

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face, her eyes looking directly at the viewer. Her face is partially obscured by a collage of elements: a butterfly on the left, a large orange maple leaf on the right, and various feathers and branches. The background is a dark, textured blue with a subtle starry pattern. The title is centered over the lower half of the face.

SARINA'S NIGHTMARE

THE DREAMER CHRONICLES I
ROBERT SCANLON

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Your FREE Chapters!
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Dear Reader, thank you for downloading these free chapters! I hope you enjoy joining Sarina on her journey. May I share a word or two about spelling? Thank you! I consider myself to be 'half-Australian' and 'half-British'. Which means I've chosen to use British English spelling conventions throughout. So for example, when you see an 's' that you think should be a 'z', that's me using my native spelling.

But knowing you, Dear Reader, that won't bother you one bit!

Please, start reading!

For Isabelle and my Dad
My inspiration.

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~ 1 ~

XTRIUM

AN ICY DARKNESS descended into the valley and seeped into the edge of the township.

Paolo stared up from the edge of the field at the slowly advancing black dread, then across at the townsmen working in the field.

Some had fallen to the ground writhing in agony, others had their faces turned to the sky.

All had their hands clamped over their ears.

He pulled himself away from the sight and turned to Andreas in alarm.

Andreas too, had his hands to his ears and was collapsed against his plough, doubled over in pain. He caught Paolo's gaze and with difficulty, released a hand. He signalled to the boy to run away, but the noise must have been unbearable and he quickly pressed his hand back.

"Run Paolo! Run!" The older man's face was twisted in anguish, but he moved his lips clearly enough that Paolo could still read them. "Valkrog has summoned the Darkness. The noise is paralysing us. Run to the forest and hide." He jerked his head towards the forest trail.

Paolo hesitated. The last time he had run from the sadistic bird-man, he had managed to remain undetected, only to learn that his father had died at the creature's hands. With his mother and brother still missing, Andreas was all he had left.

He was torn between staying to help Andreas and the other townsmen, or escaping, but he soon realised by taking advantage of his deafness and hiding, he would be of more

help once the attack had passed.

If there were any survivors.

He looked up again and spotted the bird-like creature in the distance. He shivered at the sight and reminded himself that the day would come when he would avenge his family.

He stirred himself into action and, frustrated at not being able to speak, he signalled back to Andreas, and turned and fled into the thick forest trails.

He ran, alone in his silent world, thrusting aside wet branches and leaping across twisted roots on the path. His mind raced. Where to hide? What did Valkrog want, and why had he summoned the Darkness?

He peered through the murk to make out the trail, and an idea came to him. The log, over by the clearing, across from the lake. He'd hidden there before, when the bird-man and his sorcerer master had come to take the women and the children, and left him behind. If he could get through the forest and across the clearing, he'd be safe until the Darkness retreated, or—

Or what? Did Valkrog intend to kill the rest of the townsmen this time?

Paolo pushed on faster now, his clothes wet from the cloying, black mist, desperate to reach safety. The safety of the hidden log he thought of as his own. None of the other kids in the township knew his secret place existed. Not that it mattered anymore, since he was the only one left.

He knew the trail so well he could navigate it blindfolded. Running into the clearing, the blackness was less oppressive. He sprinted to the other side and around the perimeter of the lake, and dived into the middle of the large hollow log that lay there.

He had no way of knowing how badly the Darkness was affecting the townsmen, nor whether Valkrog was still terrorising the township. In frustration he kicked the inside

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of the old log, and some of the wood crumbled away to reveal a small patch of moss, glowing with a faint blue hue.

He'd never seen this in the log before, and he scraped away more wood to reveal more moss, glowing blue, extending all the way out of the end of the log and down to the grass. Each time he touched the moss, the blue light flared briefly and sent a tingling buzz through his hand.

He pressed both hands down on the moss outside the log and a surge of power buzzed up his arms. Paolo jerked his hands back in surprise. What was that? Cautiously he tested again, pushing with one hand. He felt energy rise up his arm and watched as the blue glow intensified. Was that his imagination or did the Darkness retreat? Not by much maybe, but he was sure the icy mist had also diminished.

