung of the ladder, ready to pull herself up and through the hole. The cringeworthy clamour of sounds arising from the unruly children is unbelievably, louder than the music. She shakes her head, glad to be going into the eggtrance if only to get away from the dreadful racket some idiots on the planet call music.

A piece of string is tied securely around her right thumb, the balloon floating a dozen or so inches above her hand. Three items encased in individual transparent bags are reduced in size, and attached to the string like charms on a chain—Serenity's collar, the goodie bag from the party, and the three pencils banded together in a purple hairband.

"Well, here goes," she murmurs confidently, squaring her shoulders with determined resolve.

With a gymnast's flexible grace, she hauls herself through the egg trance, and jumps down on the other side of the opening. The moment her feet touch the ground, the noise from the party cuts off into silence behind her and snapping her head around, she sees the egg-shaped opening is no longer there. Instead, the large clock face she saw briefly the night before hangs in its place. The time reads 9.02 pm.

Along the narrow corridor to her right, a dark gloom stretches away. To her left, the hall leads to a subdued brightness not far away, with several feet-shaped spotlights infused into the floor. Feeling a slight, tugging sensation, she is drawn along by an invisible force towards a pair of heavy, dark purple curtains a few dozen feet away. With youthful daring, and an almost casual acceptance of her fate, Sally surrenders to the energy flow and walks down the corridor, placing her feet on the lighted feet.

She's really gone and done it now! She giddily thinks, as excitement and apprehension build within her. She is in a magical place about to play Saxon and Noxas's leap year game of... the leap year game of... *oh, whatever he called it.* It no longer seems important since it is only a game. A game she is determined to win.

For a moment, she thinks back to Hannah's dinner party when she

was greedily stuffing her face with pizza, and deciding their plans for the weekend. Then about the strange party she has just left behind, relieved to have moved beyond the noise and mayhem. While both seem a little surreal, she is totally up for playing this magical leap-year game, and her lips quirk into an expectant smile as a phrase her mum often says when referring to something inexplicable or unusual, springs to mind; *stranger things have happened*.

It is not the first time odd things have happened to her, and she can almost normalise the things around her because it is only a dream.

But was it, really?

Convinced there is far more to the leap year game than meets the eye, she is on high alert, ready for anything.

That clown has a lot to answer for... fooling me into this. But if he did fool me, why do I feel like... her eyes fix on the wondrous sight before her as the heavy curtains automatically sweep open, dramatically revealing what lies beyond in the massive, cavernous space. She blinks three times rapidly. "Like I've... done this before..." Her voice trails off as she stares up at the enormous... game structure.

*

Hidden inside the game's shadows, the brothers chat amiably...

"By the Empress. That was it. Did you see that?" Saxon cries, leaning forward in his cushy, high-backed floating chair.

"The three blinks. Yes. I saw it."

"Then, it truly is her. Empress Salliniquai." They state reverently.

"You had doubts brother?"

"No. Not doubts. I simply wanted confirmation. Now I have it. We both saw the sign."

"The sign of the Empress marks the start of a deep infusion cycle," Noxas murmurs, almost to himself. "A subtle boost of soft but fierce, wise but innocent, uniquely matched energy."

Saxon pauses, eying Sally with a knowing glint in his eyes. "Just like

young Sally."

"Ah, yes." Noxas draws out the words. "A good choice..."

*

In the game...

Eyes wide, Sally marvels at the impossibility of it. The misshapen squares, the specifically sectioned colours, the ladders. She cannot tell if she is inside, or outside as a light breeze of fresh air brushes against her skin, cooling her nicely. As suffused overhead lights shine down on her pretty upturned face, she gazes at the most extraordinary sight she's ever seen, eyes still wide with stunned amazement.

While the edges of the space are concealed in mists and shadows, a huge, pulsating grid of illuminated squares is nestled at its centre, the defining lines glittering and sparkling with flashing, changeable colours. Upon the mist-shrouded squares a colossal, three-story-high, three-dimensional Snakes and Ladders game stands, its structure resembling a cube.

"A giant, snakes and ladders game! That isn't so bad. It's my favourite game. I'm good at games..." Her eyes snag on a long, thick shape, moving stealthily slow within the recessed shadows between or beyond the squares' inner sides, and her enthusiasm wanes a bit.

"Oh... my... gosh! Saxon, you were right," Sally stammers breathlessly, her voice trailing off. "This isn't just another board game."

As the threat of danger slips into her mind, the whole thing seems impossible but as it is right there in front of her, she knows it is real.

As real as a dream can be, she blithely supposes.

She takes in all the numbered squares with sparkling corners, and all the ladders—some of which stand out as suspiciously plain against the bright, busy background of the enormous structure, while others are long and metal, short and wooden, or made of rope.

The lowest row of squares are dark and hard to see through, but she can just make out oddly angled staircases that curve and twist away into

a shadowy, green-tinged gloom. Drifting mists thicken and expand, and then deteriorate into thin, wispy tendrils, giving her glimpses of other ladders in higher squares. A sinking feeling of dread hits her when she reasons that where there are real ladders, there must real snakes too—snakes that seem to be missing from the structure before her...

Hm... she cautiously murmurs, peering into the deeper recesses of the cube. Did she catch a shadowy glimpse of a colossal snake weaving from side to side in a menacing way in those depths? Or was it her imagination?

She does not feel intimidated by the idea of playing a magical game of snakes and ladders since the game is so familiar. She's played it hundreds of times, practically every day after she first got it, and almost drove her parent's crazy with her cute, insatiable demands to play the game again, and again, and again.

Several squares making up the frame had strange, snake-skin sides, making her wonder about their snaky effects on the game. She is in no doubt that there are some, but she is intrigued rather than daunted by the sight. She can face anything dressed in her 'Cat Woman' outfit; a vital element inside the dream as she can climb, manoeuvre, run and jump in relative comfort and ease.

"This is awesome," she murmurs, as she takes in the whole sight in its entirety.

She looks down at her arm when heat rushes along the length of it, and the balloon string tightens. With a sharp, ripping sound, the transparent bag holding the goody bag detaches from the string, drops to the floor, and then slowly begins to unfold itself transforming into a large piece of flexible parchment displaying a map of the game.

Picking it up, she contemplates it for a moment, but it looks just like the board of a typical snakes and ladders game, with one difference. A small 'Cat Woman' figure leaning against a giant pencil like it is a steadying staff, stands on the board before a line labelled 'START.' An arrow points away from the figure to the left towards a curving, snake-skinned corridor, numbered square one in the game. Then she sees a junction marked with a large die face beyond the corridor, and knows she must get to it.

The Trial of Salliniquai

After staring up at the structure in wonderment for a few more minutes, despite her misgivings about the suspiciously absent snakes, she is ready to play.

"Right, so. How do I begin?" She muses lightly, stepping forward and crossing the threshold from the corridor onto the board proper.

The balloon floating at her side abruptly bursts, and the pencils and cat collar fall to the floor as the torn pieces vanish into thin air. Jumping back in surprise, she swallows deeply, her hand on her chest to calm her skittish heartbeat.

It was just the orballoon, you idiot. But, was that meant to happen? And what is that sound she can now hear?

From a direction she cannot ascertain, a hollow, ticking sound has begun. Then she hears a dreadful hiss which becomes a horrifically knowing, hiss-filled, gurgling chuckle. A trickle of ice-cold fear shoots down her spine when she also hears a slithery, dragging, shifting sound. Something huge and bulky was moving about, but from the sounds of it, it wasn't close.

She glances down at the floor to where the items previously tied to the string lay. One of the miniaturised pencils has quadrupled in size, while the other two, along with the cat's collar, remained small. Scooping everything up, she examines the oversized pencil thoughtfully as she tucks the other two and the cat's collar, securely inside a hidden pocket in the thigh of her outfit.

For a minute, she is unsure of what to do next. Then she looks to her left and sees an archway with the word START burned into the wood, and *square one* printed on the ground beneath it. Neither had been there a moment ago when she bent to retrieve her fallen items. Passing under the arch, she walks down the corridor leading directly into the huge structure, and properly enters the game.

15

Square number one.

The corridor she finds herself in is perfectly square-shaped, with the walls, ground, and ceiling measuring the same on all sides. The floor is covered with a brown, gooey substance, and her nose wrinkles at the sharp, rank smell rising from it that quickly replaces the fresh air. The snake skin pattern of a Burmese Python, coloured chiefly in brown and yellow with a little black, decorates the ceiling and walls in a magical life-like tapestry.

Curiosity makes her reach out to stroke the wall, but before her fingers touch the surface an angry hiss, and a decidedly creepy ripple along the wall, makes her snatch her hand back.

The wall had *moved*, or in fact, *breathed* with life. By itself. She saw it with her own eyes.

But. No. *That isn't possible*, her mind insists. But still, she cannot deny that the walls are somehow... *alive!*

Damn, they didn't just look like snakeskin; they *were* snakeskin. *Real* snakeskin, she finally admits as her mind flips at the idea. Adrenaline

The Trial of Salliniquai

begins to pump through her veins as she moves forward trying to make sense of it.

*

Having stroked a Burmese python once when the snake expert hung it around Hope's neck during a class trip last year, she knows what the skin feels like.

While most of the students stared unimpressed at the snakes for a few moments, then moved on to the next glass-walled enclosure, because of her interest in all animals, particularly exotic ones, she, along with Hannah and Hope, took the time to read about the different species on display: Burmese pythons, milk snakes, and adders.

Only Hope was brave enough to hold the snake, while the rest of the class were chicken. And only when she promised it would not bite her if she stroked it did she do so, nowhere near its head, though.

*

In the snake-walled corridor, while her attention is elsewhere, she slips over and barely manages not to fall flat on her face. She catches herself, but both hands sink wrist-deep into the goo, and her face twists in disgust as she wipes her mucky palms on her legs. Paying proper attention now, she moves on slowly and steadily, placing one foot carefully in front of the other, as though walking on a beam at gym club.

The goo is growing steadily thicker and getting deeper, and when she wipes a sweaty hand across her face, she leaves a dark stain across her cheek and chin. Moments later, she gives up trying to keep any part of herself clean. It is just her luck the goo is everywhere, she inwardly grumbles. She *hated* being messy.

Carefully moving forwards, she cringes back from the walls as the way twists and turns, sloping down and then up in places. The design of it makes no logical sense to her, and she can only conclude it is probably normal for a snake.

Sporadic gusts of wind surge through the game, bringing the foul stench of what she assumes is the snake pit, with it. Wrinkling her nose, she almost slips over again and has to slow further to slog her way more carefully through the goo. She tries not to think about what it is, and momentarily wonders at the possibility of her truly being *inside* a snake. But the idea is too mind-boggling to consider seriously. Her face is streaked with grime as she focusses on putting one foot in front of the other, loathe to risk falling over again because if she did, she will find herself covered in the stuff.

The corridor grows narrower, and narrower, and it isn't until she is knee-deep in goo with the walls almost touching her shoulders, does she remember the hood of her catsuit. It might stop the goo from getting in her hair at least.

Better late than never, she supposes, quickly pulling the hood over her head. She gasps, and then grins, as in one smooth ripple, the suit becomes a water-tight wetsuit with only her eyes, nose and mouth exposed, and the goo seems to slip off the fabric leaving only dry stains.

It's perfect for these conditions, she thinks as she slogs through the almost waist-high gooey substance.

Growing increasingly apprehensive, she pushed forward knowing she can't turn back. The walls are close enough to touch her shoulders now, and she turns sideways forcing herself to keep going. Why hadn't the map shown the corridors strange features, its length, and if the goo will rise high enough to drown her—the main danger the corridor presented. She tries hard to ignore the thick substance as she wades through it.

16

Snakes.

Back in the bedroom, Sally says...

"I didn't dwell too much on the corridor or the rising goo. I distracted myself wondering what Smudge-face would make of it." She rearranges her position on the bed. "I imagined your arty eyes bulging, fascinated by the snakeskin walls. If you can make your paintings look half as real as them, you'll be quids in one day."

"Hold it. A bit more detail please." Hope demands. "For Smudge-face."

The sharp point of Hannah's pencil scrapes across the page of A3-sized landscape paper, scratching out lines in varying thicknesses.

Hannah is nodding slowly, not looking up from her sketch pad as her pencil sweeps masterfully across the page.

"Okay. It had..."

*

Back in the game...

Sally allows herself a brief grin at the thought of her friend, then focusses her attention back on the game. It is a shade darker in the corridor now due to the rising goo, and she has to squeeze between the breathing, snakeskin walls now, which are *very much* alive. A deeper, more pronounced hissing, echoes around her from all sides, and she cringes more and more with every step she takes. Just when she thought the walls would squish her if she went any further, she reaches a junction where the left and right off-shoots slope downwards, and the goo blessedly drains away. Utterly relieved, as the goo reduces she rechecks the map, then continues straight ahead with trembling steps until the corridor widens, and lightens.

While the next junction seemed quite close on the map, she is out of breath when she finally reaches it. Stained and dirty, she pauses to bend over, resting her hands on her thighs for a minute as she glances around, almost convinced she'd made a wrong turn. But no, there it is—a large, square, silvery die face set low in the wall with its bottom edge almost touching the ground. Its mirrored surface is dazzling in its surround of gently pulsing snake skin.

She pulls back her hood and stares hard at her reflection, momentarily caught by changing images flitting across the surface of the die face.

In a series of brief, vivid impressions, she sees a shimmering, emerald green symbol of Venus, then a reflection of herself in her catsuit, then a young girl whose lilac aura exudes an otherworldly energy. Images of several lovely women follow, all with a milder aura of the same potent energy about them.

As the images disappear and the die face reappears, Noxas' instructions and warnings return, and she remembers how to play the game.

Stepping up to the die face, she looks down as the outline of the square on the ground beneath her lights up. Stepping back, she finds herself encased inside an invisible barrier that encloses her on all sides, rising up from the outline of the square.

The die face is at least four times the size of a regular snakes and ladders board, with three black holes instead of dots giving the number. Folding the map, she tucks it securely into a thigh pocket. Then, holding the pencil she retrieved by the blunt end, she aims it at the centre of one of the black dots, then pushes it firmly through.

With a sharp, popping sound, the pencil and her hand drives through the black up to her elbow, and she gasps when it is instantly numbs, and a tingling sensation she doesn't like one bit, starts to creep up her arm. A mechanical sound rises from behind the square, and it takes a few minutes and a determined effort to manipulate and then wrench her arm free. She stretches and curls her fingers to clear the numbness, and looks at the pencil. Half of it is sliced cleanly off.

She jumps as a loud, booming clang reverberates around her, followed by the distant sound of a heavy chain being dragged across a hard surface, along with the same slithery sound she heard before. This time when the chilling gust of wind blows past, a foul, pungent stink comes with it, almost making her gag.

Urgh. What a stench! Has she made a mistake and set the snake free? She wonders as Noxas' warning about the master snake being released if she chooses wrong too many times, floats into her mind.

"Damn, I poked the wrong hole. Noxas, I picked the wrong one! Maybe I'm not as smart as you think," she mutters, then shouts, "What do you think?"

No response.

So, she sighs. She must assume the master snake is a step closer to being freed.

As if to confirm her suspicions, a malicious, guttural hiss sounds from somewhere behind her. Ice-cold fear grips her heart as she spins around fast, face pale, wide frightened eyes wildly searching everywhere at once. She shakily coughs out an explosive huff of relief when she sees she is alone in the corridor, and the passage is completely empty as far as her eyes can see.

The stench from the snake's pit, is ten times worse than the rotten smell already apparent as it whooshes past. This time, with enough force

to send wispy tendrils of her hair blowing wildly about her face. Not wanting to overthink it or start to dither, she turns back to the die face and stabs the half pencil into one of the remaining two holes.

Then, holding her breath, she waits.

The extended silence is unbearable, stretching on and on like the longest, most deadly silence in the history of long deadly silences, ever.

Her eyes narrow when she hears the suspenseful, tell-tale sound of a mechanism winding into action. And then, a moment later, something brushes against her left shoulder and she quickly jerks back. But it is only a long rope ladder, dropping down from a trap door above. Her pent-up sigh is released as she grabs it, and scolds her jittery self under her breath.

What a scaredy cat, she silently chides. *Jumping at an innocent little ladder.*

She can imagine Saxon laughing at her for almost releasing the snake at the first die face. Since Noxas hadn't told her exactly how many mistakes she could make before the snake is released, a sense of utter terror starts to grow inside her. Swallowing deeply, she forces the horrible feeling back.

"Silly, silly, *silly* karm." She scoffs, as her determination and resilience slowly return, along with a dash of hope. "Ha! I'm not done yet, Saxon. Not when I have nine lives to play with." She crows, her lips stretching into a half-smile as she forces an air of confidence into her trembling tone.

Dropping the half pencil into a side pocket, she grips the ropy sides of the ladder and climbs to the top. Pushing her head and shoulders through the trap door opening, she leans her waist on the edge, swings her legs through, then clucks her tongue when the half pencil falls out of her pocket. Pausing halfway through the trapdoor, her heart sinks as it falls straight down, bounces on the ground, and then rolls away.

Damn. Should she go back for it? She grimly wonders.

She considers a moment, poised on the edge of the opening. Then decides she couldn't even if she wanted to because she cannot go backwards. That is not how the boardgame is played.

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Would the unknown, non-magical rules in this one be any different?
She wonders, unwilling to risk breaking any of the known or unknown rules.

Before she can think on it further, a distant, squelching sound arises from farther along the dimly lit, dank tunnel she is now in, and whatever it is seems to be coming her way. Scrambling onto her feet, she looks around and sees only moist, muddy walls, and faded, uneven lines on the floor, marking out faint squares. Crouching down in a cat-like pose, she flips the trap door shut and starts to back away, but there is nowhere to go. Nowhere she can see anyway.

Though the light is weak, she can see quite far in both directions and in the gloomy silence, she can hear everything. The approaching sounds are seriously disturbing, and she takes a moment to listen more intently.

Where is it coming from?

The single light bulbs hanging in equal gaps from the curved ceiling, casts eerie yellow light on the mud-stained walls, and throws a smoky circle of light beneath each bulb.

Staring down the tunnel, Sally squints, and turns her head slightly to hear better.

Soon enough, a huge, misshapen, writhing shadow appears at the end of the tunnel to her right. The slithering mass covers the distance with a stomach-churning speed and fluidity, and whatever it is makes a beeline for the only thing standing in its way. Her.

Eyes widening in shock, terror lances through her in a thunderous rush when she sees it is not one snake, but... *hundreds!*

The heaving, squirming mass of milk snakes rush toward her, their slick, slithering bodies making her sick with horror and disgust. For a few dreadfully long seconds she really thinks she is going to die as they rapidly close the distance. Overcome with fear, she braces her palms on the slick wall behind her just as a spine-tingling, itchy sensation under her skin jerks her out of her stunned state, urging her to act for her own survival.

An insistent pressure against her thigh prompts her to find Serenity's collar. The collar magically returns to its standard size in her hand, and

she instinctively knows what to do with it. Keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the approaching mass, her hands shake so badly she can't fasten it around her leg or connect the clasp until her fourth or fifth try. Hooking her right leg behind her, she quickly sits cross-legged on the floor, and hopes with all her heart that something will appear to save her.

Perhaps sensing they are about to be denied a succulent feast, the snakes speed up their efforts, and the front runners of the swarm are a mere six feet away when a glowing, orb-shaped shield with a sparkling, greenish tint suddenly bursts into view, enclosing her inside it. Beads of sweat stand out on her forehead as relief floods through her.

Thankful that her view beyond the orb is a distorted haze through the thin, luminous membrane, she hopes once more with all her heart, that it is strong enough to hold them off.

*

Back in the bedroom, she tells her friends...

"It formed an orb-shield around me in the nick of time, and kept me safe."

Head cocked to one side, her pencil poised, Hannah prompts her to, "Describe what it was like, Bubbs."

"Um... it was like..." she pauses, considering. "Like being inside one of my bubble-gum bubbles. Except when I pushed against it, it felt tough, you know? But weirdly flexible too. I'd say it was as solid as a rock the way it held the buggers off, but that contradicts what it seemed to be made of."

Contradicts; another word used correctly from Dad's word-play game, she thinks.

*

Back in the game...

The sensation of being inside the orb-shield is utterly strange, and yet somehow, familiar. Her shaky breaths, and wildly beating heart drown out all other sounds as she peers through the luminous shield. The snakes are almost on top of her. She holds her breath as her eyes open so wide, she is afraid they might pop out of their sockets. Her up-close-and-personal view of what is coming for her only makes her heart pound harder.

Then, out of the darkness they come.

Like a relentless, thrashing wave over a wildly churning sea, their sinuously wiggling bodies almost fill the width of the tunnel as their dark, lidless eyes flash in the light from the overhead bulbs. The heaving mass of slimy, slithering milk snakes have skin of patchwork red, divided by black-edged white stripes identifying them as such, as they launch themselves as one, towards her. She stares out at the sickening, creepy sight as the leading wigglers slither over the shield, leaving gooey, crisscrossing trails over its impenetrable skin. Her stomach twists horribly when she catches sight of their long, pale underbellies slithering over it.

Their numbers increase, and as the heavy thumping against the orb's side rumbles through the tiny enclosure, the squelching sounds begin. The trickle becomes a flood that seems to go on forever as she shivers and trembles inside the shield, unable to tear her terrified gaze away, yet wanting nothing more than to block the sight of them out. An image of them slithering over her, covering her, and then *devouring* her as they take her life, is so frightening and real in her mind, she shakes uncontrollably and tears threaten to spill from her eyes.

The blunt, drawn-out sound stroking her fingers across her orballoon made in the car, is magnified a hundred-fold inside the orb. Short, sharp hisses overlap constantly as jostling bodies crowd against each other in an angry wave as they search for a way in.

Unable to stand it any longer, Sally claps her hands over her ears and tucks her head down into her chest, realising only then, that she is

screaming.

Squeezing her eyes tight, she forces herself to think of something else. *Anything* else... even another dark, dank place that isn't scary.

*

With her dad's special interest in British folklore, and prehistoric sites, he took her on day trips to the West Kennet Long Barrow, and other places in Wiltshire with some of his university students, a few times.

She remembered how soothing the cool, dark, burial caves were, and how much she enjoyed learning about the site's history. She'd watched people perform rituals, or gather there to play drums, and chant, or sit and meditate while taking in the breathtaking, panoramic views from the top of the barrow.

They borrowed her uncle MJ's campervan a couple of times as well, and spent weekends in the area going to various sites. She thought Stonehenge was a magical place when she walked around the enormous stones, then darted between them and through the centre when the security people were looking the other way.

A small, involuntary smile arises and she blinks and opens her eyes... Only to shut them again. Fast.

The snakes were still squirming across the top and the sides of her shield.

Just how many of the buggers are there?

To distract herself in another way, she thinks of Andrew, the boy in Saint Lucia she really, *really* likes, wondering what he would make of her predicament.

17

Andrew, her friend, slash, possible boyfriend, though she wouldn't say so in front of her friends, is a smart, adventurous, sensitive boy with a wicked sense of humour. Having heard the story of how his parents fell in love when they were only a couple of years older than they were many times, she never tires of it as he tells it slightly different each time, while romantatising it with a casual, charming maturity a boy of his age shouldn't yet be conscious of.

JJ, his yoga instructor mum, and his dad, Tyrone; a reputable carpenter, have chilled, easy-going natures, and are happy and content with what life has blessed them with.

When Sally and Andrew are separated by distance, he sends her pictures of the most amazing sunrises, and sunsets. They video-call regularly, and remain steadfastly up to date with each other's antics through photos and stories posted online. The two are inseparable when she is there during the summer holidays, and she knows how lucky she is to have such great best friends in Saint Lucia, as well as in England.

"Even though they were on opposite sides of the world..." she remembers him saying as he stared out over the valley with a distant,

dreamy look in his eyes. "They loved each other *so* much, Sal. They knew they were *made* for each other." *Like we are*, he thinks but does not say. "Their love is so deep, it is unbreakable, and nothing could keep them apart once they fell in love and knew they had to be together. Not even distance."

Her mouth ticks up at his slight exaggeration in geography, but it adds a captivating, romantic element to the story when he says how well it turned out for them, and later hints that it might also be true for them.

She tries to remember when the feel of their friendship changed, but can't pin it down exactly. It felt like one minute they were eight and ten years old, splashing around in the swimming pool with floats, and balls, and water pistols, and then in the next moment, he was shyly taking her hand and swinging it between them when they were out and about, and alone.

Fortunately, while their families are close, they are not related.

The Vincent's—her mum's family, and the James's—his mum's family, and the Franklyn's—his dad's family, were all from the large Catholic community in the sleepy, laid-back town of Soufriere. The Vincent's, and the James's moved to England in the sixties and got jobs there, while the Franklyn's stayed in Saint Lucia. The three families, have a long, shared history and strong community ties having known each other all their lives.

*

Back in the game...

Huddled in a ball within the orb as snakes slither over it, she forces her brain into focusing on other things. In particular... *how she ended up here trapped in this creepy game...* She thinks about the first dream. Maybe she should have gone through the eggtrance hole then, she might have saved herself unnecessary risks in the longer game. Had she been too hasty? Librans didn't do hasty, which is why she had raged at the Juggernaut after carefully styling her hair on Hannah's birthday.

Suddenly, further details as to what occurred on the Friday morning, returns...

*

A throaty, unladylike growl bubbles up through her parched throat as she curses the throbbing pain of her stubbed big toe. Hopping around the room she sucks in a deep breath, then expels it in a sharp, irritated hiss. She hobbles over to where her school blazer hangs and stabs a hand through the pockets. Nothing. She tries her cardigan, and finds nothing but bubble-gum wrappers, hair clips, and a tiny emery board. She stops hobbling around and rifles through the messy collection of items littering the surface of her dressing table.

Most of her hairbands and clips are scattered across the top among perfume bottles, bubble gum, and several pictures in glitter and gem-encrusted, funky frames. Her gaze scans the palm-sized crystals, crystal jewellery, Indian-styled jewellery boxes, books, papers, and other school paraphernalia for the specific hair accessory she is looking for—her three decorative pins, large grip clip, and a hair band to match the colour of the party outfit she will wear later. Being big on accessories, she has dozens to suit her wardrobe.

Typical, she fumes at the guilty party for messing up her plan. *She knew I'd want to use those today*. She sighs. *It's my own fault*; she chides herself, *for being too lazy to tidy up last night after they left*. She would have noticed it was missing and got it before the Juggernaut nicked it. She is not usually untidy, especially on a school night. And especially since she is going straight to a party after.

Her eyes dart around the room as she picks up the glass of apple juice nestled between two books and the lamp, and takes a sip. Her wrist is starting to ache from the awkward angle she is holding up her hair. It took her ages to get the chignon just right and now she did not have time to do the style again.

"Juggs, you flipping hairband thief!" She mutters, looking around the room squint-eyed, and searching. No matter how many spares she

carried, Juggs always borrowed hers. "Just because your hairbands are always snapping or getting lost in all the crazy sports you play, you take it upon yourself to nick mine! *So* annoying." She catches sight of herself in the mirror and sighs, shaking her head a little. "Now you've got me talking to myself like you are actually here."

Reluctantly releasing the handful of hair she was holding perfectly in place, she throws her hands up in exasperation, her lips twisting to one side as the intricate hairstyle unravels and falls in soft waves to her shoulders, framing her pretty face.

She sucks air in through her teeth irritably, wondering if she did it on purpose just to annoy her. It was *so* maddening.

But, then again, who better than Melissa to make it right this evening. Her smile returns and her irritation vanishes, because Melissa will do her hair brilliantly.

Thanks, Juggs. You are forgiven.

From the top drawer of the bedside table, she removes a new pack of bands and selects one, letting it slip over her wrist. Moving over to lean on the window ledge, she rests her chin in the palm of her hand and looks out the window with a satisfied sigh.

The frost-covered houses on the estate she calls home, resembles a pretty, winter wonderland. She wipes condensation off the window, glad to be inside and toasty warm on this cold, wintery day.

At least those boys have gone.

The lane running past her house is buzzing with activity – students rushing off to school, or having snowball fights. Parents grappling with unruly children as they pass the time of day with neighbours, and dogs straining on leashes as their owners pick up nasty dog poo.

Glancing up at the sky, which has brightened a bit in the last hour, she crosses her fingers hoping for Smudge-face's sake the weather reports she has gushed about every day for the last week, were right.

It is pretty good for February, considering the alternative of being chilled to the bone 24/7 and completely snowed in by now, as they were last year.

It is still a bit grey and gloomy right now, but the warm air will melt

The Trial of Salliniquai

the ice off the trees in long water drops. Send the frost on the ground down the drains, and the party tonight will not be spoiled by freezing temperatures.

Staring out at the identical, snow-covered houses opposite and the areas shrouded in shadow in-between, her unusually distinctive, sea-green eyes search the blanket of pretty white snow that settled on the ground the night before, now corrupted by heavy foot traffic and crushed into huge patches of dull, grey slush, that will be as slippery as hell to walk on, she imagines.

Stretching her neck to see down into the front corner of the garden, she checks the area with a measured, focussed gaze concentrating on the gap between the high wooden fence, and the lawn. She spots Serenity, her Bengal tabby cat, padding her way back through the garden in careful steps, and is reassured by the sight of her.

Natural light shines its pale rays upon her face, and a quirk of a smile brings out the dimples in her honey-hued cheeks as she reaches forward, unlatches the window lock and pushes it open just wide enough for the cat to get through. Having been in and out twice that morning already, she expects she will snuggle up in the warm all day.

A shiver washes over her when a chilling gust of wind blows in. She turns away from the window to patiently restyle her hair a bit less extravagantly, securing it in a neat bun at the back of her head, with a couple of hanging wisps at the sides.

She glances at the clock again. 7.59.

A wry, expectant smile forms as she starts counting down the seconds... waiting.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four ..." as expected, her phone starts to beep and vibrate before she finishes the count down.

She snags it out of her jacket pocket and is, unsurprised to see the grinning whatsapp face of Smudge-Face. Guessing what the message will say, she touches the screen to open it. Predictably, it reads:

"Today is my birthday!!!"

Like she needed reminding, she inwardly scoffs, amused by the ridiculously obvious statement. Her cute dimples reappear as she

indulgently shakes her head.

"Ready for a rad weekend, Bubbs?" The second message appears before she can reply to the first excited announcement. Typing quickly, she replies,

"Totally ready, Smudge :-)" Assuming she has messaged the Juggernaut already, she sends a second message. "See you on the corner in fifteen." Then drops the phone back into her jacket pocket.

Glancing around the room once more to check she hasn't forgotten anything, she grabs her school bag off the wardrobe door, threads an arm through the handles then slings her rucksack, packed with all she needs for the party, over her shoulder. She is almost at the door when a streak of emerald green light flashes out of her favourite book *The Serenity Experience*, snagging her attention.

She stops abruptly, turns slowly, and squints at it almost challengingly before frowning at it curiously for a long moment, her head oddly tilted.

It was not where she left it earlier—laid on its back between the dragon's eye jewellery box and the palm-sized, rose quartz crystal. It is standing upright on her dressing table balanced on the very edge at an impossible angle, looking about ready to topple off.

Her eyes fix on the cover which is behaving oddly again, doing its weird, smoky, swirling thing that seems to... *call to her*.

Swallowing hard, her mouth becomes dry as suspicious speculation, and a feeling she has felt only once before grows. Something strange is about to happen—again; like in the shop last summer. Since it has happened before she isn't frightened exactly, only cautious, and curious.

On a level her young years cannot yet comprehend, she knows something magical is occurring.

Her bags slip unnoticed down her arms, dropping to the floor as she turns to face whatever *it* is. Straightening her shoulders, she takes a deep breath and prepares to take whatever is going to happen next, in her stride.

THE TRIAL OF SALLINIQUAI

Meanwhile, in the magical Realm of the Empress...

In a space beyond the human physical realm, the Timekeeper—a striking, mystical being with old wise eyes of a greyish-green hue, and flawless, ebony-black skin that contrasts starkly with their purple-black hair, chooses this moment to subtly manipulate time.

Intensely focussed, they manipulate their bizarre, time translation rings with impossible dexterity, a natural fluidity, and their immense power floods the scene.

They study the young girl's energy closely for a long moment comparing her with their own young charge, the magnificent Empress Salliniquai—a being of immeasurable worth on a quest of epic, world-ending proportions... The quest to save the spiritual integrity of humanity, by ushering in the Aquarian age in the three realms of nature.

As one of her four masters, and the story narrator, the Timekeeper's role is crucial, as it falls to us to observe, decipher, and translate the English/American English language well enough to do the Malsimily translated text justice.

*

In the human physical realm...

Now infused with magic, the air in her bedroom heats up and becomes charged with enough energy to raise the tiny hairs on her arms. A visible distortion in the air pulses and pushes against her. And then, as it thickens and swirls in a strange pattern of lines and loops, a wavering shimmer in the air twists her vision of the bedroom unnaturally, and then ... unexpectedly, time ... simply ... stops.

A mysterious, otherworldly anticipation... hangs heavy in the air.

Unable to tear her gaze away from the book, Sally's mind shuts down and she is frozen in place; mesmerised for exactly nine minutes.

In the magical Realm of the Empress, during those nine minutes...

Inside a giant amethyst geode, the Elevated One—a powerful, androgynous master with skin as dark as polished oak, stands on a dais with their rune-infused staff gripped firmly in one hand. Their face is partly hidden behind a thin, layered veil as they turn their glittering emerald eyes to meet the Timekeeper's grey-green gaze. Their commanding power snaps, crackles, and then bursts from their fingertips in flashes of silver lightning as they weave a spell that brings a close, musty aroma to the air which gradually builds in intensity.

Hovering a few inches off the ground beside them, the Timekeeper—a manipulator of time, continually work their time translation rings. Worn on all four fingers of both hands, the rings are powerful tools made of a unique substance that enlarges, reshapes, and blends into and out of reality. Projections of unrecognisable elements spin at different heights and speeds in both directions, forming a riot of flashing colours and shapes in a display of ancient magic. Operating with incredible speed, the Timekeeper's swiftly moving fingers are mind-bogglingly creepy to watch.

Blessed with the gift of foresight, once the Timekeeper evaluated the level of difficulty attached to the Empress's approaching challenges, they created three fantastical, earthly environments and objects with hidden magical conditions, and selected properties linked or anchored to the dream knight's timeline. As a knight of the Brotherhood of the Nine, his influences will impact the Empress's life when she is on earth learning about human behaviour.

Prior to their arrival at the side of the Elevated One, the Timekeeper was creating the first two with the Alchemist in the cradle. The first is a thriving new county in England called *Rowanshire*. The second, is an area called *The Lavender Valley* in Saint Lucia; an island in the Caribbean. The third has been created with the Elevated One, when their combined magical powers conjure an important book called *Spiritual Illumination*, and then communicate the idea to a reputable earth author, whose work will carry mystical messages of spiritual

guidance for the Empress during her earthbound journey.

All three were brought alive by magic to become realities in the human physical realm.

The two masters focussed on finding a specific human host for the Empress. Preferably, a young girl from Rowanshire with a unique type of energy and ties to the island of Saint Lucia, where the location of the only jump portal leading back to the Realm of the Empress, lies. The other being in the subconscious Realm of Ludonia.

Soon enough, one who fits the profile almost *exactly* to their requirements appears, and the Timekeeper adjusts their rings accordingly. Minutes later, the exact moment to manipulate the human girl arrives, and a glowing, silvery hue replaces the grey-green in their eyes as they focus all their attention on her. On Sally.

*

Back in the game...

A strange feeling unexpectedly washes over her as the remembrance of her rushing out the door that morning fades, and she feels disoriented. She senses a new lightness to her body, and a subtle separation of sorts. While the outermost layer of her energetic aura continues to react to the scene beyond the shield—raising the hairs on the back of her neck for example, another layer draws everything else inwards until it seems like nothing exists outside the shield.

Her hands fall from her ears, as the wretched sounds diminish. She is no longer a gasping, sweating mess, and her skin feels miraculously cool.

Bewildered by the sensory changes, she shuts her eyes once more, and a vaguely familiar image of a mysterious, hooded figure forms in her mind.

It's the Timekeeper, she somehow knows, as her tension eases and she almost relaxes.

Their appearance is reassuring, and their voice when they speak, sounds exactly how she imagines it should sound. Authoritative, direct,

and deeply compassionate.

In her vision, the Timekeeper is manipulating a set of magical rings that glow with an otherworldly light. The vision strengthens in intensity, and the Timekeeper's energy crosses the realms to communicate with her...

"Welcome to the Realm of the Empress, Empress, a realm formed by one of the Malsimily Matriarchy." They say, gentler than usual. "In this realm, the sun turns within a colossal Venus symbol, sending a myriad of colour across a bright, green-hued sky. While the combined, never-ending wind and the natural tone of the Empress—a high-pitched, chiming bell sounds, it indicates that all is well and the balance within the realm, remains true.

This is a magical realm of your *own* creation, Empress, and while you are parted from it physically, you remain connected in spirit. Open your heart to me, young Sally. Look at all you have achieved!" They state, pride clear in their tone as they continue.

Sally finds she can actually hear the sounds of softly rustling leaves, the sighing echo of night bloom petals, and the swish of tall grasses brushing the air as the Timekeeper describes them.

"The realm has many fantastic wonders beyond human imagination, and its meticulous structure naturally creates spiritual harmony, while its magic is aligned to the Aquarian age. Here, all living things are either made of or use, magic—a state as normal and as common as say, people having two feet, and all are attuned to your unique, Empresserial energy.

Since completing her gestation in the cradle, Empress Salliniquai was instructed and guided by four, green-eyed, androgynous masters, whose unwavering loyalty to serve and support her, never ever failed. These ageless companions were blessed with powers and abilities of extraordinary range to ensure her natural evolution, and to prepare her for the tough challenges she must face both before, and after sacrificing herself to the Distance during the Offering.

Appearing as a young girl of around sixteen earth years, Salliniquai's surpassing beauty (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld*) for human

eyes.

Once awakened, articulate, and aware, she proved to be stubborn and demanding with a regally superior attitude, and as spirited and sneaky as any earthling girl of that age thinking only of her own, selfish needs. Since she has infinite power under her control, however, her education had to be handled with extreme delicacy and care.

The first to take her in hand was the Alchemist. They nurtured her with tenderness, and grace through their heart, ensuring a natural alignment and linkage to her realm. She learned to navigate multiple, dangerous fields under the Awakener's tough tutelage, and built up her aura proximity awareness, strength, and stamina. After this, she honed her magical abilities with the Timekeeper learning to shimmer into and out of the seen seamlessly, among other things, and took full command of her magic. Her final, on-going lessons, which were under the direction and care of the Elevated One, supported her feminine evolution into a mature woman.

Not so long ago, within the cool interior of the Elevated One's amethyst geode, the Awakener and Salliniquai were having an argument.

Stop.

One moment.

We are in error.

Pause.

It was not an argument, but a discussion. Yes, a discussion. It is pointless arguing with the Empress since she has the power to manipulate things to her advantage anyway." A soft, knowing chuckle rolls around inside her mind like a cheeky wisp of smoke. "If she is in a particularly naughty mood, she uses her wiley ways to twist the Awakener around her little finger, often pushing them to the edge of their patience. Admittedly, she doesn't exactly enjoy seeing their discomfort when they are torn between doing as she commands, whilst trying to do what was best for her as a young, inexperienced charge.

In this instance, she was determined to get her own way, and used her advantage to get herself flower petalled to the earth. Upon arrival,

though, she was surprised to find herself infused into a young girl from the county of Rowanshire. A young girl called..."

The voice fades away then, and Sally opens her eyes. She blinks rapidly three times, and shakes her head a bit.

"That was... a fascinating story, Timekeeper," she murmurs in a daze, as her senses re-align to her immediate surroundings and the orb. "This girl, Sal... lin... ni... quai? She sounds quite roguish, and cool. I could hang out with her, I think..."

Realising what she just said, she spits out a crazy laugh at the inconceivable notion of having an imaginary conversation with an imaginary being from an imaginary realm, about an imaginary girl.

How would Juggs explain this strange set up? She wonders, the corner of her mouth ticking up a little at the thought of Hope trying to apply logic to the situation.

Fully aware of her surroundings once more, she forgets about the Timekeeper and glances around. It took an age for all the snakes to pass over her, and while she dreamed within the dream, the slithering, slapping sounds gradually became less intrusive, less creepy, and the hissing began to peter out. When the last snake wiggles down the long corridor and around the corner, she breathes a huge sigh of relief but stays inside the shield for a few extra heartbeats, her senses alert for any sign of their return. After the slithering, slapping sounds have ceased completely, she draws in a deep, calming breath, satisfied they are really gone.

The faint, *tick-tick*, *tick-tick*, *tick-tick* of the unseen clock gets her moving again. Time was pressing and feeling less afraid now, she is ready to go. Reaching down, she gently taps the cat's collar, and the shield thins, then vanishes.

A foul smell, stronger this time, hits her at once and she wrinkles her nose in disgust. She tucks the collar securely into her pocket as her eyes warily scan the darkness stretching away along the dimly lit tunnel.

A dreadfully menacing, angry hiss that seems to scream *we are not*

done with you! makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and a cold chill dashes down her spine.

"Oh, my, gosh. If that's the master snake..." She trails off, chewing nervously on a fingernail. "I bet it's just waiting for its chance to get me."

Her first mistake must have set the milk snakes loose, she reasons. If she made another, would she release the master snake, or be faced with another sort before the big one?

"Oh, I wish someone were here to answer me," she mutters.

There is no one, of course.

She must find a way to outsmart the slithering beasties all by herself. She grits her teeth, determined not to let fear paralyse her.

Checking the map, she sees she must go in the same direction as the snakes. Her face twists uneasily, as her lips press together in grudging acceptance. Seeing the thick, dark green goo they left behind has sunk down between the cracks in the ground, roughly marking out squares, she starts down the tunnel heading deeper into the game.

*

From comfortable, prime positions beyond the walls of the game meanwhile, Saxon and Noxas lazily consider Sally's progress as they observe her.

"She's remembered my instructions." Noxas ventures softly, watching as she heads off after the snakes.

"Yes. So far, so good, yes. I never imagined we would participate in the Empress's elevation training." Saxon muses thoughtfully.

Noxas glances over and squints at him, considering. "Brother, I do not think this is part of her training. Not for the Offering at the Distance."

"No?"

He shakes his head. "This feels like... a test. A trial, maybe. And there is no kurren-see exchange." A slight frown of consternation. "How deeply her presence affects the other children and the longevity of our purpose, should be considered."

"Those we chose to lead during the new age are magically protected,

regardless of the outcome of this game."

"I have faith it is as you suggest, brother."

"It can be no other way, brother. *Ahh* ... look. She is almost at the next die."

Eyes shining expectantly, they tune back into the game.

*

After keeping a good, steady pace through the winding, uneven tunnel, Sally slows down and freezes when hissing abruptly echoes all around her, along with the heavy, shifting sound—as though a beast of unimaginable size was moving through the game with calculated stealth.

It was impossible to determine which direction the sounds were coming from. She could be walking towards it for all she knew, but she had no choice. The maps directions must be followed if she wanted to finish the game correctly, and make it out of there. Getting out was the only hope she clung to in this moment. Nothing else mattered beyond that.

But the game was getting decidedly creepier, and though she moved forward steadily, the going felt way too slow. She had to stop and listen before making each turn, or before blindly following a curving wall in case she came upon the hundreds of milk snakes, or the master snake itself.

As she reaches the next die face, her shoulders slump, and her hope withers when she sees the number of holes in it. There are four. Four choices, *or four chances to mess up*, she thinks. She can't afford to make another mistake as, according to the map, there were more die faces to play. Hesitant to choose, she bites her bottom lip, twisting it to one side as she struggles to make her choice. Having learned that dithering was a common Libran trait when under pressure, she was learning to accept it as a natural part of her nature.

The cover of her favourite book *The Serenity Experience*, pops into her mind, and like a timely prompt it sends a fresh wave of confidence surging through her. Her chin lifts and her back straightens as she

realises the game is the perfect test of her ability to make speedy choices. She decides to make the best use of it.

Since reading the book, she noticed how differently she was looking at things and governing herself. She was getting better at making decisions in general, even if they were small, insignificant ones, and her confidence in herself and her capabilities, were growing.

*

Standing on the square before the die face in the wall, she takes the second enlarged pencil from the pouch and without hesitation, thrust it through the hole on the bottom left. Something instantly clamps bone grippingly tight around her arm, and she cries out in pained surprise.

Shit. That really hurts, she curses as the truth of her predicament slowly sinks in. Dream or not, she is in real danger here.

The square beneath her feet lights up, and the wall the die rests in rumbles and shakes as a harsh, scraping sound echoes through the tunnel. With a nervous glance over her shoulder, she tries unsuccessfully to wrench her arm back out, then panics when everything except for the die face and the square she stands upon, abruptly falls away.

The shifts and spins are crazy-wild, and she suddenly finds herself upside down with everything moving in a topsy turvy swirl.

Oh no. She silently cries inside her mind. *Wrong again!*

A feeling of dread, and chilling goose bumps march up her arms as the familiar, cold finger of fear creeps down her spine.

18

Ladders.

Sally's eyes are shut tight, and her teeth gritted as the world around her moves in a dizzying blur. She seemed to be moving in all directions at once, frighteningly fast. Ducking and dipping, juddering, and shaking so hard, her teeth chatter and her nerves jangle on a knife's edge.

It's like riding an upside down waltzer from a fun fair, she stupidly thinks. The one ride she wasn't wildly keen about.

As time and the horrible, tornado-esque ride-of-death stretches on, she takes the fact that a snake hasn't appeared as a positive. Distracting herself once more, she narrows her focus to the day out with her friends which seemed so long ago...

She'd taken ages to decide what to wear while Hannah and Hope waited for her, trying not to be impatient. In the end, she wore light blue dungarees over a pale pink, short-sleeved sweater, and pink trainers.

Hannah, looking ridiculously cute with her permanent dimples, perfect teeth, and almond-shaped eyes behind black-framed glasses,

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with her hair styled high in a ring comb. She looked slightly eccentric but cool in her mismatched outfit of a Bob Marley t-shirt, and a long, flaring skirt with squiggly Indian writing decorating the otherwise plain, cotton material.

As always, Hope was fresh-faced and pretty in a deep purple tracksuit; *nothing new there*, with the top tied around her waist. Her hair was loose, windswept, and shone with health. Their completely different styles suited them both, and unlike her, they threw their outfits on in minutes. They *never* dithered when deciding what to wear.

Sally had no idea why she was thinking about this now, she only knew that it seemed to reduce the rolling sensation in her tummy.

*

Back in the bedroom...

"Thinking of you helped me realise I'd actually chosen right. I was on a spiralling, twisting ladder, and safe-ish."

"Mm-hm..." Hannah murmurs, hunched over her sketch pad. Her brows are drawn down, and her face is tight with concentration.

"So, nothing to get bent out of shape about then." Hope states mockingly, grinning.

A pained smile, and a reproachful head shake at her friend's poor humour, is Sally's response.

*

Back in the game...

Just when she thought she might actually throw up, the ladder starts to slow and stabilise. Then abruptly, without warning, the die face releases her arm, her knees buckle beneath her, and she drops down hard onto the floor. Before stopping completely, she catches sight of the giant clock face. It reads 10.15 pm.

The passage around her is pitch black.

Unmoving, she takes a minute to get used to the complete darkness, but after what felt like an age, nothing changed. She could still see nothing. A warm pressure on her thigh brings her attention to the cat's collar, and its uses. Quickly retrieving it, she fastens it around her wrist this time.

A radiant, emerald-green orb about the size of a large grapefruit, appears at once, hovering a few inches above the back of her wrist. Her relieved smile brightens her mud and grime-stained face as she experimentally moves her hand around in a flowing, figure-eight motion. The orb moves with her, bound by an invisible, magical field.

She considers the state of the pencil still gripped tightly in her hand. It is still whole.

So, if she picks right, the pencils stay unbroken, giving her another turn at the die faces. Good to know, she thinks. If only she'd realised this earlier, she'd have been more careful and not dropped the other one, she belatedly grumbles.

Holding her arm with the orb-light attached straight out before her, her eyes narrow as she strains to see into the impenetrable black. The pungent stench is much stronger here, even though she is higher up in the game.

The curved ceiling is only a couple of feet above her head, with naturally formed, rough walls she can touch if she spreads her arms wide to each side. Something like tree bark is growing on them, and grey-green slime drips down uneven surfaces and cracks in dark runnels, forming a narrow river at the curvature's lowest point.

Her face twists with disgust. She was already in it up to her ankles.

Treacherous, crisscrossing roots and vines hidden beneath the goo, make her progress slow and halting. She thought there might be squares marked out beneath the tangles, but after peering down into it for a minute, she gives up, unable to tell for sure. It doesn't matter.

She must get out of the stinky dark passage... her mind urgently urges.

Save for the area close to her, where the bright glow of the orb reached, the entire passage was shrouded in gloom. Having tripped over a couple

of times already, she creeps along slowly, placing her feet carefully, checking if a root can hold her weight before stepping on it fully, while avoiding holes and gaps that hide vines able to twist her ankle.

Does the passage shape represent the actual size of the master snake? She wonders, while at the same time, dreading the answer. *It's probably slithered through here a million times*, she reckons, not falling into the trap of fooling herself into a false sense of security. She must face the truth. She swallows deeply, trying to hold back the fear building within her.

"The smelly thing must be huge." She grumbles sourly.