Did the strange blue moss affect the Darkness?

He tested again, pushing harder with both hands, and this time, prepared for the buzz of energy, he did not pull his hands away but maintained the pressure.

The blue energy flared again, and the Darkness retreated a little more.

Paolo, determined to do anything to rid the valley of the dark threat, leaned in with both hands. He felt the buzz of power grow and craned around to look back behind him, and kicked his feet up and into the top of the inside of the hollow log to anchor himself.

He turned back to face the moss and shuffled his body until he was securely braced. Now he could push with maximum effort. He pressed both hands into the moss and pushed with all his might, his legs straining behind him to drive him into the ground.

The blue glow consumed his hands, and the energy flew up his arms, where it changed to a life-affirming vibration, and the glow built to a breath-taking crescendo of positive power.

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The sky flashed white and the air shifted violently in the trees. The Darkness imploded into the shifting air and vanished, along with the icy mist.

In the field, Andreas looked up in surprise as the Darkness disappeared and the crushing howl was cut short. He slowly lowered his hands and looked at the other men doing the same.

Paolo felt the vibration in the ground diminish and stop. He sat up and looked down at his clothes. He was completely dry. He looked at his hands and was surprised to see a faint blue glow coming from his palms, which faded as he watched.

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Sarina woke up gasping for air. She put her hand on her chest. It felt bruised—as if a giant pair of hands had been pushing down on her, making breathing difficult. She looked at the clock. 6:38am. Again.

She tried to remember her dream. A frightened boy pushing her, desperate for help, and so she had willingly obliged. She had summoned what she thought of as ‘the white-light’, and sliced the huge wraith-like bird with a blast of energy, but the bird just laughed with its huge mouth opened wide, and vanished, leaving smoky-black trails dissolving into the air as she watched.

When were these dreams going to stop? And who was the boy who needed her help?

“No time to worry about THAT,” she muttered and got out of bed, exhausted. “I’ve got maths homework to do before school.”

Any more dreams like this and she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on her beloved painting, let alone the stupid maths and science gobbledygook.

She flicked a quick, longing glance at the fresh canvas sitting on the easel and then over at the pile of her own favourite paintings she’d picked as entries for the upcoming

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competition. There were still too many to choose from, and then a thought popped into her head. Maybe she could paint something especially? Oops. She was supposed to be focusing on her maths. She shook her head to try to clear the distracting thoughts. Really. Did everyone have this much trouble with school?

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Inside the fortress, high on a hillside above the township, the man's head jerked up from the maps on the desk. He sniffed the air as if sensing something, then walked to the window. He leaned out on the stone sill and scanned the dark sky, sniffing the air again, and smiled.

"I do believe someone has found it at last," he murmured. "The question is; who? And how quickly I can find them—and force them to lead me to it." He straightened and strode to the doorway, opening the door to issue a command to the brutish soldier with a shaved-head, waiting outside.

"Hursk. Bring me Valkrog when he returns. We have work to do. Someone has found Xtrium."

~ 2 ~

ULTIMATUM

THE FINE POINTED TIP of the sable brush hovered above the paints, as if deep in thought about the choice of colour, then delicately dipped into a pot filled with a rustic ochre paint.

Sarina lost herself in the delightful, fluid flow of her painting, and flicked the brush across the canvas, adding the golden highlights to the sunset in precisely the way she imagined.

“Beautiful. Love it. Magnificent.”

Mrs Gratten, her art teacher, stopped behind Sarina to admire her work.

“Thank you, Mrs Gratten,” Sarina said, “honestly it’s just an image that was stuck in my head when I woke up. It’s nothing really.”

But it was more than that. For a few mornings now she’d struggled to shake off the persistent images in her head when she awoke.

“My dear, it’s not nothing, it’s simply wonderful—totally reminiscent of Monet’s ‘San Giorgio Maggiore al Crepuscolo’—I can almost smell the jasmine.” She lifted her nose to the sky and took a big sniff of air, then leaned in close to Sarina and whispered. “You are going to enter I hope?”