Retrieving the map from her pocket, she quickly unfolds it and immediately sees the difference in design. It reflects the level she is on with only a long, dark smudge marking the tunnel, a couple of tiny footsteps showing the direction she needs to follow, and not much else. It did not show anything beyond the next die face.

She thinks back to when she first saw the three-dimensional structure, and the frightening size of the master snake she thought she saw weaving back and forth in the smoky gloom. She didn't entirely trust what she saw then, or now.

*

Back in the bedroom...

"There were two or three levels still to go," she tells to her friends. "But I didn't trust the board to behave according to common sense because the map didn't show a spiral staircase. Or did it?" She seems unsure.

"Good call, Bubbs." Hope says, fully engrossed in the story.

"The game had hidden magical aspects, so I couldn't take anything for granted."

"Uh-huh." Hannah murmurs, making long, sweeping strokes on the page before her.

*

Back in the game...

Sally lets out a dejected sigh.

"Never mind my suspicions, it's after ten. I have to..." she abruptly stops talking to herself, and stands still, listening.

What was that?

Did she hear something?

A heavy, shifting sound?

She spins around quickly, swinging her arm before her to allow the orb to cast its glow back the way she had come, and sees... nothing.

Then... something.

Something *big* was moving. Far, far back in the shrouded, endless dark she saw...

Eyes. *Wicked* eyes.

The evil, slitted eyes of a snake... intently watching her.

For a dreadfully long time, all she sees is the snake's twin malevolent eyes gleaming in the darkness. Her heart starts to pound in her chest as she is pinned in place by its hypnotising eyes, unable to move. She cannot tell how far away the snake is or if it is still or moving. Blinking hard three times clears the hypnotising effect, and she starts to back away, *slowly*. Carefully folding the map, she returns it to her pocket, *slowly*.

Were the eyes moving? Are they coming towards her now? She still couldn't tell. She spins back around with a single terrifying thought in mind...

Run.

19

From the frying pan...

Unfortunately, running through the passage was nigh on impossible, hindered by thick roots, and tangled vines seemingly with a specific purpose to catch and trap ill-placed feet. They would hold her fast until the snake got there to chow down on her. Desperate to rush onwards, she is forced to move maddeningly slow knowing a fall now would be the end of her.

Searching desperately for the next die face as she struggles down the passage, relief floods through her at the eventual sight of it, and she runs up to it, jumping over the last of the vines. Panting shallowly, she faces the five holes with a rueful sneer as she frantically grabs the pencil from her pocket, a terrifying fear clinging to her.

The slithering sound is close now, but she is too scared to look back. Not dithering this time, she jams the pencil into the hole in the top right corner just as a harsh, guttural hiss sounds from right behind her. She screams suddenly as the square she stands upon unexpectedly tips up, dropping her ungraciously through a trap door. A long, angry hiss

follows her descent, fading away above her.

As gravity draws her down, a ridiculous sense of relief surges through her. Somehow, she has escaped being eaten by the snake by the skin of her teeth, even though she clearly chose wrong again.

To her surprise, she is not free falling through the air, but tumbling through a long, stale-smelling stocking of pale-yellow skin. Keeping her wits about her as she is thrown from side to side, she manages to unfasten the cat's collar from her wrist, almost drops it, snatches it back before it falls away, and desperately holds it tight in her other hand before straining to clasp it around her leg, grunting with effort. The orb-shield instantly materialises around her, its magical force keeping her upright within.

Better, she pants, then looks up and screams at the jaw-dropping sight rushing towards her.

With a long, wrenching tear, the orb bursts out of the end of the master snake's discarded, membrane of skin, and her heart tightens in her chest at the sudden drop, as the orb pushes out above an enormous, cavernous pit. Flakes of dried scales float around the orb as she plummets towards the ground which is a writhing, wriggling mass of snakes waiting eagerly to overwhelm and consume their next victim. Her.

Another of her mother's sayings flashes through her mind, and her mouth tightens defiantly.

From the frying pan... into the fire.

Hundreds, no... thousands of snakes of varying species with no prey to pursue but her, hiss and writhe expectantly, their glassy eyes staring up at the orb with dark malevolence, and she is falling right into their midst.

As scared as she is, she manages to keep her head, hoping she will survive the inevitable crash somehow.

A few feet before it the orb reaches the ground, it jerks to a stop, then slowly lowers itself with a solid, squishy *thunk*.

Released from the orb's invisible holding field within, intuition kicks

in and she immediately dives into a high forward roll and keeps rolling, using the momentum of her body to push the orb forward, while trying not to look at the terrifying scene around her. When she finally reaches a wall at the side of the pit, she sits crouched, head down, hugging herself tightly, rocking backwards and forwards in terror, her rattled breathing uneven as she shakes uncontrollably.

She has no clue how much time has passed before she feels brave enough to look at her surroundings proper. Peering through the orb, her eyes get used to the dark and stark horror fills her eyes with shocked tears. She considers her new predicament.

There's no sign of the master snake, at least, she thinks, grasping at the one silver lining available. It must have stayed on the level she fell from, or... an inner voice of reason insists, it could be coming for her right now...

She continues staring hopelessly through the membrane of her small enclosure, her senses on high alert as a dreadful trepidation rises. Plumes of slow-moving, dewy mist wafts from cracks in the walls in steamy swirls, and she can almost imagine the monstrous stench that must be saturating the pit.

After what seems like hours but is only minutes, she has almost convinced herself that this is the end. That she has lost, and nine lives or not, there is no hope.

Hope. She straightens a fraction. *What would the juggernaut do in this situation?*

In the dark pit, surrounded by snakes and sweating inside the shield, Hope and her family of fitness freaks come to mind, the use of the word *freak*, meant in a positive sense. Her fright reduces, her focus steadies, and like the flash of a lightning bolt, an idea starts to form...

*

A note from the Timekeeper. Generational friends...

Sally, Hope, and Hannah's parents were friends long before the three girls came along, and met regularly for BBQs, birthdays, and other family occasions over the years. On one such occasion, Simone and Hope's mum, Daphne, were discussing the new business she and her husband were setting up.

Up until two years ago, Daphne, a tennis pro in her own right, worked as a tennis coach at a country club, and at some of the large, private residences of affluent families, most of whom lived in or beyond the North district of Rowanshire—the posh part of the county.

She'd secured lucrative contracts to teach spoilt, out of shape, often unwilling teenagers, who were largely untalented and naturally uncoordinated, how to play the game. Not because they were genuinely interested in tennis, but because it was the *done* thing. It took patience, tolerance, and a good measure of tight-lipped endurance on her part.

After seven years of this, Daphne was ready to give it up. By then, the work had served its purpose, and the costs for private coaching in a neighbourhood of this sort was quadruple what she would have charged elsewhere. Playing tennis was one more way to show off one's status and wealth, and word of her excellence spread quickly as they hired her and tried to outdo each other.

She did not hesitate in accepting what was offered, and took on more clients from the same social circles since it meant the Hallertons could save the money required to start their own physiotherapy business much sooner than expected.

"Daph, you have the patience of a saint working with such hollow people." Simone gestures with her wineglass as she speaks.

"But worth every penny, ay Simms?" Daphne shrugs, with a wry grin. "Who am I to complain if they elevate my worth?"

Like their parents before them, the girls' close friendship was an important aspect of their lives. Sally drew strength from her friends and

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was often directed by their actions, even though it didn't look that way to people like her dad. He called her the linchpin in their trio, and maybe he was right, but her contribution to the friendship was much more than simply that.

With no life-changing, career-making passion to direct her energy and commitment, her friends became her focus, and all three were equal in bringing individual strengths, passions, and viewpoints into the mix.

*

Back in the game...

Exhausted and thoroughly defeated, Sally sits with her arms hugging her knees inside the shield at the bottom of the dark, stinky pit. Staring out at the horrifying surroundings she is too stunned to think what to do, and hot, despairing tears spill from her eyes.

But then, a strange feeling washes over her like a gentle caress, and her breathing calms as the Timekeeper's whispering voice returns, speaking directly to her soul.

The sense of calm she felt the first time she was protected inside the shield returns, and she welcomes the feeling, grateful for anything that takes her attention away from the pit, if only for a few minutes.

Taken off to another place entirely, weightlessness and a dreamy sensation embrace her, drawing her into a cocoon of distant memories...

*

In the magical Realm of the Empress...

In the cradle, where the Alchemist resides, the ceiling and walls are as black as night. Enchanted lava runs through a million snaking cracks and fissures in the solid rock, bringing a warm, orangy-golden glow to a cavern that would be decidedly dingy if not for this magically energetic light within its walls.

The sentimental Alchemist—a dark-skinned, soft-featured being with two long locks of golden-black hair hanging in their face, is emotionally empathic and bound to the cradle. Their precious, palm-sized symbol of Venus rests on their solar plexus outside their robe, which is made of seven layers of delicate, wispy material that billows around them when they move, giving the impression of a smooth, floating gait.

Uniquely attuned to the five senses, and at one with the realm's energy, when they speak their voice penetrates deep, in mystical-sounding tones with the power to heal.

Three healing orbs hover above their head and when summoned, add their power to theirs which initiates healing in the way of the Malsimily, entering the body through one of the seven major chakras on an energetic level.

Deftly gathering their billowing, multi-layered robe around them, they lead the Timekeeper towards the large dais beyond the far end of the cavern's gushing waterfall.

"Timekeeper, we sense the Empress's energy is in distress at this point in her trial. We must check the Kee is properly grounded as it may be her only protection. We sensed something similar earlier, but then her energy seemed to settle."

They glance back at the Timekeeper questioningly, and their gaze momentarily shifts to Sho-linga, the huge, snow-white karm padding quietly after them. The karm sits on her haunches, and seems to also be shooting a questioning look toward the Timekeeper as they climb the handful of steps up to the dais. The Timekeeper chooses not to reveal their previous involvement in the game.

"This time, her distress is dangerously close to the brink of despair." The Alchemist continues, brow furrowing. "Bringing her sixth sense here with your help, is the only way to reinforce her confidence."

They pause before an altar which holds only a large, emerald-green symbol of Venus in a position of prominence upon a central stand. The Timekeeper turns their gaze to the Venus symbol as well.

"We will guide her to us through the symbol of the feminine." They advise, in words shrouded in a mysterious reverence both understand. Then, delicately manipulating the magical time translation rings, their other hand tenderly caresses the symbol with a single, ringed finger.

"Can we reach her without displacing the timeline?"

"We can." The Timekeeper responds, as they flick three fingers in an impossibly double-jointed, twisty way. "A gentle sleep spell within the dream should suffice."

"Marvellacious. We must show her a little of the Matriarchal plan, and aspects of the realm she should be proud of. She must be encouraged to use this knowledge to infuse her ideas with the artist Hannah. Once the Kee is fully activated, she will become..." they pause, searching for the right word.

"Obsessed?" Offers the Timekeeper in their usual monotone, with a lifted eyebrow.

"Hm... no. Not obsessed. That sounds too..." They pause once more, and gently stroke a long lock of hair down against their cheek. "She will be... *focussed* on her goals." The Timekeeper's expression remains unchanged as they shrug a shoulder, stoic and unruffled. "Still, whether she is obsessed or focussed, both fit the attitude required just as well."

"In sharing the realm's beauty, love, and healing with her, she will begin to feel a strong draw to her fated path. Then, when she is finally driven to use her natural abilities, her ideas and concepts will seem otherworldly to others, as it will bring some of the wonders of the Empress's realm to the human physical realm." The Timekeeper states, resoundingly.

The Alchemist's smile is gentle. "It is as you say, Timekeeper. Come. Show me the path the Kee reveals as she matures."

The Timekeeper inclines their head in an affirmative gesture. "As you wish. Behold, the path her generation must take to progress the world towards The Third Way..."

*

In the Human Physical Realm...

Back in the game...

Time and reality mysteriously vanish.

For nine minutes, Sally is enveloped in the memories of a vast, enchanting realm, teeming with magical marvels. She is gazing at these miraculous wonders from inside a flying, emerald-green orb, her heart filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment as she somehow understands it is of her own creation.

Approaching a sun that never sets but turns in a colossal, magnificently radiant symbol of Venus, she flies over a patchwork of diverse landscapes her sweeping gaze taking in the grand sights of enormous, smoky Rain bows ascending from and plunging into the ground. Purple trees of colossal proportions, with lilac leaves the size of mattresses. A field of ice diamonds, with jagged, uneven points bursting out of a sea of ice towards the sky. A field of purple night blooms sway in the gentle breeze and... she gasps incredulously, unable to fathom what she is seeing—a vast, upright ocean with no visible barrier, stretching off to a point beyond her vision, and rising so high it seems to touch the sky. Nothing she saw on earth could even begin to match the unbelievably fantastic, wild beauty, magical nature, and naturally abundant life bursting with loving energies in the realm. The natural beauty on earth seemed less alive, a tad soulless, and somehow, flat in comparison.

The never-ending wind and the tinkling chime of the Empress, makes a distinctive sound she can't describe, and though she knows it is impossible, she can smell the aromatic scents of raynorlorium and

coconut, brought to her nose on swirling gusts of magically infused air currents.

The presence of magic is everywhere and normal in the realm—a friendly place she must draw strength from, just like she drew strength from her friends.

"The Realm of the Empress," she whispers in awe, then blinks shaking off the lingering daze. "The Realm of the Empress?" She repeats, as a renewed sense of strength and determination rises within her.

*

Back in the bedroom...

Suddenly frowning, Sally says, "I thought I was doomed to die finding myself trapped in the one place I will probably never find a way out of. The snake's pit. I tried to convince myself it was not a complete disaster and instead, thought of another place. It shouldn't have been possible, but I think... I actually fell asleep for a few minutes."

Hope gapes incredulously, a funny look on her face as she splutters, "You what?! You fell asleep?! How can you...?"

Sally cuts her off with an impatiently shrugged *I-have-no-idea* look.

"I don't know, I just did. I had the most amazing dream vision in those few minutes. I must tell you all about it Smudge because the things I saw..." She hesitates, her eyes momentarily glazing over as they focus on some distant place and her voice trails off. Hannah notices the odd, excited glint in her eyes when she resumes. "Will make the most wonderfully glorious paintings, and fill a void the world does not yet realise is missing." Her tone softens to a gushed reverence. "Or... something."

Hannah and Hope are impressed, and a little confused by her bold proclamation, and they exchange a curious glance when they see the fierce determination on her face.

"What sort of void?" Hope asks at once.

"I don't know," she admits. "I just know *one hundred per cent* Smudge

will be itching to paint what I've seen." She speaks directly to Hannah then with a passionate conviction her friend has not heard from her ever before.

Hannah stares at her for a beat, eyeing her carefully. She is, of course, already beyond intrigued by the magical nature of Sally's story as it is testing her artistic abilities.

"In that case, I can't wait!" She grins, tucking a foot beneath her to get more comfortable.

"What you *dreamed* you saw, you mean?" Hope points out. "It's quite logical if you..." Sally listens to her explanation, but only half agrees.

"Yeah, yeah, okay. You might be right. Now, where was I?"

"You were..."

"What's a dream vision, Sal?" Hannah interrupts, her tone urgent.

"It's..." she hesitates. "Too complicated to go into now."

"But what if you forget it like all the rest?" She persists.

"I won't. Besides, dream visions stay with you."

Hannah frowned. "How do you know that? You've never had one. What if...?"

Sally looks over, patiently. "Honestly, they do. Trust me."

She sees the confused, questioning look her friends exchange and ignores it. "So, there I was, having snapped out of..."

Hope cuts in. "You mean, you woke up from a dream inside a dream." She intones matter-of-factly whilst lying across the bed up on one elbow. She is squeezing one of her muscle-strengthening contraptions open and closed in one hand.

Sally makes a fleeting hand gesture, and resumes.

"Yes, if you say so. So, instead of cowering in a blind panic chewing my fingernails, I thought, if Hope were here, she would find a way out. She would roll around and search every corner of the pit if she had to. The Juggernaut would *never* balk at such a challenge, or ever give up hope."

"Radically right, Bubbs." Hope agrees, her chin lifting with pride.

20

Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick...

Damn, did she just drop off?

"Get a grip, Sal." She cautions herself.

Resolving not to be pulled away from her goal by alluring, distracting thoughts, or dangerous poisonous snakes, she murmurs,

"Right. First things first. I must get out of this stinking pit." She rubs her eyes, her gaze clears, and she suddenly finds herself looking directly at a die face on the opposite side of the pit. She rubs her disbelieving eyes cartoon character like, sure she is mistaken.

Could it be? Is that a... a die face?

She sits up straighter, straining to see better.

YESSS It's a way out! Her heart lifts with a sudden, nervous joy. *But don't jump the gun*, she quickly reins in her excitement. She still has to get to it safely, and then... she shakes her head thinking. *One thing at a time, Salliniquai.*

The familiar square shape stands out in the murky wall on the far side of the pit. It is faded, stained, and worn around the edges, but there is

no mistaking what it is. She hadn't seen it before because she was probably too traumatised to see anything beyond the snakes when she landed. She wished she had the power to make the orb fly to it, but knows this is impossible because the magic only worked in the Realm of the Empress.

C'mon, Sal. Think! Think! Think! What would Juggs do? Or, maybe... maybe if she moved like... Serenity?

Hearing the big clock ticking on somewhere in the game, she shifts onto all fours with cat-like grace, and then, reaching forward, she tentatively pushes the orb's skin, testing its resilience with both hands. It gives a little, then rocks slightly. She pushes harder, and it wobbles and then slowly starts to roll. Going with the motion, she rolls the orb over and over, wobbling from side to side as she bumps over the mass of twisting, undulating snakes keeping her eyes locked on the die face.

Her determination is unwavering as she scrabbles forwards like a gerbil on a wheel, gains traction with her feet, and the orb gains speed. Panting, trembling, and then giggling almost hysterically as she progresses, she works hard to keep the orb upright and travelling in the right direction. Rather than rolling like a solid ball, the base of the orb flattens and depresses at the bottom, revealing the shapes of the snakes that are squished as she rolls over them. She is no longer as frightened as she was when she landed, not now escape is within her reach. She whoops and screams and laughs like crazy as she tells herself she is going to make it out.

She ignores the faint hissing, squelching, snapping sounds, and avoids looking at the mass of snakes slithering and writhing beneath her with flicking tongues spitting poison. The task is difficult, and she is winded when she finally gets to the die face.

She stares at the number of holes displayed, cries, *Juunes-strayaiah!* Then barks more gleeful, hysterical laughter at the single dark dot in the centre. The weight of the challenge marginally lifts off her shoulders, and she expels a quavering, grateful sigh.

It's a one! A ONE! Oh, what luck, what luck!

Once again, she curbs her excitement when she realises what she will

be forced to do.

First, she must dismiss the orb, then second, play the die face. Her heart sinks as she considers her chances. Some of the snakes were bumping against the orb already, and a successful escape would depend entirely on what happened when she activated the die face. A ladder would come, but how fast would it appear? There was still another level to get through, and time was of the essence.

She squares her shoulders; lips set into a tight line. She did not have time to worry about the snakes in the pit, and was glad the master snake was slithering its way elsewhere in the game.

Swallowing deeply, she pulls the hood of her catsuit over her head so it transforms into a slime-repelling all-in-one, then, taking the last pencil from her pocket, she readies it in her right hand and touches the cat's collar with her left.

The orb fades, then vanishes, and the immediate, overpowering, foul stench of damp, festering nastiness, snake muck and slime, hits like a physical blow. In the same instant, the sounds in the pit are magnified a hundredfold blasting her senses with a deafening array of thunderous hisses, making her wish for nothing more than to be out of there in fresh air and quiet.

A second later, she jams the pencil into the dot and refastens the cat's collar around her wrist.

A thin ray of blinding light instantly appears from an impossibly high position, shining directly onto her upturned, desperately strained face. It bares down from so far up, she bends back a bit to see it. The descending ladder drops down to her impossibly fast with three resounding clunks, releasing impossibly long lengths of the ladder that end right before her. Wasting no time, she starts to climb, kicking at the snakes beginning to curl sinuously around her feet. Impulsively, she hisses at them angrily like Serenity sometimes hissed at dogs and other cats in her territory, and for a moment they seem to hesitate. Then, perhaps sensing the threat is an empty one, they slink around the bottom rung of the ladder, tongues flicking.

She climbs quickly, higher and higher, keeping her gaze fixed on the

square of light as she hoists herself up the rungs with the orb-light on her wrist lighting her way. She cannot block out the sounds unfortunately, and winces at the dreadful hissing.

"Fifty-five," she pants, an age later. Worryingly, the trap door did not look any closer.

At rung seventy-five, she sees the large clock face again, fixed into the wall behind the ladder. It reads: 11.35 pm.

Oh gosh! Is that the time?

She is desperately tired but continues to climb slower, and slower until her aching arms and thighs force her to stop and rest. Panting and breathing heavily, she holds on tight to the ladder, resting her forehead against it, waiting for her breathing to slow and her strength to return.

Just for a minute. She tiredly allows.

The ladder wobbles, jerks a bit, then wobbles again.

Sally raises her head and glances down to see what is causing the wobbling. Her eyes bulge as large as saucers when she sees that rung by rung, the ladder is disappearing beneath snakes crawling and wiggling their way upwards. Up, over, and through the rungs, they are no more than a dozen rungs below her feet. Fear grips her anew as she stares disbelieving at the hundreds of horrors coming toward her.

Sally blinks.

Sally swallows.

Sally... screams.

Galvanised into action, she no longer grapples her way awkwardly up the ladder but moves with an alacrity and smoothness Hope would be proud of.

"For - *no English translation at this time. The closest Malsimily term is - Mellotorium* - sake!" She cries, muttering. "You crummy little buggers don't give up, do you?"

*

Back in the bedroom...

"It wasn't funny!" She snaps irritably, as Hannah and Hope roll about laughing like it is the funniest thing they have ever heard.

"It so is." Hope's unapologetic, high-pitched peel of laughter grates on her nerves until both hers and Hannah's laughter dies away to low giggles.

"Go on, Bubbs, what happened next?" She urges.

*

Back in the game...

Sally climbs the ladder with an agility more catlike than human, because the prospect of falling back into the pit or being ensnared by the snakes is a deadly fear that fuels her determination. For the second time since starting the game, she is truly afraid by what is chasing her.

Her strained muscles scream in protest, but she manages to keep going as the climb stretches on, and on, and on. Then, at last, the trap door is within reach.

The snakes, a mere two rungs below her now, speed up their efforts to reach her, but they are too slow. Kicking wildly and grunting with effort, she hoists herself up through the opening and awkwardly pulls her legs out snagging and ripping a leg of her all-in-one. Three snakes slither out in the few seconds it takes her to slam the door shut, but they slither away while she sits in a heap on top of the door, panting hard and shivering. Her trembling smile, is bleak, and she takes a few deep breaths to calm her wildly beating heart.

No graceful, karm-like exit and landing this time, my friends, she thinks grimly. That was way too close for comfort.

21

Facing the master snake.

Sally is back on the level she dropped down from earlier, a short way away from the die face. From somewhere behind her, the dreadful hissing increases in volume, a reminder that she is not yet safe.

Retracing her steps over the roots and vines, and through muddy goo with her light held out before her, she arrives at the die face. Her hole choices now are upper left, lower left, centre, or bottom right.

"I can't make another mistake," she cautiously notes. "Oh, for mellitorium's sake *which is it!*" She huffs, angry with herself for getting annoyed, and deeply frustrated with the apparent unfairness of it all. She is tired, irritated, and just wants the damn stupid dream to end.

*

Back in the bedroom...

"Shhhhh!" Hope shushes her with a hiss while staring at her in wide-eyed amusement. She glances towards the door. "Trust your voice to return just as you said that." She jumps up, goes to the door and leans an ear against it. "Your dad would've heard that."

Confused, Sally glances at her, frowning. "Heard what?"

"You said, or should I say, shouted *FMS*, but properly, you know?" She ambles back to the bed, satisfied they will not be disturbed when no sounds of approaching footsteps are apparent.

"I didn't." Sally retorts, but there is uncertainty in her tone. "You know I don't like swearing."

"But you did then. With full articulation." Hope insists. She looks to Hannah for backup, but her head is down and she is focussed on her drawing pad. "Besides, it's no biggie, it's human nature. You should hear the language seasoned athletes use out on the track and field."

"I was sure I said..." Sally began, then changes her mind, eager to finish the story. She speaks defensively. "Oh, whatever. Can I get on with it?"

Hannah looks up at her irate tone, catches Hope's eye, and taps a finger to her lips, warning her to keep quiet. Hope bites back the retort she was about to offer and flopping down onto the bed, starts stroking Serenity again.

*

Back in the game...

With growing alarm, Sally notices the ticking clock has sped up.

Is this because she is nearing the end? She wonders, hoping for mellotorium's sake that she is right.

"Time for a lucky guess, I guess," she says in a forced, cheery tone attempting to dispel the gloomy outcome she has envisioned. She rakishly shoves the pencil into the lower left hole, waits, then pulls it back out when nothing happens. The pencil is still whole. She cannot

hear a mechanical contraption gearing up, so with a bit of luck. She hesitates. But where is the ladder, or...?

A hiss of seriously deadly intent reverberates around the passage, loud enough to rumble through her body making her muscles tense up, and freeze with fright.

She can feel its presence. She *knows* the master snake is closing in on her. She doesn't *want* to see it, but she is unable to stay her curiosity and glances over her shoulder... to finally come face to face with the monstrous master snake, an enraged beast of bone-chilling ferocity.

Slide-weaving its way almost drunkenly towards her, the snake's black diamond pattern over shades of brown, identifies it as an Adder as it moves between the outcrops and branches with smooth familiarity, filling the entire passage with its huge bulk. Its hypnotising eyes glisten malevolently as they fix on her, and its oversized fangs drip stretchy globs of poison the size of her hands. Her heart stops beating as a single, terrified thought skitters wildly through her mind, and her throat is so dry, it clicks when she swallows.

Mellotorium! It could eat her alive in one snap of its monstrous jaws...

Shrinking back against the wall, she is beyond petrified by now, and *terrified* of losing not only the game, but her *actual* life.

That last hole must have been a dud, like a red herring, she shakily reasons, biting her trembling lower lip. She turns back to the die face and tries a different hole with a single, desperate thought in mind. *This one has got to be right.*

The snake is almost upon her, and knowing she will die if she chooses wrong this time, she shoves the pencil into the bottom right hole and bravely turns back to face the snake almost dripping with sweat from her efforts. Falling into the pit, scrambling to get out, climbing the longest ladder in the history of long ladders, ever, along with the constant hissing and nasty, ripe smells batting against the periphery of her senses has been relentless—the pressure almost unbearable.

She flinches and shrinks back against the wall once more, crying out in terror as its huge head looms up before her. It opens its jaws, and she can see right into the depths of its deep, dark, despicable throat all the

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way back to whatever is rotting there, the repulsive smell washing over her like an unwelcome, invasive caress. Before it can clamp its jaws around her, a sudden bolt of heat beneath her feet launches her upwards on a spring like a jack-in-the-box, a loud clap reverberating round the passage. Instinctively holding her arms above her head like Hope did when she was diving, she shoots through the trap door opening like an arrow, and gets stuck halfway through it.

*

Back in the bedroom...

"There, see. I wouldn't have got stuck." Hope declares nonchalantly.

Sally glares at her exasperated. She hadn't stopped picking at her story with a mocking tone, ignoring the very real dangers of the game.

"As tough as you are, you wouldn't have fit through the trap door. The snake would have eaten you, *legs first*." She pauses to let the dreadful vision sink in. "Now, let me finish, please."

"*Soreeeee...*" Though Hope rolls her eyes at her, when she thinks about being eaten legs first, an expression of discomfort crumples her features.

"So, after my springy Hope-dive..."

*

Back in the game...

She struggles to pull herself through, kicking and twisting violently whilst trying to see what the snake is doing. It has reared back, and is preparing to spit a string of poison at her. Desperately wrenching her legs through, she scrapes her thigh painfully against the edge of the door, hissing at the pain as she quickly ducks back to avoid a stream of thick poison shooting through the opening, by inches. She scrambles to kick the door shut, then scootches back, her breathing ragged. Getting to her feet with her knees practically knocking, she stares down at the door,

relieved it is too small for the snake.

Under the long tear in her catsuit, her thigh pulses painfully. The skin there is red raw and stinging like when Serenity accidentally scratches her. She worries vaguely about the wound becoming infected, which only strengthens her determination to get out of the game. Retrieving and unfolding the map, she sees she is on the last level.

"Oh, thank God!" She cries, desperately relieved.

The hallway is of a normal size and shape, like the hallways at school, except the walls are dark and reflective with die faces all along it. Fist-sized holes mark the number of dots in the faces, and as she watches, a snake pokes its head out of one, tastes the air with two flicks of its forked tongue, and then retreats. Other snakes appear out of other holes, but none came out entirely. She guesses their stealthy interest is to monitor her progress, and hiss-communicate exactly where she is to the master snake.

The magical clock has stopped ticking meanwhile, and she worries again about the snake coming for her. It wouldn't be long before the beast tongue-sniffed her out, and pounced, so she should not hang about dithering.

The ceiling and floor are made of a black, glassy substance, and after scanning the way ahead and behind, she peers more closely at the walls, without straying too close.

Is someone, or maybe something watching her from behind it? She has a strong sense this is the case.

As the seconds stretch on, the dark walls remind her of the wall behind the till at Hannah's mum's charity shop. While it has a similar mirrored surface facing the shop, if you are on the other side looking through, it is like clear glass...

When the three friends were browsing around the local charity shops, while Sally always went straight to the books section and Hannah rifled through the rows of donated clothes looking for *anything from the sixties and seventies era*, Hope would sit in the back room, flicking through a fashion or sports magazine that cost more than half the stuff

in the shop. She had a big aversion to rummaging through other people's cast-offs, and found it utterly distasteful. It didn't matter if it was dusty books handled by hundreds of people, old board games, or clothes from decades ago.

"Clearly, I don't understand the fascination." She insists, unable to hide her reflexive cringing.

"You act like a snob sometimes, Juggs." Sally said idly over her shoulder when she joined her in the back room.

"It's not an act." She throws back. "I'm an ordinary girl who likes ordinary *new* things." She insists, wrinkling her nose at... practically everything around her. "Next time, I'll wait for you in the café next door.

"Ordinary? *You?*" Sally laughs outrageously. "Miss Olympian 2024, or is it 2028? You're more extraordinary, than ordinary." Hope grins, agreeing with the compliment. "And I'll be there in the stands cheering you on when the time comes."

"Me too." Hannah says, joining them. She is carrying several items of clothing, and Hope sniffs at her choices.

"Fantastico. I expect nothing less of my best friends." She drapes an arm over Hannah's narrow shoulders.

"You mean, your only friends." Hannah mumbles.

"Yup, if you say so."

On one such occasion, after she and Hope had gotten bored with pulling faces at the customers waiting to pay for their goods at the till, Sally stayed in the back while Hope went into the shop to hurry Hannah along.

As she sat on the edge of a desk waiting for Hannah to finish rummaging, a green glimmer of light caught her eye. It was coming from a large cardboard box on the floor opposite the door to the back office. It was labelled *donate to specialist or chuck*. Curious, she wanders over to investigate, and crouching down beside it, she looks in.

The box is almost full of books which look tattered, slightly-worn, or like cheap rubbish she wouldn't read anyway. Except one. One book,

The Serenity Experience, was vaguely familiar. She noticed it straight away because it seemed to be the only new book in the box, and because of the strange, muted glow that brightened a shade when she pushed a few books aside, and uncovered it. Withdrawing her prize, and stares down at it in awe for a long, disbelieving moment.

*

In the magical Realm of the Empress...

The Timekeeper masterfully, and effortlessly manipulates time in the human physical realm, magically infusing the air around Sally.

A visible distortion in the air pulses and pushes against her. And as it thickens and swirls around her, a wavering shimmer in the air twists her vision of the room unnaturally, and then ... unexpectedly, time simply stops.

A mysterious, otherworldly anticipation... hangs heavy in the air...

22

The magical book.

For nine seconds, Sally is drawn into an intoxicating, magical mystery—a mystery for her alone. A tinkling chime dances through her mind as a misty projection of sparkling, blue-hued light glitters brightly around the book. She stares at it in dumb fascination, hardly believing her eyes at first.

Gingerly reaching out, she touches it then flinches back when a rush of shocking energy surges into her through her fingertips. It is a nice sensation and it travels up her arm to then spread over her entire body, bringing warmth and a wave of joy with it which is at once soothing, and somehow, steadying on levels she does not understand.

Then the light blinks out and gasping softly, she tightens her grip on the book, draws it closer and clutches it to her chest. She looks around, but her surroundings remain unchanged, and it seems no one else has noticed the strange phenomenon. The low murmur of conversation in the shop continues, the till bell rings up a purchase, and beyond that she hears the usual street sounds rising and falling, as the shop door opens

and closes. She looks down at the book's cover.

The writer of *The Serenity Experience* is A. T. Flowers, the author who wrote *Astrology for your Astro child*, the book she got from Serenity, her uncle MJ's shop when she was nine. Suddenly, a memory flashes into her mind...

On that same day, while she waited for her mum inside, she saw the book on astrology lying on one of the coffee tables. The strange shapes of the zodiac signs intrigued and fascinated her, and she asks if she can have it. Since it is the only copy in the shop, MJ had to say no, but he promised to order a copy especially for her. The book she now held in her hands, *The Serenity Experience*, was on the same table, but when she reached for it, MJ picked it up first and said,

"Not this one, Sal. It's for adults."

"How long until I'm adult enough to read it?" She asks at once.

Laughing softly, he gives her a kind, approving look then fondly tugs one of her plaits as he says. "About another seven years, sweet thing."

Back in the shop, her heart swells with glee as she cries,
Ha! Excellacious! I won't have to wait all them years after all, uncle MJ.

Beyond pleased at the prospect of reading something thought to be beyond her age and intelligence, she holds the book protectively, flushed with pleasure. A cursory flick through the pages reveals a single line of text on several of the pages, which she assumed were the chapter headings and sub-headings, until she read,

Warning: The knowledge in this book is restricted to persons aged sixteen, and over. The Salliniquai host may read one or two taster paragraphs, the author's prediction, and about the wide variety of spiritual tools only. The rest shall remain untranslated.

Erm... Okay... She hesitantly muses... a tad suspiciously.

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The spiritual tools mentioned were things she overheard her uncle discussing with her parents on many occasions, and the book had tasters from the third book in the series (*True Malsimily. Translation Withheld*). Flipping to the back page, she finds the Author's prediction, which reads:

This is the second in a series of three books by A. T. Flowers. The first, titled *Spiritual Illumination*, was published between the summer solstice of 1988 and the winter solstice of 1989. The second, *The Serenity Experience*, was self-published around the summer solstice 2019. The third book in the series shall (*High Malsimily, translation in progress...*) for the Matriarchy between the leap years 2024 - 2028. For these are the years the Third Way shall begin to gather momentum. (*True Malsimily. Translation Withheld*) will become the book of choice for women on spiritual journeys, and for those who wish to embrace The Third Way—the way of the feminine.

After reading the prickly first line of the introduction in (*True Malsimily. Translation Withheld*), she saw why the book was for adults. It read:

Growing up in southeast London in the eighties, racism was rife, the national front was growing stronger and bolder, and one of my neighbours had a dog called the N-word.

*

Hm... racism.

Sally's lips press into an unforgiving line as she recalls a nasty incident from just over a year ago...

She and Hope were at Hannah's house one day after school, when Dyon and Douglas got home much later than usual. It was clear from the cuts, bruises, and torn clothes that they'd been in some sort of scuffle.

Dyon said that seven white boys; known bullies from a school on the other side of town, were in their neighbourhood looking for trouble, and confronted them and two other boys in the park. Two of the bullies were on bikes, the rest on foot, and after taunting them and calling them names, they started pushing and shoving them. The twins were small for their age and the bullies likely saw them as easy targets, but when they fought together they did so fiercely, almost moving as one and defended themselves better than expected.

The twins were good students liked by everyone, and were never considered to be troublemakers or fight starters. They were intelligent, and brave, and would never back down from a fight, especially with bullies. It wasn't the first time they had experienced racism, and Sally felt bad for them because boys were much worse than girls when it came to bullying. Boys tend to punch and kick while girls usually limit their attacks to cut eyes and snide, bitchy comments. Fisticuffs were usually the last resort, lest someone's perfectly painted fingernail gets accidentally ripped off.

This was the first time she truly got the gist of what it meant to be a victim of racism, though, and how deeply hurtful it was for black people. She spoke to her parents about it later, and they explained how those bullying boys were too young to understand how their actions and racist comments truly affected others now, and in the future.

"They're like that because their parents are probably like it." Richard reluctantly admits.

As she considered this she puts herself in the bullies' shoes, and clearly sees the difference in parental guidance. She almost pities the boys—almost.

She was a decent, moral, kind, and responsible girl because that is how her parents are, and it is how they raised her to be. They meet all kinds in their lines of work at the university and the sports academy, treat everyone with respect and with many friends from diverse cultures, they embrace all types.

When she told her Saint Lucian bestie, Andrew about the fight, he was completely dumbfounded. Not only did racism not exist in Saint

Lucia, but he couldn't figure out why being so mean and nasty to another human being was necessary in the first place.

"Some people can only lift themselves up by putting others down," he tells her morosely, sharing what his parents had told him. "Historically, white people in first world countries treat people of colour like crap, which is why we live in Saint Lucia."

Andrew's mum, JJ, and her twin brother, MJ, were raised in England and had to fight twice as hard for everything, absolutely *everything*, which often meant going above and beyond to prove themselves as equally valuable as their white colleagues. In the end, JJ felt too unfairly judged and restricted by British society, so he moved to India for a few years. Even though many Indians had never seen a black person in the flesh before, their first reactions to her were kind and embracing with a natural, innocent curiosity one would expect of people of a vastly different culture. Their acceptance of her was refreshing, and completely opposite to how English people treated her.

His uncle MJ meanwhile had,

"Battled racism for years in England, and after hearing more than enough about his troubles over the years, mum didn't want me exposed to that kind of hate and pressure to prove myself. That kind of life would slowly but surely repress my creativity, encourage a defensive attitude, and dampen my youthful, positive spirit forever, she said. Leaving me with the inevitable chip on my shoulder, put there by the very people meant to steer me true."

As always, Sally is impressed by his smart, clued-up parents. The two think of themselves as extremely lucky to have the best parents in the world.

*

Though she knew she might not understand all the information in the book, she was too intrigued not to read on. The next taster from the book's introduction was positive, and read:

As one of the feminine, you realise you are a Goddess, right?

What was strange, was that most of the text was preceded by the words (*Malsimily translation shield in place due to age - of Aquarius, and of Empress Salliniquai's host - restriction*) and seemed to be written in another language until she got to another taster paragraph, which read:

Deep inside, at the centre of your being, a warm, spiritually eternal force wants to build and rise through you.

Followed by something about a Great Suffering and the exact cautionary words as before (*Malsimily translation shield in place, due to age - of Aquarius, and of Empress Salliniquai's host - restriction*).

It felt like the book was teasing her by only letting her see a few choice sentences, and she frowns at it, wondering how it could possibly know she was under sixteen, who this Empress Salliniquai was, what the Great Suffering thing was about, and who it was referring to when it mentioned a host. It couldn't possibly mean... her. Could it?

Most of the text was indecipherable, but oddly, on some *inner* level, she somehow understood its futuristic elements. Except for the 'Spiritual tools' excerpts, practically all the information in the book was like this. The text only became readable again once she got to the Author's prediction.

Indecipherable. She thought at the time, congratulating herself for using the difficult word in its proper context.

She understood the book was being secretive for a reason, but she was gutted at having to wait until she was sixteen for the text to be revealed. How could she keep her curiosity tempered for *three whole years*?

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In the back of the charity shop, she asked Hannah's mum if she could keep the book, hoping and praying she would let her.

"I'll pay double the price for it," she offers generously.

"You might not understand most of it, Sally. It's a spiritual book for women." She told her kindly as she stood in the office doorway leaning against the frame.

"I know. I really like the cover, though. MJ said it's never too early to start thinking about spirituality. I mean, it's..." The phone on the desk in the office behind them started ringing.

"Alright, take it. No payment necessary," she says quickly, gesturing vaguely as she turns and reaches for the phone.

Sally tucks the book into her bag, a cool relief washing over her. She left a generous donation in the charity box by the till as payment.

23

The end of the game.

From behind sleek, black walls, Saxon and Noxas were watching Sally's progress with an almost lazy interest, until her courageous escape from the pit. After that, both are now leaning forward eagerly, watching to see if, and how she finishes the game.

*

About fifty feet ahead, she sees the corridor gets brighter, and runs towards it staying close to the centre. She ignores the sudden rise in snake heads poking out of the die faces, their numbers having multiplied considerably in only a few moments. Now, every hole is occupied with a weaving head, their constant hissing engulfing her. Her run to the end has her panting hard again, and she is shaking as she stands bent over, hands resting on her thighs, trying to calm her breathing.

She gasps at the marvellacious view before her.

One hundred, illuminated numbered squares form a flat grid on the

dark ground, which glows an eerie greenish-yellow in the surrounding blackness. There appears to be nothing but a dark gloom beyond the grid's edges, and the gridlines are made of a flexible substance not attached to anything making the whole thing seem incredibly unstable. She is relieved to be at the end of the game, at long last.

Something brushes against her shoulder and she whirls around expecting to see the snake at her back. But it is only an orb-balloon, drifting beside her. With two, palm-sized square objects floating inside it—extra-large, golden dice.

The balloon bursts, and the dice hang in mid-air for a beat, giving her time to grab them. She cries out in surprise as she is instantly lifted over the grid in slow motion to land on square ninety. Wobbling, she drops into a crouch as the flexible square dips and bends under her weight.

It is like trying to balance on a tightrope, she thinks, frustrated by yet another difficulty.

The six sides of the dice are numbered not with dots, but with the faces of Saxon on one, and Noxas on the other. She shakes them awkwardly between her small, dirty hands, throws them to the ground and they tumble away, faces interchanging as they turn over and over. Both land on square one hundred.

The die displaying Saxon's face shows the number two face up, the other, a four.

Square ninety-six automatically lights up.

Her green eyes darken as a solid determination to succeed rises within her once more.

She will *not* fail, she doggedly insists.

Hunkering down to brace herself, she jumps with enough momentum to carry her forwards, and lands safely but awkwardly in the middle of square ninety-six, hissing a sharp intake of breath as a stinging pain snaps across her right heel. Tears spring to her eyes, but she wipes them away as both dice pop up from the grid and fling themselves at her. She catches them in both hands, then throws them down again. The Saxon die shows a three, the Noxas die, a one.

"Yes! Yes! *Yes!*" She screams, punching the air with her fist, then

wavers slightly as the squares of the grid start to shudder.

Small cracks start to appear along the dividing lines of the grid, and as the ends of the flexible lines begin to unravel, half of one of the grid squares to her side drops down into the darkness, while the square marked one hundred stretches away from her, then retracts back towards her. She has to judge when to jump carefully, as she has no idea what might happen if she misses the square marked one hundred.

With only seconds to decide, as has happened before in the game, these seconds seem to stretch out, giving her time to think about another overheard conversation, which only makes her more determined to win the game...

*

When Simone insisted on going back to Saint Lucian to care for her mum, Richard was concerned with the extra responsibilities she would be taking on. She'd explained that, yes, there were family members there who could care for her, but out of the six siblings she is the only daughter.

"She needs a woman's touch." She insists.

On the plus side, one brother was a doctor. He worked at the hospital in Vieux Fort; temporarily based in the old Olympic stadium, and ran a surgery at the medical centre in a village called Choiseul. It kept him busy, but he made time to visit her when he could. Relatives living in other areas of the island would swing by occasionally, but Simone should be there to organise her care and these visits.

As the family home is in a quiet street, it had plenty of space and a Wi-Fi connection, so both were able to work remotely in relative peace, easily keeping in touch with students and trainees through Zoom and podcasts.

*

With her ever-rising desire to go back to Saint Lucia, Sally refuses to let anything more get in her way. She has to get back, and losing her voice, being trapped in a fantastical dream, or being virtually dead—is no reason to give up. *Nothing* can or will, stop her.

Her most important motive is of course, personal. She cannot wait to see Andrew's face when she answers his *special* question.

Andrew's confident intelligence, coupled with a teasing, cheeky smile, an infectious laugh, and a self-effacing humour always has her in fits of giggles. There is a year and a half age gap between them, and she'd noticed how he'd grown a few inches taller last summer, and was sure he'd grown a few more when she saw him at the wedding a few weeks ago. She wonders if he will take after his dad and grow to a towering six feet, seven inches tall, or taller even.

In their last conversation, Andrew had got all serious and mustered up the courage to ask an important question. She promised to think about it, and said to expect an answer when she returned in the summer. And now, as she neared the end of the game, she couldn't help but feel a surge of hopeful anticipation for his reaction, and how it will shape their relationship. It fills her with nervous excitement, but to make sure she has back up, she does something that is quite rare for her. She offers up a prayer.

Though she doesn't want to actually *bargain* with the good Lord above, she promises to make her confirmation at the Catholic church in Soufriere if she makes it out of the game and back to the island in one piece, grinning a little wryly at the pledge.

Her parents are Catholics and the promise holds deep meaning for her, as she will build a stronger connection with the faith, honouring their beliefs. While both go to church regularly, since she turned twelve they let her go when she wants, never pressuring her.

Whilst this meant she rarely went to church in England, in Saint Lucia she attended mass at least three times during the holidays, because she wanted to. There was an entirely different feel to Catholic services in Saint Lucia, apart from the obviously pleasant temperatures. Just being inside a church that was warm inside changed the whole feel of services.

For one thing, the congregation dressed in their bright and colourful best rather than for warmth, which encouraged brighter attitudes somehow.

Going to church was a respected occasion in Saint Lucia. All her friends went to church. Not every week and not because their parents made them, but because it was important to them. All the children she hung around with were christened and had made their first holy communions, and she remembered how they joyfully celebrated the occasions.

Yes, she would do it IF she made it out of this.

She inhales and then exhales a deep, determined breath, bringing her attention back to the business at hand.

*

Square one hundred was the last square on the grid, and she saw nothing beyond it except darkness as she crouched down on the already unstable ground. It shook again, more violently this time, and more squares dropped away from the grid. Pursing her lips, she tried to gage the distance to square one hundred, but it kept stretching away and coming back like elastic.

"Noxas. Can you help me?" She begs in a low voice, not expecting an answer.

Noxas's strong, encouraging voice bellows out from within the die, surprising her.

"Leap Sally! Leap like the leap year it is and like you've never leapt before! *Reach beyond the one hundred.*"

His voice echoes for a few beats, then fades as the die falls away and the sides of the remaining squares continue disintegrating.

"Yes, you can do it, Empress, but you might not make it. Is it really, *just a jump away?*" Came Saxon's familiar, teasing voice from the one remaining die. "You can reach the one hundred easily. But hurry," his voice turns low and sly. "The snake approaches..."

The die tips over the square's edge and falls away.

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At these last words, she cannot resist turning to look and instantly wishes she hadn't.

The giant snake is rushing towards her so fast; she sees it only for a split second before turning and leaping with all the spring and strength her legs allow. With her head thrown back, and her eyes wide and wild, her back arches in an elegant curve as her arms stretch out to the ends of her fingertips, and she reaches forwards and upwards for extra lift.

The downward curve of her leap happens in slow motion as she drops toward square one hundred, but then the smile begins to slide away as incredibly, she seems to have jumped a tad too far, missing the grid's edge by inches.

Once again, she finds herself falling, down, and down, into darkness.

As she falls, she passes the giant clock face once more. It reads: 11.59.

Faintly, she hears Noxas's echoey voice. He is chuckling, telling her she won fair and square. And then, fainter still, she hears Saxon referring to Empress Salliniquai...

*

"Why, oh, why, do they always, *always* jump too far in the end?" Saxon mutters to Noxas. Sighing, he wipes the back of a hand across his brow as though the tension of the game is too much.

"Surely you know it's the sight of the snake rushing towards them like that. You warn them of its approach on purpose, don't you, knowing most can't resist a look. It must be pure fright which makes them leap so wildly in the end."

He chuckles evenly. "I'm compelled to say it at the end of every game. But not all turn to look, brother."

"Hm." Noxas concedes. "As with Empress Salliniquai, she will make it safely out."

"Out, yes, as in properly out. Alive and well out." Saxon states in an equally regretful and relieved tone.

"Yes, all of the above."

"A fitting end to a well-played game then. Right, brother?"

Noxas nods. "Still, if she did lose, we couldn't have kept her with us anyway. That kind of neglectful interference would undo our own Malsimily agreement. As she is True Malsimily born, and a direct descendent of the Matriarchy, an agent of the supreme would be sent to displace us. We would face dissipation, and all those we have taken under our wing who have a big part to play in the human physical realm's divine future, who *must* survive the Great Suffering without mental disturbance, may have also been jeopardised.

"It is fortunate then that she has come to no harm. The call from the human physical realm was a strong enough pull to draw Sally back to her life."

"Indeed. But what will become of her once the Empresserial energy returns to her realm?"

"Sally?" He contemplates the question, head cocked. "I imagine her destiny lies upon a different path now. One of global importance that will progress the Third Way."

"Is that a fact...?"

"Mm hm..."

Their voices fade back into the magical realm of leap year games...

24

Girl's and boy-friends.

Sunday 1st March, 2020

"And then, I woke up." Sally shrugs, signifying the end of the story.

"Well, get you with your bad-ass, Snakes-and-Ladders game. I would've liked a go." Hope says enviously, shifting to sit up on the bed.