Sarina looked at her teacher with a big smile. “Oh yes. I wouldn’t miss that opportunity for the world.”

Mrs Gratten nodded, smiling. “That’s great. You’ll do well of course.” She straightened and looked over at Georgia, who was struggling to rescue a sopping wet and runny picture of a fat brown cat with a minuscule head—at least Sarina thought

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it was a cat—and failing miserably.

“Now, Georgia darling,” Mrs Gratten said, walking over and peering intently at Georgia’s work, “what exactly is this?”

Georgia looked sideways at Sarina, stuck her tongue out and made a face.

Sarina chuckled and concentrated on the small figure she was painting. The boy was running through the grass and was strangely dressed, as if from a mediaeval time, and he had a large mop of curly brown hair.

She looked at the expression she had painted on his face and she remembered where she had seen him before.

In her dreams.

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The next day, Sarina woke to the shrill sound of her alarm and sighed. She looked at the clock. “Oh great. Tuesday. Double science and double maths.”

She gazed across her bedroom at the unfinished canvas sitting on the easel, a set of brushes longing to be put to use, a partially painted picture of a sad-looking boy with large pale-blue eyes begging to be completed.

“Ah, it’s no use,” she said to no-one in particular and stretched her arms to shake out the ugly thought of her ‘double horror day’. She jumped out of bed and surveyed her messy room.

Apart from her beloved art, her first year in high school had been a disaster. Maybe next year, they’d let her drop her two most hated subjects. She realised what a stupid thought that was. High school was all about maths and science, and to tell the truth, she was dreading it.

She sighed again. Dragging the chain and moping around definitely wouldn’t help. She reached for her clothes and began dressing for school.

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“Hey, Sarina! What’s up?” Georgia skipped up to Sarina

in the playground.

“Oh hi, Georgia. It’s Tuesday and ... you know ...”

“Ah! Double science?”

“And maths,” Sarina added, gazing at the classroom entrance and wishing she could make it disappear. “I just can’t seem to figure that stuff out, it’s like a foreign language, all gobbledygook. Ugh.” She shook her head in disgust and looked at Georgia for sympathy.

Georgia smiled. “You’re lucky you’re the school’s almost-famous artist. Everyone wishes they could paint and draw like you.” Georgia smiled again and put her arm around Sarina’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s go in and start the day with a positive happy attitude.” They walked off into school, arm in arm.

At the entrance Sarina saw the lanky figure of a boy heading in their direction. Rats. She really didn’t need her nose rubbed in her problems before the day had even begun. Just because he was a super-brain didn’t give him the right to mock her in science class. Then she caught herself. Georgia was right, she should do her best to be positive. After all, she’d seen the boy’s attempts at art, and they weren’t pretty. Anyway, no need to be smug. He couldn’t draw to save his life.

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Sarina thought her science experiment was progressing quite well for once. Well at least it had been, up until the moment she knocked over a flask of alkali and sent it spinning across the bench. She leapt over to catch it and managed to do so before any of the contents escaped, but let go of her pencil and dropped it on the floor.

She bent down to pick the pencil up and when she stood up, she crunched her head into someone’s chin.

“Ouch!” said the recipient of Sarina’s head, “Did you think to actually look where you were going?”

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“Oops, sorry.” Sarina rubbed her head and looked up—and straight into the eyes of the lanky boy. Oh great, this is gonna be fun. Not.

“Ummm, sorry, Nathan—here let me—” and she reached over to hand him back the mini-clamp that had been thrown out of his hand and onto the bench. As she did so, she knocked the recently-rescued alkali flask again, only this time it fell off the bench, directly onto Nathan’s shoes.

Where it emptied itself.

The boy jumped backwards to avoid making the mess worse and reached down to pull off his shoes. He glared at Sarina.

“First you smash into me,” he rubbed his chin, “then you tip chemicals onto my shoes. You’re a walking disaster, aren’t you?”