"You're mad, Juggs." Hannah's face twists. "I don't know how you did it, Sal."

"Well..." Sally tilts her head slightly. "I didn't *actually* do it. It was only a dream. But damn, it felt real."

"Those bruises prove it was real." Hope says, her curiosity and confusion still apparent. "But I don't understand how that's possible..."

"I'd rather not dwell on that bit now. It's too strange to get my head around."

Hope nods, but the look in her eyes shows she is not finished with the subject. Considering her own sporting activities, she knows all about cuts and bruises, and finds it odd that her friend got them while she was

dreaming.

There must be a rational, normal reason for them, she logically insists. It is a puzzle she will ponder long and hard until it makes sense.

"I did a few drawings from your descriptions." Hannah says, breaking into both girls' thoughts.

"Cool. Let me see." Sally replies, moving over.

"Wait a minute. Are you sure that's all you remember of the whole weekend? You've left nothing out?" Hannah asks.

"No. Not that I can think of. What about you two? Did we get up to anything else I should know about?" The two girls exchange quick, furtive glances. Sally elbows Hope. "What's that look about?"

"Well, there was one thing..." Hannah says with grim reluctance as her eyes fall away from Sally's sharp gaze.

"What thing?"

"It's a bit embarrassing, mun." Hope reluctantly admits, her face twisting uncomfortably.

"What is? What did I do? I know it's serious when you slip in to Welsh, mun." She jests, leaning forward now, impatient to know the shameful deed they were hiding from her.

"Maybe we shouldn't say." Hope mumbles, avoiding her eyes. "You might literally never go out in public again."

Sally's frown deepens and her mouth tightens as she closes her eyes, "Oh god. *What* did I do?"

After a beat, they fall about laughing.

"*Ha ha*. The look on your face is... *quality*." Hope giggles.

Hannah lets her off the hook. "No, Bubbs. Honestly, there's nothing else."

Sally glares at Hope, then shrugs. "Let's see the pictures then."

Pushing up from the wicker chair, Hannah crosses to the bed, sits down between them, and flicks over the first page of her large sketchbook.

The first picture is of the clown. Initially drawn as an outline in black pencil, she did not simply draw the face, but the whole person, flaring long coat, big red nose, and everything. Patches of colour were added in

places, and she has somehow captured the edgy energy behind the clown get-up perfectly.

"And neither of you saw him at the party?"

Hannah shakes her head.

"Nope, definitely not." Hope responds. "I would've remembered."

The next picture is of Sally in bed, with a circle of astrological symbols floating around her head, followed by a drawing of the party.

"It's your dream party." Hannah says, lifting the next page over.

Sally and Hope exchange a blank look, then look back at Hannah questioningly. They see only slanting lines, swirls, dots, and strange shapes, but nothing clear-cut or solid.

"Hm..." Hope mumbles doubtfully.

Sally cocks an enquiring eyebrow at her friend. "Um?"

"Sorry, yeah, you won't understand this one. It's a technique I use when I draw a lot of things quickly."

"Skip it." Hope says, eager to see the next one.

"Wow!" Sally cries at the next sketch. "Han, that's totally marvellacious!"

The picture is of the three-dimensional, snakes and ladders game with patches of colour in places. She'd taken the board game out from under the bed to make sure the shades were right. The snake skin walls, and the rising gooey substance from the first tunnel were next. Then, the orb-shield with Sally looking scared inside of it. A big shiny die face was next, with one dot in the centre. Then she'd sketched a drawing of the big Adder. Finally, she showed them the last picture which was the end of the game, and mostly black. It was another one she would fill in later, she explained.

"I can't believe you drew all that, Smudge."

"Oh, how you underestimate my talents, Bubbs," she mockingly states, her voice syrupy smooth.

"I'm glad I remember it all now, and my voice is back. Thanks for this, you two."

She was really back in the real world, alive and in one piece. She almost pinches herself to make sure.

Hannah catches sight of the new addition to Sally's bedroom. Closing her book, she slips it into her bag, then gestures towards the long, black, soft guitar case leaning against the wardrobe door.

"Sal, before we go. What's in that?" Her tone suggests she has some idea already.

"Oh, you'll never guess." Her reply is slightly exaggerated.

Hope, who is not musical at all, and wouldn't know a guitar from any other string instrument, says innocently, "That's too small to be a guitar. Is it a banjo?"

Tickled by her ignorance towards anything other than sports, Hannah snorts and cracks up; her explosion of giggles infectious as she falls into Hope, shaking her head slowly. "Of all the instruments you can think of..." she chuckles.

"A *banjo*?!" Sally's laugh rings out. "What would I want with a flaming *banjo*?"

Picking up the bag, she unzips it and carefully removes a travel guitar.

"Nice!" Hannah gushes, drawing out the word.

"Is it the one Snowboy gave you? I didn't know you could play an instrument?" Hope says. "Play us something."

"Hope, you're such a muppet. I've only just got it. I can't play anything yet."

Hannah was chuckling once more. "You're so funny, Juggs. So funny."

"I wasn't trying to be." Hope mumbles as Hannah playfully nudges her.

"I can't play anything, but look." She turns it around.

Written in thick black pen were the words.

For Sally with the green eyes. Play well, Snowboy. Then, Take care of her, sweet Sally. Trevor.

"Oh my gosh! No way! An *autographed* guitar from *Deep Silver Lining*!/" Hope gushes. "That'll be worth millions, one day."

"Snowboy will still be there when we go back, as well. He's promised me a lesson."

"Oh, Bubbs, you should video it and send it to us. It'll go viral."

Hannah says.

She purses her lips and shakes her head slowly. "They've asked me not to do that, actually. Things like that must go through their publicity office or something first, in case their location is accidentally revealed in the background. I didn't really get why. A protective measure for all concerned, they said."

Hope gushes enviously. "God, I'm *soooo* jealous. Not only have you met Snowboy in the flesh..."

"And keyboard Trevor," Sally adds.

"*And* keyboard Trevor," Hope echoes. "You've got a *signed* guitar, the promise of a private lesson, *and* you're going back to hang with your lush sweetheart while me and Hannah are stuck here shivering."

"Oi, Andrew's not my sweetheart!" She denies heatedly. *Not yet, anyway...*

Hope gives her a long, suggestive look. "He should be. He's cute."

Sally hesitates, then rolls her eyes. She almost tells them then and there, but chooses not to while Hope continues to tease her about him.

"*Bubb's has got a boyfriend, la la, la, la, laaa la ...*" She sings, confirming for Sally that she is right not saying anything.

"Oh, *shut up*, Juggs. He's *not* my boyfriend. Shhhh, my dad's working."

"I wish I was going to Saint Lucia. It sounds so nature-filled, exotic, and totally radical. I would love it there, I bet." She said wistfully.

Hannah and Sally exchange a brief, knowing look.

"You're so funny juggs, and you don't even know it." Sally says softly.

"Why? What have I said now?" Hope frowns at her.

While Hope often wished to go on holiday somewhere as exotic as Saint Lucia, her friends were not convinced she would like it.

While there were many adventurous things to do, most people went to the Caribbean to relax, lie around in the guaranteed sun and fresh air, and enjoy great food, rum cocktails, and smoothies. The strength of the heat alone would be a test for her pale, freckled skin.

"Wouldn't you get bored being in a hotel for most of it?" Sally asks her.

"Not if it had a gym, swimming pools, and a beach right in front of it,

I could be kept reasonably busy." Hope says.

But Sally doesn't believe it. The Hallertons usually went on action-packed trips to places in Scotland or Wales. Rambling holidays where they climbed peaks, took long, brisk walks through valleys, and enjoyed views of wide-open spaces with brisk winds blowing about them. She thought Hope was too charged up and energetic to enjoy doing nothing more than slowing her pace down, relaxing in the sun, and lazing around.

Since her mum was originally from Pembrokeshire in South Wales, they have tons of family there. Their three families went on holidays together often, exploring the coastal, historic, and rural villages. Since the three girls were little, they'd taken them there every year for a week to a campsite secluded in the Wye Valley. Its name translating into something close to *the crimson cove*. Named so by the locals because of the spectacular sunsets at certain times of the year. There are castle ruins and a farm they visit as well, where they learn about animals. It is not a zoo, but a sort of educational holiday place.

*

"Let's go out for a bit. We've been holed up in here long enough." Hope suggests. Stretching her arms lazily above her head, she arches her back, and yawns.

"Yeah, come on." Hannah agrees, making one last sweeping scan of the floor. A crayon had rolled part way under the bed, and she scoops it up and drops it in a pocket.

"Ok, let's go. Time is of the essence." Sally says, making shooing motions towards the door. "I'll just put this back." She zips the guitar carefully back into its case.

"Time is of the essence?" Hannah looks over. "Where did you hear that?"

She shrugs. "Mum says it all the time." She lays it on the bed.

"Since you'll be jetting off to paradise tomorrow, we should make the most of your last day." Hope says, sauntering out to the stairs. "Which

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counts me out cos I have to get home. We're going to my nans for lunch and she lives miles away. Walk through the park with me?"

"Alright."

"Yeah, cool."

"*Cold* you mean." Hope says, ever the comedian.

They noisily descend the stairs and shrug into their coats by the front door.

"Morning girls. What's going on?" Richard calls suspiciously, appearing in the doorway to the study. "You sound like a herd of elephants coming down those stairs." His tone is amused as he drinks from the mug he holds.

"Sorry, Dad."

"Hello, Mr. Vincent-Payne," her friends respectfully chorus.

"We're walking Hope through the park. I'll be back soon," she says heading out.

Pushing her friends out of the open front door ahead of her, the three hurry out into the cool day, pulling on gloves and woolly hats.

*

On the way back from walking Hope home, strong gusts of wind send dry leaves swirling and dancing across their path as they stroll through the estate. Sally, at last tells Hannah some of the details of her dream within the dream, and of her wish to work together to create the most awesome paintings in the history of the most awesome paintings, ever.

"When I get back from Saint Lucia, we'll decide how we're gonna do this."

"Do what, Sal? You haven't told me anything yet." Hannah scoffs as she kicks up leaves in a little dance.

"I need you in on this because I can't do it without you." She catches her arm and speaks in a tone so serious that Hannah's smile fades, and her eyes widen expectantly as she turns to stare at her. "Smudge, as of today we're on a mission. Possibly the most important mission of our lives." She says gravely.

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"An overly dramatic, totally intriguing way to get me interested, Sal. I'm hooked already." She shivers a little and her shoulders tense against the cold. "Let's get back to yours so you can fill me in properly."

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A dedicated duo.

Back at the house, she resumes...

"We're gonna create an exhibition." Sally announces, once they are comfortably seated on the bed. "Obviously, I'm not an artist, which is where you come in."

"What kind of exhibition?" Hannah adjusts her glasses, then folds her hands in her lap.

"If I describe the visions..." She sees Hannah's cocked eyebrow. "They're scenes really, or landscapes, or maybe dreamscapes? If I describe them well enough, you can paint them onto huge canvases. I know you can do it."

"Probably, but why's it so important? Will they be interesting to other people or just us?" She asks, adjusting her glasses again.

"Of interest to everyone," Sally offers a half-shrug. "I can't explain it. It will all make sense once we finish the first painting."

"Hm..." Hannah rubs a finger across her bottom lip as she considers.

"After that, you can decide if you're with me all the way or..."

"All the way where?"

"To the end of... well, there are twelve paintings altogether. They will test your skills as an artist, but I've seen what you can do, Smudge. Only you can do this with me." She pauses thoughtfully. "It feels like a sign or something."

"A sign about what?"

"About... a powerful movement for women, a matriarchy and... some other stuff I should look up." She trails off, eyes squinting thoughtfully, then shrugs. Her inability to explain her meaning maddening. "Something so good it will somehow help to heal the world... or something," she finishes vaguely.

"The... Matriarchy? It sounds... uh... cool." She hedges. "But, what is it? You must have some idea."

"I have no idea," she chuckles, nudging Hannah's shoulder with hers. "I think it's about you know, girl power. I'll ask my mum..."

"And I'll ask mine..."

Having made the decision to work in partnership with Hannah, Sally is further uplifted by the thought of future possibilities. With the proper support and direction, she can spend the next few years learning how to organise and manage an exhibition. She can hone and use her unique talents productively. Then, by the time she is sixteen she will know how to take advantage of her assets.

"Sounds challenging and beyond radical. I'm in." Hannah says. "I've been after a special project to focus my art on for the club. Something themed and long-lasting. This could be it, Bubbs."

"Really? You're not just saying that?"

"No." She gave her a nudge with her elbow. "Why would I?"

"Well, it is a bit of a strange request, and a big commitment."

"I'm glad you've finally found your passion, Sal. I wanna be involved." She presses their linked arms tighter. "You'll have to practice your descriptive abilities, though. I mean, obviously, you're quite good already, or I couldn't have drawn what you dreamed. When you're in Saint Lucia, practice describing the scenes when we WhatsApp, so I can

imagine it and draw it."

"That's a great idea. Let me try something now to see what you make of my descriptive abilities."

"Alright. Go on..."

"Alright. Um." Her eyes slightly narrow. "Imagine a place where it's always warm, day and night, I mean. A place where the sun shines, even when it rains..."

Hannah rolls her eyes. "I know all that."

"The island is a lush, green paradise, abundantly blessed with healthy flora and fauna covering the hills, valleys, and fields. Trees and flowers with sweet smells are everywhere, their aromas rich and robust, it's a sensory experience non-existent in England, unless you're actually in a park or something."

"Hm, I can almost imagine it." Hannah says, a speculative look in her eyes. "But I'd need more detail, less general info, know what I mean?"

Sally nods. "Driving on the winding, hairpin turn roads, you get great views of the sea and all the pretty, brightly painted homes built higgledy-piggledy in each little town and village. If we're lucky, one of Andrew's uncles take us on a speedboat ride from one bay to the next in Soufriere. Not in any old speed boat because he works for the water police—no, not the water police," she corrects, "the marine police or something like that."

"I've heard most of this before, it always sounds amazing." Hannah says wistfully. Sally hears the enthusiasm in her tone and is glad she feels inspired. When her friend leaves an hour later, she is as excited as Sally, and eager to start their mission.

*

That night as she lay in bed, Sally thought about the other, totally awesome place she dream-visited when she was at her lowest point in the game. Before the dream, she thought there was nowhere else in the world she could love more than Saint Lucia, but a brief taste of the Realm of the Empress showed her she was wrong.

So magic and magical places do exist.

Turning over, she shakes her head at her own stupidity in challenging the truth of what was staring her in the face as blatantly obvious. Magic... is... *real*. But maybe only a chosen few were granted the ability to sense, see and experience it.

Since she found the book in the charity shop, the idea of magic being present in the world became a bit of a fixation. Having subtly revealed the magical realms existence to her, she can't forget it or the sense of peace, harmony, and joy she felt whilst there. Her heart seemed to expand in her chest when it was instantly flooded with love from all the life around her. The realm was a place of magical and spiritual unity, beauty, and love, but unfortunately not a place she could physically travel to, except in her imagination. Turning back the other way, she smiles knowing that with Hannah's help, she will bring the energetic aspects of this special place to the human physical realm for all people to enjoy.

Right before sleep takes her into the depths of her dreams, it occurs to her suddenly that this is it. This exhibition idea is the passion she has been searching for. An ambitious plan she can work towards that will influence others positively. An accomplishment she can be proud of that swelled her heart with excitement, and a tiny bit of fear.

Fear?

Yes. Fear. Because this is a seriously complicated, monumental challenge, and the first of its kind in her young life. She wonders if Hope and Hannah feel inspired in the same way as she does about their creative, and sporting endeavours.

Due to its nature, the scope of work involved and the long-term possibilities, this could be the most important thing she does in her life. Something to be developed and honed over time.

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Since playing the deadly game of snakes and ladders, a subtle shift has occurred inside of her, and a new force of energy fuels her desires. She is suddenly looking at life, and herself, with new eyes. Almost as if she were seeing things through a lens that exposes life's hidden aspects.

Fortunately, she is good with complicated challenges, she proved that in the game. Now, she can prove it in real life.

*

Meanwhile, in the magical Realm of the Empress...

In the cavernous cradle, the Timekeeper and the Alchemist are discussing the ongoing journey of the girls. The ever-present sound of rushing water fills the air, offering a calming backdrop to their conversation. (T01)

*

In the Human Physical Realm...

Lavender Valley, Saint Lucia. March 7th 2020.

It is mid-morning. Sally and JJ's guests are lounging around the pool drinking fruit smoothies, or coconut water directly from the coconut. Having discussed the exhibition and her dream of the strange realm with Luke Phelps, lead singer of Deep Silver Lining, and his wife, Sallie, she is surprised by their response.

"It sounds like a beautiful place," Sallie says wistfully, swirling her glass around, and then tipping her glass back to drain the thick smoothie down. "It reminds me of a place I dreamed of once... years ago."

"We'd be happy to offer some guidance, Richard." Luke says, gesturing with the large green coconut he holds in his hands. "They'll need a lot of help and support while they are studying and doing this as well."

As a child genius himself, Luke formed Deep Silver Lining with his schoolmates when they were in their early teens. He understands the long-term commitment, passion, and determination involved to achieve such extraordinary goals, and having seen a hint of the same passion he possessed in Sally, and since she and Hannah were children of his friends from way back when, it was good to see the next generation were passionate about bringing unique art to the world.

"Yeah, we know. But where do we start?" He asks.

"Start with Sally. Listen to what she wants then you can do for her what my parents did for me." Luke suggests. "Once we've seen the first painting and understand the talent we're dealing with, we can talk about it all in more detail on a professional level."

"Thanks Luke. That's a great idea." He calls out to Simone, who is swimming a dizzying number of lengths in the pool. She halts and swims over to lean her elbows on the pool's edge.

"Sounds like a plan..." She says breathlessly, after he explained. "They'll be in good hands."

"Exactly. DSL can sponsor them under a contract, as well. Providing the paintings are good, and the artist is as keen as you are Sally..."

"She is. It's a shame I'm stuck here when I want to get started." She says, a tad regretfully. Then checks herself.

Don't be foolish. Why would she rush to get back to freezing cold England when she can stay where it is warm and sunny?

"Best to see this as an opportunity to plan what you'll need to do when you get back. Use this time constructively." Luke wisely advises.

"Hannah is one hundred per cent in. She's the most gifted artist I've ever known, not that I know many," she chuckles, slurping the coconut water noisily directly from the nut, and smacking her lips.

Andrew's dad, Tyrone, strolls over carrying a large machete. He takes Luke and Sally's coconuts, moves off a few feet, chops a sliver off the side of each and then splits them in two. He hands them back, and Sally and Luke use the slivers to scrape the soft, sweet jelly out the middle.

"Alright, first things first. Where can she paint if not at home?"

"They can use our house." Sallie suggests. "I mean, if we're spending

more time here, they can set up and work there on weekends. The housekeeper, or their parents can keep an eye on them."

Sally's eyes light up, her mind buzzing. She'd been to their house twice before. They had a swimming pool, a sauna, a gym, and *everything*.

Hope and I can swim and work out while Hannah paints, she thinks excitedly.

"We can easily arrange for them to be picked up and brought to the house, and you'd be welcome too, although, as I said, the housekeeper will be there."

"That's so generous of you." Simone says from the steps half submerged in the water.

"Being passionate and totally focussed on achieving something so close to your heart when you're this young, is admirable and must be encouraged." Luke says.

While the adults discuss the possibilities and arrangements to support Sally in her new venture, she goes searching for Andrew and finds him in the kitchen gulping soursop Turbo from a large water bottle. His goggles are strapped crookedly on his head, and his face is wet with perspiration from playing with the dogs.

Before she left a few weeks back, he'd pulled her into a doorway, hugged her skinny frame tight for longer than usual, then pulled back, kissed her cheek and in an uncharacteristically shy stammer, asked if she would be his girlfriend.

"We're as close as my mum and dad were..." He enthuses in hushed tones. "We'll only see each other in the summer, and I'll try not to get jealous if I see you with other boys."

"Oh, don't worry. You won't." She adamantly stresses. "I don't like any boys. They're all stupid, idiotic, and irritating, apart from Hannah's brothers." She chuckles. "None are as interesting as you, Drew. You're my best friend. You know?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but for me it's... more than that." He says, watching her anxiously as if willing her to understand his meaning by the look in his eyes alone. "I mean, if you like, we can make a promise to... well, to... to... um... to be..."

Saving him from his cringeworthy embarrassment and uncertainty, she touches his arm gently and with a shy smile of her own, says softly,

"I'd like that. But I'll have to think about it." She says, not wishing to sound too eager, but not wanting him to feel rejected either. She impulsively gives him a reassuring kiss on the cheek. "Yuk, you're all sweaty..." she pulls a face.

Andrew grins and brushes a palm over her face.

"Get off..." she cries, drawing back as she slaps his hand away. "Your hands are sweaty too."

*

Since playing the deadly game of snakes and ladders, not only does Sally feel a rising confidence and maturity within her, but the way she thinks about Andrew has subtly changed too.

At almost fifteen years of age, Andrew is the spitting image of his dad at the same age, and already taller than average. His interest in building things from wood has grown since he was given his first set of handmade, toy carpentry tools as a toddler. While he is still too young to use some of the equipment, sharper tools, and machinery, he is learning about the different types of wood, how to carve, cutting directions, and joinery. When he is not in school, he goes to meetings with potential clients and suppliers with his dad so he can learn the business from the ground up.

Andrew is also his mother's son, however, and this is shown in the way he enjoys gentler pursuits like yoga, swimming and walking, respects nature, and best of all, has a soft, sentimental heart with a special place in it full of love for Sally. He feels deep down in his bones she is his one true love, and is sure about his feelings, just as his dad had been about his mum.

His surprised, beaming grin says it all as his skinny chest puffs out and his back straightens. Then, he nods coolly, as if he wasn't at all worried, saying,

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"Ire, sister. Ire." Then, pulling his goggles down over his eyes he shouts, "Last one into the pool is a green coconut!" And races back outside with Sally chasing after him.

*

A note from the Timekeeper...

Over the next four years, Sally and Hannah will complete the first painting titled *The Question*, and then obtain full backing from the Deep Silver Lining Management Company to complete all twelve paintings. The rest will be titled *The Answer*, *The Truth*, *The Rise of the Feminine*, *the Third Way*, *The Matriarchy*, *Illumination*, *Bliss*, *Unity*, *Completion* and, *The Empress*.

Newly infused, potent spiritual energy—a mix of Empress Salliniquai's essence and the natural abundance provided by Mother Earth, will guide and support Sally from now on. As she matures, she will evolve a great sense of protection towards all living creatures, and her curiosity and consideration for all people shall be important desires throughout her life. She will eventually become a true humanitarian, and one of the Rowanshire nine.

STELLA FLETON

PART TWO

SALLINIQUAI plays
The GAME of LIFE.

26

Salliniquai.

In the magical Realm of the Empress...

The Timekeeper, their old, wise eyes glowing a silvery hue, watches the scene intently, absorbed in the task at hand. As they twist and turn their time translation rings with an impossible dexterity, they review *The Trial of Salliniquai*.

Over the span of one weekend, while infused with Salliniquai's Empresserial energy, Sally Vincent-Payne was drawn into a trial of her own where her faith in herself, her instincts, and her determination were all thoroughly tested. By standing strong and remembering her reasons for wanting to win the game, she successfully returns to the real world, Salliniquai returns to her own realm, and both trials are a complete success... according to Salliniquai, that is. But how did she fare in the eyes of the Awakener...?

In the Elevated One's amethyst geode...

On her arrival back into the realm, the Awakener at once puts her into stasis as the flower petals unfold around her. Her body gently lifts to hover horizontally above the circle of travelling earth, before being carried to an area off to one side.

Partially conscious of her surroundings, the gentle chime of her Empresserial energy mixes with the sound of the never-ending wind—even in stasis. Salliniquai is aware she made it to the earth and back, in the same sun turn, and that the Elevated One is still busy working on attunements in the unseen.

Smugly congratulating herself, she dares to consider making her second jump at once, and once the jewelled symbol of Venus reappears upon her forehead, she can converse with the Awakener telepathically.

"So, as you saw, I am more than capable of channelling my energy appropriately." Behind her closed lids, her green eyes sparkle with life and excitement as she adds a little crossly. "It was not quite what I expected." She sends her impression of a sour look out to them. "Was it meant to teach me a lesson, trapping me in those childish circumstances?"

"The Empress never fails to see the truth." The Awakener offers in an amused, complimentary tone. "You have proved yourself worthy of a full life in the earthly realm, Empress."

Salliniquai's senses reach out, scanning for any sign of the Elevated One. "Time is of the essence, and I'm ready to go back now. The time has come to experience a full human life as a woman."

The Awakener's gasp is not in the least bit subtle. "But... Empress," they splutter. "We do not have the capacity to ensure the..."

"What aspect of your capacity is missing?" She interrupts rudely.