He threw another angry look at her and started to walk off in his socks, then stopped and turned around to stare at Sarina.

“You’re so clumsy. I don’t know why they even let you in here. How come you can hold a paintbrush perfectly well, but a simple test-tube? You know what I think? I think you should stay well away from it. It’s quite obviously not something you can ever expect to be good at. Ever.”

He turned around and stormed off, holding his alkali-saturated shoes out in front of him between finger and thumb in disgust.

Sarina wasn’t sure she really cared what Nathan thought, but she couldn’t stop the tears welling up in her eyes as she knelt down to clean up the mess. Positive start indeed!

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The bell signalled a finish to what had felt like an excruciatingly long double-science class and Sarina walked out of the classroom into the corridor, relieved to be free of science—well at least until Thursday.

She saw Georgia further down the corridor and hurried to catch her. Georgia waved and stopped, and opened her mouth to ask a question, but closed it again when she saw Sarina's red eyes and the expression on her face.

"Come on, Sarina, why don't we check out our paintings, they should be dry now," Georgia said.

Sarina gave her friend a half-hearted smile. "OK. Maybe it will help me shake this funk."

They headed off into the brightly lit, newer wing of the school, and saw some of the senior teachers coming out of the teachers' meeting room between the wings. The last to exit was the school Principal, Mr Forrester, who caught sight of Sarina looking at him and motioned for her to stop and wait.

He walked over to her, combing the strands of hair across his bald head and dabbing them back into place. "Ah, Sarina Metcalfe, just the person I need to see. Are you free now?"

She looked up and nodded, afraid to ask exactly why the Principal had a sudden desire to see her. She had a sneaking suspicion it may have something to do with a flask of alkali. How had Mr Forrester found out so quickly about Nathan's shoes?

She hadn't realised how tall he was, having never stood this close. Maybe it was because she had never had that much to do with him before. Well obviously that was all about to change. Rats! Her day was going from bad to worse—and now she was in trouble with the Principal.

She followed along behind him to his office, turning once to look back at Georgia and roll her eyes.

The Principal's office was at the end of the staff corridor, and when she reached the door, Sarina saw the nameplate: Mr Charles Forrester, MEd. She guessed the letters must mean something important or he wouldn't have put them there. Why didn't they spell them out? Presumably it meant

he was an expert in education, or schools or something.

They entered the office, and Mr Forrester pointed to the hard wooden chair in front of his desk. Sarina sat down and discovered the chair was even less comfortable than it looked. He closed the door and walked around to sit down in a large, old and wrinkled leather swivel-chair behind the desk.

The office was not huge, but well ordered. Sarina looked around her at shelves packed with neat files and folders, reports and reference books, while the Principal shuffled papers and cleared his throat.

“Miss Metcalfe—”

“I can explain!” Sarina said, “I didn’t mean to do it, it was just an accident!”

“What was just an accident?” Mr Forrester looked over his glasses at Sarina with a furrowed brow.

“Umm, this morning, when I knocked over the flask?” Sarina looked at the Principal, expecting him to ask her for more details, but he didn’t, he just sighed and looked down at the papers.

“Sarina, I’m afraid we need to have a chat about your performance in maths and science. I’ve read the teachers’ reports and I understand that you seem to far prefer painting and drawing than maths and science, even during class.”

Sarina squirmed. She had no idea she was being watched that closely. True, she did like doodling and drawing in her spare exercise book when the numbers, figures, formulae and calculations all became blurry, but she thought it was going unnoticed. Oh well, she’d have to find other ways to disguise her frustration.

“I’m sorry Mr Forrester, I just can’t seem to stop myself, I promise I’ll—”

“Sarina, we have a responsibility to your mother—and to the school—to make sure you are properly educated in the fundamental elements of numeracy.”

He paused and fixed his gaze directly at her. “Especially when it comes to developing the critical thinking skills used in the scientific mind.”

Why did he have to use such long words, Sarina wondered. Was everyone with ‘MEd’ after their name required to speak like this? Or was it just a ‘Principal thing’?

Sarina opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say a word, the Principal waved his papers at her.

“I’ve been authorised to send you to the remedial section of Frenchstone a couple of blocks from here. They do a very good job of turning around children such as yourself who are struggling with the basics. It’ll only be for a couple of years of course,” he cleared his throat as if in anticipation of the severity of the next statement, “and while you are there, you must realise that there will be no more art, drawing or creative classes. And from this point forward, unless you are able to demonstrate satisfactory results in your maths studies, I will be forced to deny your entry to any more art competitions. I must ensure your full focus, I’m sure you understand.”

Sarina stopped breathing and the world spun away from her.

A memory of a dull, grey-brick building, with corridors that echoed no matter how quietly you walked through them, came flooding back to her.

Her mother had taken her to Frenchstone once. She shivered at the thought. On arrival they’d met the ‘Child Development Psychiatrist’ Dr Timms, whom she’d met before on several occasions when her mother had taken her to his office for ‘brain assessments’. Her mother was concerned about Sarina’s desire for doing nothing but art, and her great difficulty when it came to anything numerical and scientific.

Dr Timms, a grim fellow who wore a permanent sour

look, leaned down at her. She doubted if his mouth ever had a curve from birth. For some reason that she couldn't fathom, he was wearing a white doctor's coat, unmarked except for a large red 'S' inside a red circle embroidered on the breast pocket.

"So, Miss Metcalfe, your mother and I want to show you around. It's possible this might be your best chance at being able to grasp the more grounded concepts important in life." He pronounced the term 'grounded concepts' quite deliberately, as if it was the only proper thing young girls should be learning and clearly superior to anything remotely artistic. He went on.

"The fellows here know exactly how to make those facts and figures organise themselves properly in that scatter-brained head of yours. They'll have you back on the straight and narrow in short order." He straightened and looked at her mother. "If of course it is necessary."

As they toured the dim corridors and peered in dark rooms and met various dowdy-looking fuddy-duddies who spoke in very precise terms about 'mental drills' and 'back to basics', she'd had visions of being locked in grey rooms, with grey tables and grey chairs and grey fuddy-duddies and doing tedious long-division calculations over and over on special long rolls of paper. She could see why the kids she saw there looked so glum. Even thinking about the place now was weighing her down, let alone being stuck there.

She realised that she'd been staring at the Principal quite blankly while the memory rattled through her head. She shook herself back to the present and tried to focus, and wondered for the millionth time why they thought there was something wrong with her.

She frowned. Hang on. What was it he'd said? Did he say no art? No drawing? No painting? For two years? Surely that was illegal. And then it really sunk in. If she didn't live up to

his expectations, he'd deny her entry to the National Young Artists Breakthrough Competition. She slumped. No art. No competition entries. Could it get any worse?

"I've spoken to your mother and she is in full agreement," Mr Forrester continued, "but we've agreed that you have one week to show some dedication and genuine progress. If we don't see satisfactory results in the next maths assessments, then Frenchstone will be the next step in your educational journey. It's for your own good of course.

"That will be all for now. I'm sure if you have any questions you can discuss them with your teacher." He stood up to dismiss her and walked around to open the door, standing there with his hand out and the door open.

Her jaw dropped. What did he say? One week?

Sarina walked out as if in slow motion, stuck in a dreamlike trance.

Except for her, this was no dream.

It was a nightmare.

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She skimmed the treetops and flew along the edge of the forest, the wind whipping her hair, her flight obscured against the darkness of the inky-black sky.

Down in the valley Sarina saw the lights of the township in the distance and smelled the smoke from the wood-burning stoves in the cottages.

She soared higher and turned around slowly, scanning the scene. She saw high up on a hill in the far distance, a dark, fortress-like building. She stopped, hovering in mid-air to try to make out the details.

Suddenly from behind her, she heard loud explosions and faint screams echoing from the valley. She twisted around and saw flashes of light amid silhouetted buildings, crumbling in the distance, powerless to help the tiny figures running from falling masonry and the fires raining down on them.