Had she been awake, the Awakener imagined they would see a deep sigh of impatient protest, with pursed lips, hands set firmly on her hips, and a stern glare directed at them because unfortunately, she has the somewhat spoilt, haughty, self-important attitude of a potential ruler

slash sixteen-year-old earth girl, and could do with a firmer lesson on manners and courtesies, shall we say.

Stalling, the Awakener replies. "You have much to learn before the Offering, Empress. Time is of the essence, and the difficulty is we cannot call forth the Jump to..."

She interrupts, insisting, "I don't need the jump. I can be flower-petalled again. My lifeline will be connected to you as it was during this trial, will it not? And my time in the human physical realm will most likely be as short as that trip was, regardless of how long my life is on the earth."

And she will stay connected to the realm as long as a petal remains beyond the flower boundary... she secretly adds.

While her argumentative words distract the Awakener, she secretly speaks the words of a spell that will detach one of the large petals without the Awakener noticing, and then lays it down outside the circle of brown earth. At her unspoken command, the petal disintegrates but leaves a reflection of itself in the seen to fool the Awakener.

"I shall return in no time at all." She confidently affirms.

The Awakener reluctantly agrees. "As you say, Empress."

"Yes. As *I say*," she throws back, her tone decidedly snippy.

The Awakener makes no move or action to progress her request, but states hesitantly, "There is a further difficulty..."

Even telepathically, Salliniquai cannot hide her irritation. "Which is?"

"Why, the Malsimily elements required to support you on the earth, Empress. Some of these hold the key to keeping the four aspects of your glorious soul together, as well as retaining the unification of the Trilogy. For should they..."

"That is why *you* are here, to ensure nothing bad happens."

"We shall do our best, Empress." They concede, glad she can't see the uncomfortable look of doubt in their eyes.

Then, reciting a series of magical incantations, the Awakener spells the studded, jewelled symbol of the feminine, rendering it invisible, and then removes the stasis spell around Salliniquai's body and floats her back inside the open flower where the stasis partially breaks.

Overly pleased with herself, Salliniquai assumes she's gotten her own way. Knowing they are only looking out for her as is their duty, she reins in her arrogance as she arranges herself within the flower, and then speaks.

"You must not fear for me, Awakener." She says softly. "I shall be back before you know it, before the Elevated One knows it, and well before too many turns of the sun have passed. I have no intention of jeopardising my charge."

She's only saying this to appease us, the Awakener knows, troubled by the mischievous tone in her voice.

"As you say, Empress."

"Yes, as I say. Now, open it again and do not fret so. *Yes*, the Elevated One might be expressly... um... astonished by my absence, but they will be good with it in the end." She makes an off-hand, dismissive gesture.

Inwardly wincing, the Awakener mutters, "Astonished is not quite the word we would use to describe the possible wrath of the Elevated One," while pressing a hand to their precious Venus amulet hanging from the choker around their neck.

The Empress ignores the comment, as she is secretly casting spells upon the separated petal outside the circle of earth. Inside the flower bud, she sinks deeper into its soft, fluffy centre as the large purple petals finally start to close around her and travel is initialised.

The never-ending wind dies down to a whisper as she murmurs the mantra in Malsimily, which, along with the Awakener's ministrations, will draw her back to the earth. Her second journey begins as the flower portal opens beneath her, and giving in to the sensation of weightlessness, she drops down through the orangy-brown stem.

At last! She giddily thinks. *She is on her way and nothing can change the path she is now on.*

She frowns suddenly as an unfamiliar, decidedly off, stinging sensation like her energy is being stretched too far... almost to the point of... *Oh, my Goddess! Something is... wrong. This is not how it felt when she...*

Abruptly, her Empresserial energies start to freeze, a pale-yellow glow

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starts to roll down her body from her head to her toes, and she panics somehow knowing the human life she so wished to experience, is in jeopardy, and may become more complex than she ever imagined. Whatever is happening, she somehow *knows* it means trouble.

Before she loses all control of her power, she activates the censoring charm she prepared, then links it to the Awakener. This way, the Elevated One will know she made them initiate her jump. The magic might affect them unusually somehow, but it was her earthly life they were talking about here, and she will do almost anything for the chance to live it, no matter the earth-bound consequences.

27

Chaos.

While the unscheduled, unauthorised jump through the purple flower portal was pre-emptively initiated by the Awakener, it is fortunate that the Elevated One shimmered into the seen moments later and with one sweeping glance, ascertained at once that something was wrong. *Very* wrong. They step out of their orb and hurry over to stand beside the Awakener.

"Vek Paidus Kay Conarium-Ella." (*What is going on here?*) They ask at once, as their orb retracts back into the unseen. "Dimsulu, Empress Salliniquai?" (*What has happened to Empress Salliniquai?*)

"We initialised the second jump, Elevated One, and have ensured when she incarnates again, it shall be in a mature woman," the Awakener answers, chuckling softly. "She wanted to return to the human physical realm right away, and we could not refuse her."

Wordlessly, the Elevated One shoots them a reproachful look, then takes control of the situation beginning with halting Salliniquai's progress through the portal. Standing with their back turned towards

the geode's huge, open side, they conjure into being a sturdy altar of dark, knobby wood covered with pots, jars, bowls, and other items with magical properties. Gesturing and weaving their hands deliberately, the Elevated One turns to their androgynous companion.

"Is that so? Right, well. Fortunately, we arrived in time to temporarily halt her progression through the flower portal," they announce evenly, avoiding eye contact with the Awakener. It grated that they hadn't been present to prepare the Empress when this is their allocated training time with her. It is lucky they sensed the change in the energy inside the geode, and dropped everything to go and see what was going on.

Now, to make doubly sure her trip is safe and successful, they must make appropriate changes with the support of the Timekeeper, so Salliniquai is safeguarded to the highest degree.

"We must move quickly to align the time element." Their purposeful gestures are swift, and they speak sharply as they bring another altar, made purely of white, smoky light, into the seen. "Timekeeper, attend me," they softly murmur.

Instantly, the Timekeeper's tall, scholarly figure shimmers into view and hovers close to the Elevated One. Raising their heavily ringed hands, they push back the hood of their robe, revealing old, wise eyes and narrow, expressionless features. They speak in their usual hushed monotone as one eye glows silver, and one hand continually works the set of time translation rings on each finger, sending flashes of bright sparks twisting and twirling around their hands. They bow in greeting.

"We are here, O Elevated One. Please know that at the request of the Alchemist, we reviewed her trial upon the earth and looked into the future of the young human host who possesses the Matriarchal Hereditary Kee. The timeline is currently right for the Empress to begin working through all four of her lessons, beginning with the lesson on trauma."

The Elevated One acknowledges their appearance with a slight bow.

"Alright. But her travel is already in motion. We must expedite the transitional awakening process, and ensure the nine Malsimily elements are infused..."

The Awakener starts, their mouth falling open as they swallow deeply. "Did you say, *nine* Malsimily elements?"

The Elevated One pauses their hand-weaving actions, and slowly turns their measured gaze to the Awakener.

"Yes. There are nine Malsimily elements that are *vital* to her surviving the human physical realm. Surely, you remembered that? By infusing the energy of these elements into objects and people, they provide her with guidance, protection, and safety. The Timekeeper manages three of those elements through magical time manipulation, while we infuse the other six in varying degrees." They say slowly, eyes narrowing. "Which of these did you infuse?"

The Awakener, though caught off guard, offers a partial, positive response to the question. "Crystals." They chuckle with smug delight. "And we (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*) her Venus symbol." They reply quickly.

The Elevated One's eyes narrow further. "Why are you grinning like that?" They gesture a hand to indicate the predicament they are in. "This is no great achievement on your part and not in the least bit amusing." They say sternly, staring at the Awakener with a look of consternation. "At least you ensured she will retain her natural draw to crystals as a supportive energy. Chakra crystals in particular."

The Awakener clasps their hands together before them, grinning brightly. "Then all is in hand for us to..."

"No, wait a moment!" The Elevated One exclaims suddenly, pausing to assess the charged energy they can sense around the Empress. "O... my... Empress. Her energy is... separating... into *four energy streams*!" They gasp, turning to face the Awakener squarely. Their piercing gaze a hot flame of rising anger. "Awakener, *what have you done?*"

The Awakener shrinks back a step at their heated, accusatory tone, and their gaze lowers unable to meet the Elevated One's disapproving glare.

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Inside the flower, Salliniquai's eyes fly open, and she gasps in surprise. She senses a separation occurring, but can do nothing to stop it.

*

"...Her trinity of life has divided into four." The Elevated One curses, shocking the Awakener. "She is to live through four human incarnations upon the earth, and... yes, one is destined to grow up in the human physical realm but will then be drawn to the Land of Ludonia while the other three remain. Awakener, fetch the remaining knights of the Brotherhood of the Nine, at once! They must follow her into the same spans of linear time. Go, now." Though abruptly spoken, their tone has softened a touch.

The Awakener's golden orb appears, then shimmers away with them inside.

"Timekeeper, attend me." The Timekeeper hovers forward once again. "First, we must disperse the familial bond. Depending on the binding of the Hereditary Kee, this particular bond will create extreme, emotional difficulties. To make up for this, we will create realm bonds to pair the appropriate knight with the right incarnation using a charm spell. Once the locking gaze is initiated, everything they do is (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld*). The human attraction can then evolve naturally after the love at first sight moment.

Secondly, the links to ensure the other elements are appropriately infused will require construction." The Elevated One continues. "Infusing the staff is the only way to ensure all nine elements are present in the human physical realm before they are expelled out of the portal."

The Timekeeper nods agreeably, but does not reveal how the split has fractured not just her energy, but time as well. Fortunately, they created a brand-new county called Rowanshire when the dream knight arrived in the human physical realm many years ago. As such, they can easily anchor all eight energies to his timeline, and give his brothers a specific life span to ensure the Malsimily connections can (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld.*)

A small, emerald green orb the size of a grapefruit appears before them, hovering above the Elevated One's open palm. They speak strange words as the Timekeeper grips the staff with one hand while working their time translation magic with the other. Closing their eyes briefly, the Elevated One weaves and gestures eloquently, making light patterns in the air with the orb. Then, they softly sing the spell's words.

"Empress Salliniquai, now upon the earth, live a human life from six, not birth.

They set the orb to rest upon the crown-shaped head of the staff.

No child shall you bear of your own; with parents gone, you will be alone.

The orb melts, and begins to infuse its glow into the staff.

No host will know their family's past; a search for parents is a hope not cast.

Sinuously, in glowing, swirling patterns, the magic weaves its way down the shaft.

When the time arises, you shall awaken, and the good knights' triggers shall make the way open.

The staff begins to cool, and the intricate patterns burned into the staff are permanently set.

Sent in your wake so all will understand, your true destinies are within this land."

When they release the staff, it stays upright and fixed in place as they expect. The Elevated One's measured sigh is relieved.

"There. It is done. Now, the lesser Kees are directly related to her four

lessons, which we have linked to her energy while she is paused in the portal. A tendril of this energy will steady and ground the portals back to the Realm of the Empress. For our efforts to succeed we must work within the same leap year used in her trial. The year 2020. Isn't the time factor more easily manipulated in a leap year?"

"That is so," confirms the Timekeeper, ignoring the bright star of iridescent blue light that bursts out of one of their rings to disperse into the air in tiny, star-shaped flakes.

"Exceptional. We shall come to that in a moment."

The Elevated One pauses suddenly, sensing a tiny disturbance in a segment of their timeline. Recognising the time signature of the Timekeeper, they have no desire to pursue the disruption. If the Timekeeper saw fit to intervene in the past, this is reassuring to them.

Within a few minutes, the Awakener returns and approaches the Elevated One.

"We have the knights, O Elevated One." They say, offering the box containing the seeds of the four remaining knights of the Brotherhood of the Nine.

Inside the box, nine circular depressions in three rows of three can be seen, five of which are empty. Objects resembling large mango fruit seeds, sit within the remaining four holes. Each have a single, thick lock of hair growing out from the centre of the seed. One is a spray of dark, rowan red, the second, a deep honey colour. The third is blonde, and the last is black.

The Timekeeper turns to address the Elevated One.

"Her trial was completed successfully. There were nine principles the Empress had to experience while she was in the hidden realm of magic, and the human physical realm. (*High Malsimily. Translation in progress...*) initiated a genetically established infusion of all nine."

"Yes. We sensed this through the Hereditary Kee." The Awakener agrees. Raising a hand to their Venus talisman, they gently stroke it.

"Exactly. Sally is fully linked in spirit to Salliniquai."

The Elevated One shoots a sideways look at the Awakener. "According to the Awakener, that is so. Why you thought risking the

Empress was a..."

"O Elevated One," they hastily interrupt. "We never assumed for a moment we were capable of..." The Awakener's sudden, uncharacteristic chortle interrupts their defensive explanation. Gesturing expansively, the sleeves of their robe slip back, uncovering their arms which have intricately detailed, swirling flowers blossoms tattooed in browns and greens from the wrists upwards that disappear into their sleeves. They give a rueful grin. "Of successfully completing all aspects of this vitally important task, but all was in alignment. We could not delay once she..."

"Once she put a spell on you to believe it was so, as well as..." The Elevated One emphasises with grudging admiration.

Astonished, the Awakener's mouth drops open. "She... put a spell on us? Why, the little..." They giggle at their own gullibility. But to the Elevated One, they are acting ridiculous and their amusement is highly inappropriate. "It was our understanding that making the transition at this time was absolutely necessary."

"That is true for a re-energising, meditative sleep, yes, but not as a way to avoid my ministrations," comes the Elevated One's reply, a noticeable frost in their tone.

The Awakener gurgles out a laugh, their shoulders shaking as the jolly sound echoes around the geode.

"The requirement for four incarnations instead of one is... isn't it... um...?"

"Dangerous, dreadfully complex and fragile while it is separated like this? Yes, it is." Once again, the Elevated One glares at them disapprovingly, lips pressed tight together as they visibly force themselves not to take their frustration out on them. "Having had no influence over her actions during the transition..." the Elevated One says pointedly, ice in their tone as they direct another displeased look at the Awakener. "The four incarnations have arisen because the energy of the Empress is far too potent to be hosted by one single human without (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld.*) Hereditary Kee, which *was* during her trial, correct?"

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"That is correct, O Elevated One. As the first human to host her energy in its true, complete form, their glorious spiritual connection shall be as permanent and binding as it is hereditary." The Awakener practically sings.

Barely managing to ignore the Awakener's hearty manner, the Elevated One draws out a puff of black smoke from a coil-shaped yellow bar, which then expands to form a misshapen shadow with tiny, forked lightning strikes flashing within.

"It is as we thought. One lesser Kee *must* be bound to each incarnation." They explain. "When the Sallee incarnation and the knight come of age in the human physical realm, they shall transfer into the subconscious Realm of Ludonia."

"A truly amazing, fascinating realm that is as magically blessed and spectacular as the realm of the Empress," The Awakener enthuses.

The Timekeeper, and the Elevated One exchange a resigned look as they slowly shake their heads at the Awakener. A serious expression returns to the Timekeeper's face.

"The social situations and life experiences of her four incarnations shall be extremely diverse, will they not?" They say, even though they know the answer.

"It is as you say, Timekeeper." Replies the Elevated One.

"What of her protection against the emperor's books of stone?"

"The nine books of stone, yes. Her Empresserial energy will guide each incarnation to a book, and only the dream knight can protect them from being tainted by the dark energy." The Timekeeper nods agreeably. "In terms of her general welfare during her lives, with a knight of the Brotherhood of the Nine being duly charged and charmed, they shall carry out their duty as her rescuer and protector with high honour, and unwavering valour."

"Except for in the life where more of my ministrations were necessary." The Timekeeper adds cryptically, turning away slightly. "Notwithstanding the usual translations, we interfere only twice for the Sallee incarnation in Ludonia. But as the thought dispersal spell does not work on the Green Oracle, a more direct approach will be necessary

at the appropriate time. We can easily interrupt the time stream there, however, so have no fear. It will be sorted, trust me."

The Elevated One gives them a long, considering look at the strange reference. *Sorted?* "What about in the other three incarnated lives?"

"We intercede in events around nine times for the Sallyanne incarnation. The others required no interference of major significance."

When it became clear the Timekeeper had nothing further to add, the Awakener spoke, their smile overly bright and wide, their words jovial.

"Ah ha! Then we have prepared well, and everything has..."

"This is no laughing matter, Awakener," snaps the Elevated One. "These unexpected lives you have unwittingly brought upon us shall not be lived without difficulty. While Salliniquai merely embraces the human experience through hosts, her incarnations must suffer through risky, dangerous situations, and interact with unprincipled people to ensure her four lessons are learned fully."

"We dare say you understand the thoughts and passions of humanity well, O Elevated One. We see now why the love that will evolve between each Empress and knight can only be of a spiritual, twin flame quality with unbreakable bonds," observes the Timekeeper in an uncharacteristically delighted tone.

"That is so. It is the reason we made the charm so especially potent. As one of the nine Malsimily elements, they shall immediately respond to it, consciously or not."

"On the spiritual level first?"

The Elevated One nods. "This element shall ensure immediate recognition between the two on the spiritual level. They will naturally bond in ways not immediately apparent at their first meeting, and the knights shall be inexorably drawn to their Salliniquai incarnations because of the kurren-see within them, which is made of Malsimily energy." A sprinkle of multi-coloured, star-shaped flashes explode around them, glitter brightly for a second or two, then wink out one-by-one. "There is a strong possibility of blended language when they express their thoughts, feelings, and love, and a natural sense of reverence for one another will grow the more time they spend together."

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"Precisely." Chuckles the Awakener. "For what is the human experience if all aspects of life are not a part of it? Especially love. And now the Empress gets *four* chances to experience it..."

Like that is a good thing... the Elevated One's lips tighten in annoyance.

"It is unfortunate how the familial bond of parent and child must be broken." They say, their voice lowering to a murmur as their eyes shift downwards, and their expression becomes sad.

"Yes, yes, that is unfortunate and indeed a sad situation, but there was no choice." The Elevated One gestures impatiently whilst glancing over at the Awakener, a sharp look in their eyes. "Any desire to search for earthly parents or investigate the lineage or roots of her family had to be quelled. Going down that road would only lead to confusion, disappointment, and possibly more complications. She will instinctively sense she is right to leave this part of her life alone, letting it remain a mystery."

"The knight's love will pierce her heart, bringing them together when she is feeling most alone and vulnerable," the Awakener offers with a smile so impossibly wide the Timekeeper frowns, thinking their face might split.

Ignoring their *smiley-happy-people* face, the Elevated One says. "It pleases us, too. They shall (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*) especially when they meet." A short discussion ensues while the Elevated One continues their preparations.

*

"Now we only need to ensure all eight energies are protected from the great suffering, the worst threat of all, O Elevated One." The Timekeeper murmurs meaningfully, a few minutes later. "As well as avoiding being tainted with the subsequent man-made vaccines."

"That consideration is in the hands of two of our charges, Timekeeper, providing all eight energies make it through. Then Salliniquai will have the stone harvest to stay on her return, and only

four sun turns to get to the Distance for the Offering."

Hovering back slightly, the Timekeeper shakes their head with a sad regret.

"Hm, we do wish we could offer assurances but as you know, we are prevented from doing so. Having the knowledge of these things and being unable to speak of them is a pain in the backside, actually."

The Elevated One is busy weaving and gesticulating as they organise unique spells for the four knights, and they only frown slightly at the Timekeeper's unusually direct articulation in the earthly language. They were usually enigmatic or quite bland in their responses, and the Elevated One questions this new-found form of expression.

"We are curious as to why you speak so strangely, Timekeeper. You are using unfamiliar language not of the eloquence of the realm. For example, you said earlier *kicks off*, *mad coincidence*, and just now, *pain in the backside*? Your linguistic ability is becoming..."

To the surprise of the Elevated One and the Awakener, the Timekeeper, for perhaps one of the first times ever, grins broadly and *almost* chuckles at the references.

"We are simply preparing for the return of the Empress. She will have changed much during her years trapped in the human physical realm, and will be well-versed in the earthly language. We are merely..." They pause, quite dramatically, the Awakener thinks. "Familiarising ourselves with the earthly references and slang. Since the human element is a part of her or perhaps more accurately, since love has been established through her lives as human women, the Empress will be a tad more... chilled out."

The Awakener looks at the Timekeeper curiously again, not sure of their meaning. They are desperate to ask but are unwilling to risk further reproach from the Elevated One. The Timekeeper saves them the trouble by explaining.

"We mean, she will be more relaxed, Awakener."

"Timekeeper. Would you advise creating a fictional place where the incarnations and the knights can all gravitate towards? It would absolutely ensure a grounded, energetic link."

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The Timekeeper's features settle into their usual expression of calm objectivity once more as they state evenly, "It is already done, O Elevated One."

"Oh?" The steady eyes of the Elevated One holds the Timekeeper's grey-green ones for a moment.

"It was for young Sally initially, for Salliniquai's trial." They explain. "We created a new place because the element of free will in the actions and behaviours of everyone who may become involved in her stories would quickly spiral out of control if some sort of magical containment were not established."

The Elevated One nods, then says sagely, "Can we look into her lives without displacing the timeline?"

"This is possible, yes. Looking into her future years on earth is permitted."

They each lay a hand upon the Elevated One's staff, and then spend a moment gazing intensely at the staff just below the symbol of Venus. In their minds, they receive momentary glimpses of what will come to pass.

"The place we created to keep the knights and the incarnations safe is called *Rowanshire*." The Timekeeper says with an unusual hint of pride in their voice. They release the staff and hover back a little.

"Exceptional. Then, if all goes well, the energies of her incarnations and the knights of the Brotherhood of the Nine shall return to the Realm of the Empress at the appointed time." The Awakener concludes with a happy sigh.

"Exactly." The Timekeeper's tone becomes a little mysterious. "Observing how she navigated the human physical realm as the incarnations was incredibly interesting. Their lives were all quite remarkable, beyond fascinating, and truly revealing of human nature."

The Awakener glances enviously at the Timekeeper, noticing the uncharacteristic, faraway gleam in their eyes.

The Elevated One's gaze turns momentarily wistful. "At times, we wish we were party to all that you see, Timekeeper. How are the translations going?"

"They go well. We will not translate the sacred knowledge of the

Knowing until the appropriate time."

"Good. Now we must move quickly to align the time element exactly in all four of her lives." The Elevated One's purposeful gestures are swift as they bring another altar into the seen, and murmur a litany of unusual sounds and words over its shining, silver surface. "Her incarnations must settle the lessons within their energetic forms, and she may require a rest period at the closure of her experiences until the appointed jump time approaches. We need your manipulations to ensure this, Timekeeper. Attend me."

Hovering beside them, the Timekeeper assists by grasping the Elevated One's staff to reinforce the spell's power, while their other hand worked their time translation rings. They slowly back away as the Elevated One turns to the Awakener.

"When you transitioned her to the portal, did she cast a spell to ensure the stone harvest remained dormant in her absence?"

"Spell?"

"Yes, spell. Do not tell me that you...?" The Elevated One stopped talking; a distant look of deep assessment appearing in their eyes. A sweet, fruity scent permeates the air from their ministrations.

Believing the Elevated One to be considering a spell, the Awakener waits patiently for a response. When they say nothing, they ask,

"In her divided state, will she retain the memories of all of the incarnations?" The question momentarily distracts the Elevated One from their focus beyond the boundary of the geodes. But still, they do not speak.

Seeing they are preoccupied; the Timekeeper responds on their behalf.

"That cannot be known until her return, Awakener. What we do know, is that her spiritual strength will be tested through the experience of family dysfunction, societal discrimination, and internal and external conflicts to gain a true understanding of the state of the human physical realm."

Deeply concerned with what they sense is happening at the Sierthern boundary, the Elevated One brushes two fingers slowly across their

brow as they glance somewhat irritably at the Awakener's inappropriate, Cheshire cat grin.

Meanwhile...

Along the realms most Sierthern boundary, beyond the south love fields at the end of the Sier road, a dry well is sited. Minutes after the Empress was flower petalled, her chime faded away and a peculiar tremor, purposeful and directed, rumbled beneath the well. The single drop of crystal-clear stone water held within, turned grey.

A hairline fracture mars the surface of a tiny, stone-encrusted orb nestled in a ring of stone beneath the droplet. As the fracture widens, the droplet falls upon it, sizzling and hissing as tendrils of misty grey smoke seeps out. A more substantial, living grey substance oozes from the crack, and the outer shell shatters, unleashing a torrent of bubbling, frothing, molten rock that rapidly expands. The dark, sticky mass overflows the wells edge, engulfing everything in its path with sludge-like, grey matter. The substance, known as the stone harvest, is a lethal threat to all life.

As the stone harvest awakens, its intelligence shifts and its texture morphs into other forms depending on the surface it covers. Once it has a taste of the realm, it thickens and transforms into a viscous, tar-like liquid, and seeps away in all directions on its mission to cover all the land in the Realm of the Empress.