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She blinked, and with no effort was jammed up high in the corner of the ceiling of a vast, dark stone-walled room inside the fortress. The room was stark and empty except for a guard stationed at each corner. Far below, in the middle of the room, seated together at a long stone table were two men.

She could barely make out their features in the dim light. One was severe-faced and was giving instructions to the other. He appeared to be the leader, and was pointing and gesticulating to the other man—wait—the other man wasn't a man, he was something ... not quite human. She gave up trying to figure out what he was, but instead strained her ears to see if she could hear their conversation.

As she turned her head to listen, she lost her grip on whatever she had been holding onto, which she realised, had been nothing at all. To her horror she found herself slowly floating down to the men—and then again; a shift of view and she was sitting opposite the two men—or rather, opposite the man and the strange-looking creature.

“Did you hear that?” the severe-faced man said, “a noise, from the roof.”

Both man and creature looked up to where Sarina had been, straining into the darkness.

“It was nothing, your Greatness,” the creature said, who Sarina noticed had a bird-like beak instead of a nose. It was slowly dawning on her that she knew this creature. But how?

“If something was there, I would have smelled it,” it said. It curled its beak inward and fixed its beady eyes directly on Sarina, who shrieked, her hands flying up to her mouth.

But nothing happened.

Why couldn't they see or hear her? Her mind raced, her heart pounded and her breath was tight in her chest as she feared to move or make a noise.

The creature pulled its gaze away from Sarina and back to the other man.

“Your Greatness, we must force the townsmen to give the boy up. It’s the only way.”

“Perhaps.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “That deaf-mute is the only one who can show us its location, of this I am certain.”

He stood to leave. “They will come to appreciate my vision for a superior world, a world that the townspeople will be grateful for. A new world that will provide them with riches that will far exceed the hard-earned returns from their backward farming techniques. They will realise they were wrong to challenge my right to rule.”

He glared at the creature. “Despite the removal of their women and children, they are proving obstinate. We must resort to more persuasive methods to force them to give up the boy. If they choose not to, then there will be painful consequences. Possibly fatal. I intend to succeed no matter the hurdles thrown at me.” He glanced out at the sky. “You must work with the men to complete the plan. We will be ready in one passing of the sun.”

He motioned the guards to follow him and walked out of the hall.

The creature turned back and leaned forward, placing his hands—which Sarina could see now were more like talons—on the table. Suddenly he leapt forward, sniffing the air around Sarina, his eyes looking right through her. She screamed and fell backwards off the chair.

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“Sarina, Sarina, what is it?” her mother said. She stroked Sarina’s forehead.

“A dream, Mum, that’s all, a bad dream.” Sarina sat up, her pyjamas twisted around her, her hair tousled. She shivered as she remembered the piercing, beady bird-like eyes looking right through her.

Thank goodness it wasn’t real.

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Later that morning in class, the nightmare was a distant memory, mostly due to another maths lesson going badly.

Sarina looked up at the board ... and then looked back down at her exercise book ... and back at the board again.

No matter how many times she did this, the numbers swam in her vision. She couldn't make head or tail of what was going on.

Sighing, she turned to a new page and started re-writing the problem for the third time.

"Sarina," the teacher called from the front, "how is it going this time?"

Sarina cringed and looked up.

"Umm, would the answer be 2.75, Miss Andrews?" she said, with a question in her voice.

Miss Andrews smiled and walked over to Sarina. She scanned Sarina's calculations then looked back up at the rest of the class.

"OK everybody else, while I help Sarina, please carry on with the next problem on page 31. It's quite a bit more complex, so let's see who can solve it first."

While Miss Andrews was talking, Sarina caught Nathan grinning at her. Oh that boy! Just because HE could do those sums easily, it didn't give the right to be so mean.

Nathan pointed his finger at his chest, mouthed 'I'm number one' then held his index finger up in the air.

Miss Andrews turned to Nathan, who quickly recomposed himself to look like a model student, looking up into the air and pretending to hold his finger up as if to say 'ah-ha'.