The paralyzing, unstoppable force, threatens to undo all the Empress's creative works in her realm, and the re-making power it possesses will destroy the realms unique nature that has thrived under her blessings. The only way to save the realm now, lies in the cleansing waters of the Distance, but for this opportunity to arise, the Empress must fulfill her sacrificial duty and ignite the spark that initiates, and then drives the Third Way Movement forward.

28

A magically rectified disaster.

In the amethyst geode...

"The stone harvest is conscious." The Elevated One says gravely into the growing silence. They turn their attention to the Awakener. "While it is too late for recriminations and regrets, we must do all we can to support her since..." They pause. "Since the plan has gone so badly wrong."

"Badly wrong, you say?" The Awakener says, genuinely surprised.

"Yes, wrong." The Elevated One responds brusquely. "We must ensure the remaining Malsimly elements are set in place before her arrival." They glance at the Timekeeper for confirmation.

The Timekeeper gives a serious nod while the Awakener giggles and says,

"Precisely."

The Elevated One is annoyed.

"This is why the rules of inter-realm transportation are monitored so strictly. There are elements to travel which must be adhered to, or...

situations such as this happen. "

"The Empress commanded us to complete the transition," the Awakener defensively offers once more.

"Be that as it may, we alone have the knowledge to be soul-specific with an earth-bound contract. We alone understand the delicacy and the intricacies required to prevent this kind of catastrophe." They say, voice dripping with an icy frustration they cannot entirely rein in. "We alone are skilled in the mastery of this. *You* do not understand the spells required to ensure she fulfils the Trilogy and returns ready for the Offering, or do you?" Their heated gaze is relentless and unforgiving as it bores into the Awakener.

The Awakener falters, affected by their gaze. "Why... no, Elevated One." They stammer, hands reaching for the security of their talisman.

"What action did you take to ensure her relationships were charmed?" They demand, their patience frayed. "What action did you take to ensure she would be awakened at the appointed time, and brought back?"

The Awakener hesitates, hands twisting anxiously. The Elevated One and the Timekeeper watch in silence, waiting for their response.

"Actions?" Their deep voice is showing signs of distress now, though they remain confused by their own incompetence as the Elevated One points out more of their failures. They cannot restrain their inappropriate happy countenance, however, somehow remaining blissfully oblivious to the seriousness of the situation, which only fuels the Elevated One's uncharacteristic anger.

"Yes, actions. Must you throw our questions back at us?" The Elevated One demands, their tone laced with scorn—a stark contrast to their usual means of communication which is firm, but always gentle.

The Awakener flinches at the rebuke, and takes a small step back.

"We were not aware..." they stammer, and their tone becomes remorseful. "We are deeply sorry, Elevated One. Have we truly jeopardised the...?"

The Elevated One interrupts. "If truth be told, (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*)."

The Awakeners' shoulders sag, and the Elevated One's frustration

dissipates when they remember their conduct, which at this time is not in line with the spiritual vibration of the realm. But who can blame them? This is not a problem they were expecting. They take a deep, calming breath to cool their anger.

"It is not entirely your fault, Awakener. One must do as one sees fit at the time, or as one is commanded," they generously allow. "As long as we act swiftly to ensure her safety and prepare for her triggered return, all shall be well." They say convincingly.

Behind the look of reassurance however, deep down in their core apprehension steadily grows. Since the Empress is no longer in the realm, the two sound constants keeping the stone harvest at bay were no longer present. They sense its silent, creepy progression and spreading influence. Shaking themselves out of their dire musings, they redirect their focus.

"Now, back to the locations and jump dates for the two portals. One is in the Land of Ludonia, the other in the human physical realm." They turn to the Awakener. "How much time passed before Salliniquai returned from her trial?"

"Moments, Elevated One. A minute or two, perhaps."

The Timekeeper speaks up. "It was nine minutes exactly. We took charge of this aspect, Elevated One. The time factor is more easily manipulated in a leap year."

"Excellacious. It occurred within the cycle of nine then." They state, their wrinkled brow smoothing out a touch. "The jump date and portal for the six energies in the human physical realm has been solidified."

"What about the jump date and portal in the Land of Ludonia?" The Awakener asks.

"There, too." The Timekeeper confirms. "As time works differently in Ludonia, our input was required on two occasions only. The one we spoke of earlier was a minor adjustment to (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*), and the other..." They hesitate, then clear their throat. "Both were (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*) and the timely interactions were risky."

"Precisely." Chuckles the Awakener, their expression becoming

stricken by their own inappropriate behaviour. Feeling like they have failed everyone in the worst way possible, it is deeply upsetting not being able to correct this themselves. They understand why the Elevated One was so wrath, but are unable to stop the bubbling mirth rising within them.

"Reveal the faces of the incarnations, 'Timekeeper.'" The Elevated One's commanding voice echoes around the geode. "We wish to see into the future of the four women the Empresserial energy naturally selected."

With a twisting flick of three nifty fingers, a small green orb with an opaque surface appears before them. With their combined powers joined through the staff, both sets of eyes take on a silver glaze as they look through time into the four lives of the Empress.

"This is Empress Sallee, for her we set the Hive portal in the Land of Ludonia where the Matriarchy governs life." The orb turns transparent, revealing the heart-shaped face of an Indian girl, then it turns opaque. "The Island portal is set for Empress Sallie, Empress Sallyanne, and Empress Sallori in the human physical realm." The orb again becomes transparent revealing three faces one after the other. The first belongs to a young West Indian woman with fabulous hair tumbling almost to her waist. Her gaze is direct but wary, and her bright smile is infectious. She is a beautiful girl who would stand out in a crowd. The second belongs to a striking young woman with a scarred face, and eyes burning with ferocious defiance. The third is an attractive British woman with sun-kissed skin, rosy cheeks, and a shy, penetrating gaze. All four women have Salliniquai's characteristic sea-green eyes, cute dimples, and her husky laugh.

The orb blinks out, the masters' gazes clear and their eye colour returns to its natural, green hue. The Elevated One is satisfied with the incarnations.

"On which island was the portal placed?" The Awakener asks.

"Following our observations, three areas stood out as being least affected by the great suffering during its first four variants."

"And your recommendation?" The Elevated One prompts.

"May we come to that later? It has a relatively small population of primarily Nubian folk. A strong blend of African, Caribbean, and Indian cultures, with a historical dash of French and British European cultures thrown in. It is a jewel of nature in many respects, and fairly young in its spiritual development. It is also the (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld.*)"

The Elevated One listens carefully, then turns away to speak an incantation in High Malsimily, weaving their hands in a precise way. Two sparks of light appear and hover before them.

"Timekeeper. Which of the earthly solstices is more potent, the winter or summer?"

"The summer solstice is the most potent."

The Elevated One murmurs more words in High Malsimily, makes a sweeping, circular motion with one hand, and a cutting strike action with the other. The air before them shimmers in response.

"The lesser Kees are now infused. On the summer solstice in the leap year 2020, the portal will open from the dark twelfth hour to the light twelfth hour only, on the island chosen. It is a twelve-earth-hour window in which they must all make the jump. Now..." They rub their hands together, considering their next actions before turning once again to the Awakener. "While we send the knights through, you shall go to the Alchemist's cradle." The Elevated One gives instructions, impressing upon them the gravity of the situation.

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A note from the Timekeeper...

Valuable information important to know, has now been translated.

We share this now with a degree of caution while the Elevated One instructs the Awakener.

Since too much knowledge all at once can cause irreparable damage to the human mind, our nature as one of the Malsimily prevents us from risking this harm. We must be discerning in our revelations and as such, only a little about Salliniquai will be revealed here, along with a bit about the masculine.

Historically, the events which led to the appearance of the great suffering were no accident, but a long time in the making. Mother nature has been forced to fight to survive the dire consequences of the Piscean age during which; the masculine element was dominant.

This has proved dis-harmonious in countless ways—an inevitable conclusion brought about after long years of repeated attacks by man, with nature lovers being the only ones with the wit to fear the inevitable

damage, and its disastrous long-term effects.

Clearly, the masculine sought to subdue and destroy the sacred nature of all that is feminine, by striving to lessen her influence in every way. The selfish, self-obsessed steering of humanity towards masculine drives and desires, has been hugely detrimental to the world at large.

One only needs to search through the earth's historical records to see how the masculine has severely damaged, demeaned, dismissed, and nearly destroyed the strengths, natural goodness, and selfless desires of the feminine.

As man thrives in your capitalist society, they take advantage of women, people of colour, the poor, and the most vulnerable from self-serving positions of strength.

In man's defence, and to show we are not simply discriminating against all human males in general, know that those touched by the energy of the nine kings were chosen because they already harboured desires that could be corrupted into deeper, darker intentions.

Remember as well, that trying to resist the emperor's nine kings invading energy is like trying to hold back a tropical storm with an umbrella. The men's minds are merely specks of dust battling against a powerful behemoth blowing them in precise directions.

The returning karma from the Piscean age is steeped in the emperor's dark energy, and the cycle must be broken if humankind is to survive.

As to Empress Salliniquai. Stubbornly wilful, and as impatient as ever to learn her lessons of love, she learned about the earth and its people in lessons with the Timekeeper (*who is not to be blamed for her short-sighted, petulant actions which have landed us all in it*).

After those sneak peeks, she restlessly desired a life as a human woman, and rather than wait for the appointed time our impulsive, unlearned young Empress bit off more than she could chew, got more than she bargained for, and dropped herself right in it when her energy divided causing her to live four separate lives instead. (*As you can see, we are getting the gist of earthly slang terms, and have even used an emoji - 😊*).

THE TRIAL OF SALLINIQUAI

Inside the amethyst geode...

"Working with the energy of the Empress is not merely about saying the words and drawing the symbols, Awakener. One must draw power from the realm and the Empress herself," the Elevated One patiently explains. "Salliniquai knew exactly what she was doing, trusting you to send her through this way." Their eyes narrow slightly. "She could have commanded the Alchemist or the Timekeeper to send her through, but she chose you and this portal while we were busy." The Awakener brightens a shade at the thought of being especially chosen by the Empress. "She also chose this portal because should anything go wrong, everything required to ensure her safe existence there, as well as her timely return, is right here." They pause to give the Awakener a chance to speak, but they say nothing. "We have removed the spell Salliniquai cast upon you, Awakener. Now make haste to the Alchemist."

The Awakener's countenance changes at once. Their posture straightens, and the incorrigible glint of humor has left their eyes. Their deep voice returns to its original dry cadence.

"As you say, Elevated One." At their silent command, the Awakener's orb appears behind them. "For the love of Empress Salliniquai." They say, bowing and clasping their hands together.

The Elevated One and the Timekeeper mirror the action responding in kind. "For the love of Empress Salliniquai."

The Awakener steps into the orb, it rises majestically off the ground, floats to the travel well, and sinks down until it is out of sight.

Once the two are alone, the Elevated One turns a guarded look upon the Timekeeper, their frown returning.

"We must infuse four earth Angels with the task of guiding the Empress until the knight's arrival." They say urgently.

"How did you choose which ones to magically enchant?"

"We searched for those who possess uncorrupted, spiritual maturity. Their energy is supportive irrespective of whether they meet the Empress only once, or are around for years. The nature of the

relationship depends upon how humanly evolved she is destined to become within each life."

"That is sufficiently satisfactory."

Knowing only the Elevated One can perform such complex infusions, the Timekeeper quietly observes as they pick up a wooden, circular object with carved holes and swirls in places, press their lips to it and blow. Alluring, flute-like notes enrich the air, materialising by light stream into the physical to form into a large, dinner-plate sized droplet of realm waters. After echoing for an impossibly long time, the notes die away as that part of the magic is completed and held in place until the Elevated One is ready to cast it into the jump.

"As each knight is sent to a life stream, we will set the Empresserial trigger, infuse a charmed book, commit the chosen Angels, and conjure up the Kees, all of which must be added through a drop of realm water before the portal closes. This will ensure the energy of one Angel and one triple-layered Kee goes to each fork of the Empress's life streams."

The Timekeeper considers the Elevated One's complicated actions, nodding with slow approval.

"Their lives will be quite different, will they not?"

The Elevated One pauses to glance over their shoulder. "It is as you say, Timekeeper. Ahh... here we are. The first split approaches."

The Elevated One turns back to the altar, and the assortment of strange objects they generated to hover above them within easy reach. Their fingers start to glow as the magic they bring forth crackles and hisses in the palms of their hands. They make a swift, sweeping gesture conjuring a huge, transparent cylinder of water, large enough to hold a grown man within. The clear blue waters are laced with undulating threads of silver, and rippling ribbons in bright Cyrillian, dark azure, and cobalt blue shades. The silver and blue liquids seem alive as they dance and swirl elegantly in slender strands through the water, which has no visible barrier holding it in.

Carefully lifting the first seed from the box, they place it upon the circle of brown earth and murmur the incantation to bring the knight shimmering up into full maturity while keeping him in stasis. The

charge, some of which is in High Malsimily, is telepathically communicated and infused into the knight. They take a moment to explain more details to the Timekeeper.

"There will be similarities in the earthly personalities she evolves. For example, all four incarnations will experience a deep, crushing loneliness at some point. They will be determined as they search for the missing element they intuitively know will complete them, and might be quite possessive when they find it."

"You speak of true love?"

"A true, *spiritual* love. All four women will demonstrate a natural spirituality, be almost impossible to corrupt, and once set to a purpose will not be derailed."

The Timekeeper's head angles questioningly. "Almost?"

The Elevated One shrugs an elegant shoulder. "Nothing is infallible."

The Timekeeper concedes a slight nod, then speaks cautiously.

"What of the risks and threats to her survival by those tainted with the energy of the emperor's nine kings?"

Beneath their veil, the Elevated One's benevolent expression changes to one of prideful consideration.

"We have faith Salliniquai will overcome them and reign triumphant. She may be a proper little madam with no power, but her courage is unchanged and remains true to the Malsimily."

Having infused the charge to the knight, the Elevated One calls forth the jump, adds the spark of the cradle, the earth Angel's essence, and then recites the first Kee while floating the knight into the cylinder.

"Then through their charges and honourable duty, the knights love shall support the Empress, and she will learn the lessons." The Timekeeper states.

"It is as you say."

"All eight energies may at times, unwittingly converse in Malsimily, and we used realm-appropriate terms to describe the Empress in ways different to earthly women."

"Good. After the love at first sight moment when the spiritual connection is made, it shall remain hidden until it can present through

a deeper level of awareness. The knights must attract the incarnations, and sensitively, romantically, progress their emotional, sensual, and physical desires. These developments intensify and become more... um... erotic as she evolves through each life as well."

"So, once the connection occurs, the knight will be rather eloquent in their most intimate moments." The Elevated One and the Timekeeper exchange a meaningful glance. "We included these in their purest expression as we translated the words and thoughts of all those involved in the lives of the Empresses, and the knights. As well as in one or two other areas of her quest."

"All of which helps to bind their deeply sacred, spiritual love." They turn back to the portal as the second split approaches, the trace of a pleased smile on their face.

The Elevated One places the second knight's seed in the circle of earth, speaks the incantation and he shimmers up into human form. After the telepathic charge is given, as before, the knight is floated into the cylinder. The Elevated One sends the spark of the cradle and the earth Angel's essence through, and then recites the next Kee.

"They all (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*). Therefore, their unique twin soul energy shall arise when they meet."

"They'll fall deeply in love with one another, unify their energies, and be as one," the Timekeeper concludes, and the second knight and the Kee are sent through.

The Elevated One lifts the third knight's seed out of the box, speaks the incantation, and he shimmers into human form to receive his charge. As the knight floats into the cylinder, the Elevated One sends a spark of the cradle, the earth Angel's essence, and then recites the third Kee.

"She shall be drawn to the three charmed books Spiritual Illumination, The Serenity Experience and (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld*). In the triple-layered way of the Malsimily, they are an initiating force, a trigger, and a seal for the incarnations and the knights. The books provide an in-depth account of the author's life written in a creative non-fiction, autobiographical, memoir style." They

lean closer to the Timekeeper. "You see how the style of writing reflects the triple aspect of Malsimily?" The Timekeeper nods. "The progressive state of the books is easily recognised because while there were no interactive elements in *Spiritual Illumination*, *The Serenity Experience* included a few, and there are significantly more in (*True Malsimily. Translation withheld*)."

The third knight is sent through. The Elevated One takes the fourth seed and places it in the circle of earth. The knight shimmers into human form, and is given his charge. Once encased inside the cylinder, the earth Angel's essence and the spark of the cradle are sent through.

Just before reciting the final Kee, the Timekeeper raises a hand, interrupting the Elevated One.

"We trust your sound reasoning entirely, Elevated One. But will the books and the knights be enough to help her defeat her enemies? Some of whom are quite formidable like the Red Oracle, the Italian Mafia, and the Watchers. All tame compared to the most threatening of all—the great suffering. The deadly disease must not tarnish their ethereal value in *any* way."

The Elevated One's face grows tight with concentration. "Since her energy has split, we are supremely aware of the considerably larger danger of the virus being brought through the jump by any one of the eight energies."

"We believe our protections to be sufficient," the Timekeeper says reassuringly, their chin lifting slightly.

"Good. Providing she makes it through all of that she has the stone harvest to stay when she returns."

"Can the Empress achieve her goals? Did we enlighten her enough?"

The Elevated One considers a moment. "We think so. We are doing the best we can with what we have."

The Timekeeper agrees. "She shall know her purpose to unify the mind, body, and spirit trinity as her incarnated lives progress then?"

"That she will. Her mind—instinctive powers provide unwavering purpose in the Land of Ludonia. Only when she is in this mentally subconscious realm will she learn of the great suffering—a critical factor

in evolving her lesson on *Trauma*.

Her spirit-intuitive powers ensure a strong core of spiritual integrity, which she must master as the spiritual wife. In this incarnation, she evolves her *Transformation* fully so she may return to us and be triumphant.

Her body-sensitive powers, hm, yes. She has an affinity with all that supports life and recognises the deeper life cycles in play." Their face brightens. "As a dancer, for the initial unfoldment she will learn to ground her spiritual energies into the body, and learn to trust her intuition. This journey leads her to the addressment point. Then her interactions in the earthy judicial system called the Police; where she lives her spiritual truth fully through action, shall bring her closer to completing the physical aspect teachings of *Trust* and *Truth*."

"The knights shall protect her throughout, for it is their honourable charge to do so." Observes the Timekeeper. "They will risk their lives for her if need be."

"It is so." The Elevated One turns back to the knight in stasis and recites the fourth Kee, motioning elegantly with purpose.

Once all four knights are sent through the jump with the relevant Malsimily elements attached, the Elevated One stands back, the pressing weight of responsibility now lifted.

The Timekeeper starts to turn away. "We shall prepare for their return at the jump gateway then."

The Elevated One turns a much calmer, benevolent smile upon the Timekeeper. "One moment. As the situation is already upon us, and in case we do not get the opportunity later, may we observe a little of Empress Salliniquai's experience of love?" Lines crinkle around their eyes as the Elevated One asks this with an indulgent smile.

"This is permitted." They say, a little amused by the request as they read in the Elevated One's gaze the deep love they have for the Empress.

Afterwards, the Elevated One says. "Though the incarnations lives were lonely and they experienced their fair share of sadness, there must have been interesting times, too."

"More than interesting." The Timekeeper cocks the eyebrow over

their glowing silver eye. "It was so romantic, more humourous than expected, and thoroughly intriguing. We found ourselves gripped by the (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*). It is as you say. Considering the weight of her charge and her responsibility when she returns, Salliniquai *should* experience the greatest kind of love. Yes. It is a fitting reward for all she will eventually face." The Timekeeper hesitates, clears their throat quietly and floats closer. "We understand your frustration with the Awakener," they say. "But maybe you were a bit... hard on them."

The Elevated One catches the Timekeeper's eye. "We know, we know." Their brow creases. "It is behaviour not in line with the vibration of the realm, we know."

"Ahh, well. All will be well in the end," the Timekeeper states enigmatically, their words shrouded in mystery.

The Elevated One pauses to glance at them, measuring their words.

All will be well in the end. But which end? They could be speaking of the end of Salliniquai's reign rather than the current situation.

"You know this for sure?" They ask, not really expecting a straight answer, but hoping for one anyway.

The Timekeeper hovers silently a moment, their expression unreadable. Unable to deny or confirm certain facts because they are bound by magic never to speak of events not yet come to pass, they usually infer with statements that can be taken either way.

The Elevated One continues. "Still, what is done is done. We can only move forward on the path laid before us." The Elevated One tips their head a little. The sound of the approaching stone harvest was getting more intense—a grim reminder of the impending danger. "We must hurry..." They say, turning back to the altar.

"We enhanced the chances of the knights' life paths crossing in the human physical realm, too. Our instincts saw this as beneficial. What do you think?"

Used to the way the Timekeeper spoke with hints, rhetorical questions, and innuendos towards the outcome of events, they reply,

"It is a positive possibility, yes, as they will be drawn to the same

interests spiritually. You were right to do this."

The Timekeeper hovers closer. "What might happen if they meet?" They press.

"They will experience a strong sense of knowing one another, like *deja vu*. They will instinctively seek a friendship with one another in kinship."

"So, they will recognise the similar qualities and seek to retain the Brotherhood bond." The Timekeeper says, satisfied. "That is good. We are curious to see if any of them once they come together, think it simply a mad coincidence their women are all named after Salliniquai."

There's that strange reference again. The Elevated One thinks, expelling a soft, wistful sigh.

"Sometimes, we wish we could access time streams as you do. They'll most likely put the feeling down to sharing a past life," the Elevated One thoughtfully suggests. "As we understand it, you narrowed the confines of the Empress's descent to one particular country?"

"England, yes."

"We sent the knights directly to your created county, Rowanshire. If we're lucky, the incarnations might be born in this created place as well. If not, they will be drawn there or brought there by the knights." The Elevated One seemed a bit happier with how the situation was turning out. "As to the island portal, this is a real place and known to humans, we presume?"

"We considered Samoa and one or two others, but in the end we chose the Caribbean Island of Saint Lucia."

"The knights were aligned to the life years of the oldest knight who will be born in the late sixties, and has up to fifty-five years to complete his charge. The other three shall be born after, and if all goes as we hope, they will find, love, guide, and then return with their Empresserial incarnations." The Elevated One concludes.

Having considered the span of years the knights have upon the earth; the Timekeeper offers some interesting facts.

"They shall be influenced by the vibrations of the late sixties and seventies, when the earliest advancements of the Aquarian age were

taking hold. The seventies were, by far, the liveliest, most colourful decade in earth's history, labelled as such for many reasons. Iconic aquarian artists and music from..."

"Which artists? What music?" The Elevated One asks, arching an eyebrow with interest. Now the pressure is off, they are intrigued by how the Timekeeper became so affected by human life.

"Well, let's see..." They begin, their eyes taking on a silver glow. "In terms of music, Motown, Reggae, and Disco made the most significant impact. One of the greatest musical geniuses of all time was influencing British people with reggae music, and he made a massive impact on the world by infusing people with a sense of themselves, truth, hope, and love. He spread the message of *one love* to the world as one of the greatest Aquarian water-bearers of all time, the Legendary Bob Marley." The silver colour of their eyes became smoky for a moment, and their voice lowered respectfully. "His passing was one of the greatest losses for the coming of the Aquarian age, and The Third Way."

Caught up in the moment, the Timekeeper's gaze is strangely distant and their tone subdued when they resume.

"The documentary, *When Bob Marley Came to Britain*, will not be available until August 2020, and after watching it people will know he was driven to building bridges, uniting people, and spreading his message of love from the heart. David Bowie was another famous Aquarian. Like no other, his wildly original music and unique style of genius stood out, but he was not everyone's cup of tea, ours included when it comes down to it, but we thought he deserved a mention because he was a well-respected, down-to-earth man with a brown wife. There were also bands like Abba, Earth, Wind and Fire, and singers like Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye, and Donna Summer.

In this decade and beyond, people were entertained by films like *Enter the Dragon*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *The Warriors*. TV shows like *Wonder Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Randall and Hopkirk - deceased*, *Mission Impossible*, *Star Trek*, and *Children of the Stones*, among others." To the Elevated One's surprise, the Timekeeper's face glows with animation as they recall the strange details. "Then there were

Chopper bikes, roller skates and roller discos. Walkman's, platform shoes, and flared trousers. *Abh, yes*, hippie chic and glamour were fabulous then. It underpins feminine fashion and free expression in a bohemian style to this day, demonstrated by peasant blouses, kaftans, maxi dresses, and bold, ethnic accessories gracefully designed to..."

The Elevated One is staring at them with a stunned, stupefied expression that is completely out of character. They have never heard the Timekeeper speak with such passion before. The depth of human emotional energy transferred while they were translating had obviously affected their sensibilities.

Having caught the Elevated One's perplexed, scrutinising gaze, the Timekeeper adds, "As to making a lasting impact and guiding others politically acting for peace, equality, and safety for their people, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela stand out."

The Timekeeper might have continued with a longer, more exciting list, but knowing the Elevated One can comprehend only a little of it, their features settle into their usual neutral expression and they change the subject.

"What about the High Malsimily thought dispersal spell? Was this used in the game of Snakes and Ladders?"

"It was never sent. As it was a trial it did not involve a mature Salliniquai incarnation, and did not have the objective of teaching one of the four lessons. As to the rest of it, working through young Sally, Salliniquai now has a direct way of wielding her grace worldwide, strengthening its spiritual integrity."

"She must also be protected."

The Elevated One nods agreeably. "We used a specific incident to get her to the island, ensuring her safety before the great suffering could affect her."

"A specific incident?"

"Literally, yes." They turn a curious frown upon the Timekeeper. "But of course, you know all this. It must be frustrating not speaking of such events, or maybe not, according to your unique way of existence."

"What about Empress Sallee and the youngest of the brothers,

Benton, in the Land of Ludonia? How can we ensure they return when they are required to?"

After a moment more of staring curiously at the Timekeeper, who stares back expressionless, the Elevated One answers.

"Again, it is different due to how time works in Ludonia. As they return through the jump, the knight's years in Ludonia should not change his true age from twenty-four. *If* they return through the jump, that is. Are we correct in our assessment, Timekeeper?"

Unable to reveal any details involving timelines, a long moment passes before the Timekeeper eventually replies obscurely,

"We shall await them all at Jump gateway."

Their words are reassuring, and confirms the Elevated One's belief that Empress Salliniquai as her incarnations, and the four knights, will return as expected. By not answering directly, saying instead that they will *await them all*, tells them what they needed to hear.

The Elevated One speaks of how they made doubly sure matters would progress as they have directed.

"Having cast one of our most complicated spells, the incarnations shall speak the triggers to awaken the knights at the appointed time. They cannot be activated by accident, and only work in close proximity of the portal within two days of the jump date."

"An excellacious, most valuable consideration. How did you make sure of that?"

The Elevated One explained that to ensure the chosen hosts would not be harmed by the potent energy of the Empresserial orb, which must be drawn down and infused with the Empresserial trigger, they charmed their own earth Angel—the author of the three books mentioned earlier, as their writing focusses on the Aquarian age and resonated deeply with them.

"Only the Dream Knight, young Sally, and the incarnations will be aware of the True Malsimily nature of the books.

"We understand the purpose of this."

"Young Sally's exposure is shielded until she comes of age, however. The adult incarnations shall be naturally drawn to these books as

ultimately (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*) eyes. As long as they have laid hands upon it and read it themselves, the Empresserial energy shall continue to reveal its nature to them."

The Timekeeper speaks, their voice sage. "Understood. We gather these same three books are special enough to do much to awaken humans to the oldest and wisest aspects of spiritual knowledge as well?"

"That is so. We charged the author to create the series to trigger Salliniquai's Empresserial energy in all five of her earthly forms. However, we could only use her skills on three occasions to ensure they remained potent." The Elevated One explains. (*T02*)

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The stone harvest.

"Excellacious."

"Then," the Elevated One continues. "Regardless of the span of earthly years the events take place in, the evolution of her empresserial energy presents to us in the order of her lessons. That is part of how we know when the time of her return approaches."

"Can humans discern the magical elements in the books?"

"No. Although, if one is fully open to the true nature of divine spirituality, then yes, it may be possible to some small degree."

"A suitable, unequivocally astute plan, Elevated One." The Timekeeper says. "How is the dream knight doing in his search for the emperor's nine books of stone?"

"You know the answer to that better than we do." The Elevated One states, a perceptive glint in their eyes. They know the Timekeeper's questioning technique is crucial to solidifying elements within the translation, though, and always answer their questions no matter how trivial, repetitive, or curious they are. "As the Empress's energy is divided

into four, each incarnation will connect with one of the books of stone, which automatically materialise in her presence. These are pivotal moments of the dream knight's charge. He cannot cross over to the realm of Ludonia, however, meaning the Sallee incarnation must destroy the Wrong King's Book of Stone herself." The Elevated One glances over their shoulder at the Timekeeper. "Our three charmed books have the power to call the Empress, refresh her energy, and will be a valuable aid in her spiritual development. This was vitally important as the emperor's books have powers too.

A single book of stone possesses energy thrice as potent as our three books put together, with a unique power that corrupts the minds of the masculine. The incarnations will recognise its destructive power, and deal with it in the only way they can without their Emperesserial powers; with the assistance of the dream knight." They reiterate with serious importance.

"Ah... yes, the dream knight. He will complete his three-fold charge of releasing the spirits of humans from evil, destroying the nine books of stone and (*High Malsimily. Translation in progress...*) Still..." The Timekeeper pauses, both eyes glowing silver now. "Should he fail to destroy the books and return to the Malsimily by the winter solstice of 2020, not only will all nine books be regenerated—a monstrous situation we must avoid at all costs, but Rowanshire will disintegrate into nothing as well. All of the Empress's plans will go to waste and ushering in the Aquarian age will become significantly more difficult, and this is putting it mildly.

Of the nine books brought into the world, the four aligned to the incarnations shall lose their power when she reads from them. When the three in the human physical realm touch the books of stone, the dream knight appears astrally projected, and their spiritual selves can communicate." Their shoulders straighten a touch. "Fortunately, not all who become one with the dream knight are evil. Most of the time, he travels harmlessly and joyfully through the feminine, and draws supportive energy from those who have transitioned when they travel through them. Once touched in this way, people are left with a strong

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sense of clarity around their identity, a boost to their confidence, and a strong desire for equality."

"You are translating the dream knight's quest as well, at the same time?"

The Timekeeper nods. "His story is translated quite differently to Salliniquai's as it is from the male perspective. It is um... grounded, less flowery, and far more... erotic." They give the Elevated One a meaningful look. "Some of the language we were forced to use is far too crude for your delicate ears, Elevated One."

"Perhaps you should let us be the judge of that?" They suggest, quirked one of their eyebrows up. "We can discuss his escapades later. Salliniquai is our focus for now."

"In due course, we will Elevated One. Fortunately, as Rowanshire is of our creation it is protected from the books of stone. None can breach the county's boundary."

They sigh with relief, knowing the danger brought about by the books. "How many remain to find and destroy?"

"He has destroyed the books empowered by the Holy King, the Cold King, and the Abusive King. Other than the four the Empress's find, there are two remaining."

"We trust he is successful in his charge."

"As do we." They consider the Elevated One a moment. "We were curious as to why you set the third book by A. T. Flowers to be published after the year 2024? The Empress and her knights will have returned to the realm long before then. What further use, or magic will it possess after this?"

"No use to our people, but valuable for humans after the worst effects of the great suffering. With Pluto in Aquarius for the next two decades, it will be one of many important treasures helping to steer people towards the path of... well, you know the details of all of this, we need not go over it. Now, work with us to seal all we have done to support the Empress and the knights."

The Timekeeper grips the staff while the Elevated One finalises everything, before releasing their hold.

"Thank you for your assistance, Timekeeper. You may go."

"At your summoning, we shall return." They say, seemingly reluctant to do so. In a cool poignant tone, they add "Remember, we are but a shimmer away. Bid thy return, and we will do so."

They nod in response. "Now, we must transfer the remaining essences to the staff."

"Of course." The Timekeeper clasps their hands together before them. "For the love of Empress Salliniquai."

"For the love of Empress Salliniquai." The Elevated One returns.

The two bow, and then the Timekeeper backs away, drawing the hood of their robe over their head. They shimmer away knowing they will not see the Elevated One as they are now, ever again.

The Elevated One's mind is still on the Timekeeper when they glance over to the wide opening of the geode, and freeze. Momentarily stunned by the shocking sight of the stone harvest covering so much ground, they stare in wide-eyed horror.

A dark grey sludge has crept across the boundary and is pouring into the geode. With malicious intent, it slowly, relentlessly, rolls over the entire floor its leading edge heading straight for them.

No! So soon? They grit their teeth. *There is so little time*, they silently seethe.

Hastily, they weave the spell to supercharge the Empress's energy at the time of the Offering, into the staff. At each pause in their magical conjuring, the staff pulses with an answering glow, and the scent of raynorlorium fills the air each time giving the sense a conversation is taking place. Once it is charmed and fully charged, they pause to consider the irresponsible actions of the Empress, wondering if she regrets her choice to secretly slip away. Fortunately, with the swift actions of all concerned, they managed to salvage the situation satisfactorily.

They gasp suddenly, a look of dismay in their eyes. The stone harvest is a mere six feet from the dais they stand upon.

From their position in front of a large stone altar, topped with

strangely shaped containers holding powders, liquids (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*), elements, bubbles, and hair, among other things which can only be described in Malsimily, the Elevated One murmurs an incantation, and the altars shimmer into the unseen. As they turn to glance around the geode, they find themselves stuck.

In those few seconds, the stone harvest crept beneath their feet trapping them where they stand. Their surprised gasp and groan of pain do little to change things. It has them.

By the Empress, no! They rage in dreadful desperation.

Their thoughts drift back to the Empress, and the final lesson she so blithely skipped. The one that holds the key to safely entering the Distance. Alarmed by the prospect of all their hopes being dashed with this new disaster, the Elevated One's frown deepens, their shoulder's sag a little and they wonder if the Timekeeper will intervene if it came to it.

No, that is impossible, they tell themselves, resigned to the fact that the Timekeeper cannot break their discretionary rule of information binding.

Have we failed in our charge, then?

No, comes their fierce response as their posture straightens and their chin lifts, for such negative thinking is not in the spirit of the realm. We must *not* underestimate the Empress! She will hold her own in the human physical realm, even without Empresserial powers, and she has earth Angels for support and the knights of the Brotherhood to bring her back.

Still, she must come to the geode to retrieve her staff when she returns, and when she reaches the Distance she must be mature enough to figure it out.

As soon as she returns... the thought fades away as another sliver of stone harvest insinuates itself into the Elevated One's skin, pricking into it just below the knee.

31

The Alchemist.

The Awakener, meanwhile, arrives at the cradle—an enormous, moss-covered, hollow structure that sits inside its own magically enhanced field. The cradle's welcoming, abundant health and lush-green appearance is a little deceptive since it is also an impenetrable stronghold—a place of protection able to defend itself.

Inside the misty, moist interior, the sound of rushing water is a constant due to the vast, dominating waterfall stretching across two thirds of the main cavern.

As the Awakener advises the Alchemist of the current situation, they bask in the ever-present, potent aroma of raynorlorium as they do so. The scent arises naturally from the realm waters due to the trail of energy the seed fairies leave behind.

(For those not of the Malsimily, Raynorlorium translates as lemons, which do not exist in the Realm of the Empress).

Thoughtfully considering the information as they gently stroke the long curl protruding from the left side of their close-cropped, golden-

black hair, the Alchemist smiles brightly and says,

"The Empress requires the crown for the Offering at the Distance, of course."

An encouraging smile lights up the sentimental, softly spoken Alchemist's dark brown face as they move sedately to the entrance of the chamber. Their layered robe of a soft pink hue, billows out around them as they beckon the Awakener forward, then glide down the broad steps that form a spiral staircase down to where the crown is cradled.

When the Alchemist reaches the deep centre of the chamber, they produce a small pouch, take a healthy pinch of the magical powder within, and sprinkle it over the crown. A low hum immediately vibrates out, echoing around the chamber. From a container retrieved from the sleeve of their robe, they tip out a golden liquid and with a swirl of their hands create a cloud of blue-hued smoke, which wafts around them in a spiralling fashion as they speak the incantation to release the crown.

Once the construction of the spell is complete, they quickly ascend the spiral stairs then pause to peer into the chamber. After a few minutes, seven misty layers of colour—a chakra rainbow, appears. Hazy at first, it slowly solidifies forming wide bands of colour which create a funnel for the crown to rise through.

"The crown must pass through all seven chakras before we can remove it," the Alchemist explains, fingering the precious, palm-sized amulet of the Venus symbol, hanging in line with their solar plexus on the outside of their robe.

"Is it a long process?" The Awakener wonders. As they lean forward to see into the chamber.

Both pairs of eyes light up with the luminous glow the ascending crown generates.

"It is a beautiful one."

They study the chamber for a few minutes, observing the shifting mists and thickening colours.

"It is as you say," the Awakener agrees breathlessly, awed by the sight.

Moving back a little, they reveal more of what took place at the geodes as the Alchemist strolls around the crown's chamber, never taking their

eyes off the progress of the crown.

"So, the Empress was too young to use the Jump and was flower-petalled instead?" The Awakener nods. "We suspect Salliniquai suggested using the flower because she knew the Elevated One could send a knight after her if something went amiss." They make a clicking sound with their tongue. "She behaved recklessly, yes. But she had the good sense not to cut herself off from her masters and the realm entirely." The Alchemist reasons after mulling over the Awakener's account of the events.

The Awakener's lowered gaze reveals their uncertainty, and the Alchemist senses the storm raging within them.

"We understand your concern, Awakener. You have heard about the dangers the human physical realm presents, and are worried for the Empress."

Guilt flashes briefly across the Awakener's face as they hesitate.

"We are responsible for this divisional thing happening." They admit, their eyes falling away from the Alchemist's steady gaze.

As the least evolved of the four androgynous beings, the Awakener is not necessarily aware of the broader intricacies required to evolve the Empress, or the details of her time spent with the other three masters.

"Take heart, Awakener." The Alchemist says kindly, gesturing a hand. Their sleeve wafts out as though blown by a secret wind they alone are affected by. "The situation is already upon us, and we are all working together to rectify it. Apart from her spiritual separation, the only other glitch is the knights have to fulfil the first part of their purpose on earth."

As the only master able to make physical contact with the others, the Alchemist places a comforting palm on the Awakener's arm. "It is not in the spirit of the realm to dwell on what is perceived as regretful actions, and surviving an earthly life is a condition well within the scope of the knight's markers. Otherwise, that course of rectification would not be available." Their kind, gentle gaze is as reassuring as their touch, and the tension in the Awakener's shoulders ease somewhat.

"It is of course, as you say." They reply haltingly, obviously not fully convinced. "With the fate of all three realms bound to the Empress

fulfilling her purpose, we thought..."

The Alchemist holds up a stern finger, and speaks firmly, their faith in the Empress strong and unwavering.

"She *will* hold her own."

Both turn to gaze into the chamber once more. The crown has formed more solidly into the seen by now, and is slowly ascending. The Alchemist resumes.

"Her Emprerial energy and the Age of Aquarius influence, will protect Ludonians and humans with spiritually energised hearts and souls, who are naturally attuned to the Third Way."

"As we understand it, the emperor has (*True Malsimily. Translation unavailable*), with his books of stone."

The Alchemist's mouth becomes a grim, downturned line as they expel a grave sigh.

"Yes, unfortunately."

Shi-Linga, the Alchemist's huge, snow-white karm, pads silently past them, muzzle twitching. Her lavender, lantern eyes glint mysteriously in the green-tinged, luminous light in the cavern as she pads behind the waterfall and enters a chamber beyond.

Remembering the Timekeeper's strange references, the Awakener says,

"We wish to learn more about the earth. It is intriguing to us. Will she share the new knowledge gained during her lives when she returns?"

"Perhaps, if enough memories remain with her once she awakens. Did you not ask the Elevated One about this? Or you could have shared a vision with the Timekeeper, as we did."

The Awakener's features twist to a pinched, sheepish expression that is out of place on their long, light-skinned face. They fiddle with a plait of waist-long, silver-black hair.

"We... did not ask because the Elevated One was busy rectifying our..." They pause self-consciously. "They were losing patience with us for... for..." They stammer uncomfortably.

"They realise it was through no fault of your own." The Alchemist sympathetically cuts in. "The little madam did cast her spell using you,

after all."

"Your nurturing words bring much hope and relief, Alchemist."

"As is our duty." They reply, turning back to the chamber.

The crown has risen above the base chakra's brown band of colour. After silently observing it for a few minutes, the Alchemist resumes speaking.

"When she arrives back as the four incarnations, the unifying ritual will need to proceed with all speed."

The Awakener nods. But they still have questions about the earth.

"The Timekeeper said it can take as many as twenty or thirty earth years from the moment the great age transfer begins, for the influence of the Pisces age to no longer have a hold over humankind."

The Alchemist looks over. "That is true. The current age relied heavily on control primarily by fear, using man-made religions and politics in the extreme. The damage it has wrought is seen in how the earth is now fighting back against men's selfish, misguided efforts to subdue and use nature, instead of working with her harmoniously. But people are beginning to see the darker side of Christianity and other dominant religions, which clearly cannot be based on love with such violent beginnings.

Religion was brutally and savagely forced onto people, adding to the Patriarchy's ages-old fear-based desire to ensure the utter destruction of the Matriarchy, when Matriarchal societies were just beginning to bloom around the world. There will be much friction to muddle through, as this age gave free rein to monstrously corrupted politicians who lie, steal, and cheat their way to the top of the food chain. All are capitalists who hoard wealth while the rest of the world suffers." They pause; a deep frown on their face. "We fear it will take longer than thirty years, and we hope humans have the patience and fortitude to think of the generations coming after them, rather than themselves."

The Awakener wonders, "How might humankind evolve without those horribly skewed, governing influences?"

"Their best bet is through the Third Way, when the balance of energy starts to favour authentic, free spirituality. The influence of Uranus on

the Aquarian age is somewhat of a double-edged sword, however. With AI algorithms, flash fiction, and tik-tok mentalities, earthly attention spans are becoming short and lazy, patience is practically non-existent, and inspirational, original creativity seems to be a thing of the past. Nurturing a deeper, meaningful life with spiritual truths guiding the way, has fallen by the wayside in favour of short-term pleasures.

Younger generations will not simply stand by and suffer the consequences brought upon them by old, outdated systems and governance, however. They will no longer be interested in listening to *supposedly* sound advice from pompous politicians, and suspect priests from churches with scandalous, reputation-saving agendas. All of which is entirely understandable since they are responsible for the current state of society. While families struggle and live from hand to mouth, many priests and politicians enjoy a life of luxury and swan around the world creating harm and havoc wherever they go."

The Awakener is stunned by the overwhelming uphill struggle those wishing to progress spiritual change will face.

Why does human life have to be so unfair and hard for so many people, when the answer to their survival and a chance to live life in joy, is obvious?

"Willingly sharing resources between lands is one of humankind's most major difficulties," they continue. "And something they have fought over historically since..." The Alchemist's voice fades and their gaze takes on an otherworldly cast. "We sense a change in the vibration of the realm. The incarnations and the knights will arrive at jump gateway shortly. You should make haste to the gateway, and be ready to receive them honourably while we ready ourselves for ours."

"Yes, indeed." They agree. "The Empress will expect our presence on her arrival as it was our magic that initiated her journey. We must open the jump gateway in the same way." They say, and drawing themselves up to their full height they stringently add. "We will *not* fail her again," before striding over to the travel well.

The Alchemist, watching from beside the waterfall, bows slightly.

"For the love of the Empress."

"For the love of the Empress," The Awakener returns. Their orb

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materialises, they step inside, and the orb smoothly lowers below the surface water within the well.

Epilogue

Aftermath...

In her daring, courageous exploits in the game of Snakes and Ladders, Sally Vincent-Payne exposed Salliniquai to nine important principles while her empresserial energy was fully infused into her. When the six human and three magical principles were combined in both natures, the infusion of the Matriarchal Hereditary Kee was complete.

*

When the unseen moon is new and the night is at its darkest, eight fabulously bright stars from the Realm of the Empress, race across the vast expanse lighting up the sky. These are not your average, run-of-the-mill shooting stars however, for these stars carry the essences of Empress Salliniquai and the knights of the Brotherhood of the Nine.

As transcendent time travellers, they pierce their way through Earth's history with a unique purpose to join with newly born and young humans of a particular energy.

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Chosen to host and progress the crucial aspects of Empress Salliniquai's nature and human understanding, once all the life experiences have been accomplished, the Empress and her knights are destined to return to the Realm of the Empress. A realm governed by the Malsimily but created by the Empress herself...

The end.

The Trial of Salliniquai

The Quest of Salliniquai

The *Trial of Salliniquai* prequels the urban romantasy novels that make up *The Salliniquai Chronicles*, and *The Dream Knight*. For your reading pleasure, summaries are included below.

The Trial of Salliniquai.

Young Adult/New Adult Fiction – A magical fantasy novel

Quarterfinalist in the Screen craft Cinematic book competition 2024.

The Trauma Host (in the Land of Ludonia). Book One.

Women's Fiction – A magical, romantic, full fantasy novel.

In the first of Salliniquai's lives upon the earth, she incarnates as reluctant heroine Sallee Bhiru-shah, a virgin schoolteacher from the county of Rowanshire who takes a tumble down the stairs that leaves her in a coma.

In this adventurous love story, after this tragic accident she is not too pleased when she finds herself trapped in the Matriarchal Land of Ludonia in her subconscious, charged to complete a quest.

Only one man can provide the support she needs to carry out this monumental charge; Benton of the Red, a fellow Player, who is really a knight of the Brotherhood of the Nine in disguise.

STELLA FLETON

The Trust Host. Book Two.

Women's fiction - A glamorous, urban romantasy novel.

Winner of A Woman's Write Best Unpublished Novel, 2022.

In the second of Salliniquai's lives upon the earth, she incarnates as Hippy Chick Sallie Chambers, an underprivileged orphan turned professional dancer with a somewhat paranoid view of the world, a prickly phobia of men, and trust issues.

Sallie is a fish out of water when she accepts a dancing job far from home aboard a glamorous Italian cruise ship. Things become complicated and spiral out of control during the 1990 football World Cup when the mafia, and other undesirables turn her dream job into a disaster.

Only one man can save her before she finds herself with nowhere to hide and nowhere to run – Luke Phelps, a Knight of the Brotherhood of the Nine in disguise.

The Truth Host. Book Three.

Women's fiction - A gritty, urban romantasy novel.

Finalist in the Page Turner Awards adapt to screenplay category, 2025.

In the third of Salliniquai's lives upon the earth, she incarnates as scarred-faced Sallyanne Roserie. After battling with family and leaving home, Sallyanne joins the British Police Service only to find her true battle has only just begun.

It is a fight all the way for bohemian Sallyanne, for as a woman of conscience she faces discrimination, tough challenges, dubious intentions, and secret groups within the service; one of which is hell-bent on bringing her down.

Only one may can save her; Sven Jorgensen-Thomas, a tai-chi practicing, bookshop owner who is a knight of the Brotherhood of the Nine, in disguise.

The Trial of Salliniquai

The Transformation Host Book Four.

Women's fiction - A steamy, urban romantasy novel.

Finalist in the Page Turner Awards adapt to screenplay category, 2025.

In the fourth of Salliniquai's lives upon the earth, she incarnates as Sallori Tessler, a fed up, forty-year-old, disillusioned vicar's wife of eighteen years, who spontaneously decides to throw caution to the wind when her life horrendously falls apart and she finds herself suddenly powerless, and friendless without a husband or a religion to anchor to.

In this steamy love story, having given up her marriage and her Christian faith, she travels a new path with a motley crew of pagans, and learns that when all else fails, trusting one's spirituality is all that counts if she wishes her bohemian nature to blossom.

Only one man can guide her; Marvin James, a spiritual guide from Saint Lucia—a knight of the Brotherhood of the Nine, in disguise.

The Triumphs of Salliniquai. Book Five.

A thrilling, full fantasy adventure.

In the Triumphs of Salliniquai it is action all the way as the four Emperesserial hosts, and the Knights of the Brotherhood of the Nine return to the Realm of the Empress—only to find it is a race against time to exchange the kurrans, and cross dangerous, magically infused, living fields to reach the place of Offering at the Distance.

All of this she must do before the creepy stone harvest corrupts the realm, and kills every living thing in sight.

The Book of Malsimily Translations. Volume three.

All the translations from The Trial of Salliniquai, The Trauma Host (in the Land of Ludonia), The Trust Host, The Truth Host, The Transformation Host, and The Triumphs of Salliniquai (in the Realm of the Empress).

Up next ... more good stories linked to the series.

The Dream Knight...

A dark, urban fantasy novel.

Follow the dream knight's remarkable quest to find and destroy the emperor's nine books of stone.

The dream knight's Malsimily magic gives him the ability to appear and disappear at will, and he travels through people to reach those he is charged to transform towards the light, or send to darkness on his sixty-year quest.

With a whole world to search to complete his mission, the dream knight is aided by the Timekeeper and some of your favourite characters from *The Salliniquai Chronicles*.

The Rowanshire Nine... is coming soon...

The Trial of Salliniquai

About the author

Aquarius Stella Fletton is an Indigo child on a Twin Flame journey. She lives a simple, quietly eccentric life with her family in Saint Lucia.

Thanks for reading!

#JoinTheThirdWayMovement
#JoinTheSpiritualThirdWayMovement
#TheSalliniquaiChronicles

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