"Nathan, you can do the problem on page 39, since you think you are so far ahead."

As soon as the teacher looked away, Nathan looked across at Sarina and rolled his eyes.

Sarina ignored him—for now. She needed to convince Miss Andrews that she could do these calculations. The consequences of failing didn't bear thinking about.

Miss Andrews bent down next to Sarina. "Now, Sarina, let me take a look. Explain to me how you arrived at 2.75?"

"Well Miss, I divided 14 by the results of  $3 \times 'A'$  as you said and then ... well and then ..." Sarina didn't actually know what happened after "then" because that was the point at which all the numbers had sprung off the page and danced a merry dance in front of her eyes, as if to taunt her that this should be easy and obvious.

"and then I got stuck." She looked up at Miss Andrews for help, using her best puppy-dog eyes.

"I know dear," Miss Andrews said. She leaned down and lowered her voice so only Sarina would hear what she had to say. "I'll do my best to help you Sarina, but there's only so much I can do. I know the Principal has spoken to you, so let's see what we can do together. Let me get someone to work with you for a bit, OK?"

Sarina smiled gratefully. "Thank you."

Miss Andrews straightened up and looked around the class, searching for a suitable coach, stopping and nodding to herself in recognition of the perfect choice.

"Ah yes. Nathan Goldberg. Would you please come over here and bring your chair? You're just the perfect person to help Sarina out for a few classes."

Sarina groaned inwardly. Perfect, sure, she thought, watching Nathan get up and bring his chair over to her. She had to admit, he didn't look too happy about it either.

Sarina forced a smile as Nathan sat down next to her.

"What are *you* grinning about, Picasso?" Nathan said, "Surely you'd rather be in one of your precious art classes?" He said the word 'art' with the kind of emphasis someone would put on their least-favourite food.

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“Just because your Great Great Grandfather knew Einstein or something, there’s no need to be rude,” Sarina said.

“He didn’t just know Einstein, he worked with him. They discovered the Einstein-Rosen Bridge together. I’m named after him actually.” Nathan smirked.

“Well maybe you can build *me* a bridge and help me get over this, if you’re such a maths superhero.” Sarina glared at him.

“Superhero?” Nathan muttered. He sounded annoyed about his coaching assignment. “I’ll give you superhero.”

He glanced at Sarina. “What famous artist ever became a superhero and saved the world?” He turned back to his book, flipping to the page he needed.

You have a point, Sarina thought.

## DEMANDS

PAOLO WALKED ALONG the Outer Circle, a cobbled road and the outermost of the three main paths that ringed the township. He had made his last delivery of seeds to one of the furthest farms and was on his way back to the Main Square, deep in thought.

The township was built around a park, a school and the town hall, and on any normal day, there would be children shouting and playing in the lanes, the smell of freshly baked bread; and there would be groups of men and women chatting outside the brightly-coloured wooden slatted houses. His mother and father would have been among them, with his baby brother. Those times were long gone, perhaps never to return, and he straightened instinctively, trying to relieve his sadness.

Five years ago, Makthryg had forced the township's women and children to leave and work in the mines some leagues away, threatening to destroy the township if they refused. Paolo wasn't sure of the purpose of the mines, but he had heard the women and children were being forced to look for rare compounds the sorcerer was collecting. His father had been killed protecting his mother and brother, and they too were taken.

Lately the attacks on the township itself had become more frequent—Makthryg had loosened the leash on his bird-creature to invoke terror on the men—but this time there was a new urgency behind the threats, as if Makthryg was becoming impatient.

Impatient for what? Paolo frowned. The stress in the men was obvious from the lack of laughter and the disappearance of the nightly ball-games in the Square.

He stopped at the crossroads of the Outer Circle and Main Street, caught in his thoughts, when his stillness was interrupted by a man jogging.

“What are you doing there, Paolo?” the man said, breathing hard as he came to a halt, “Shouldn’t you be at home by now, cooking the dinner?” He laughed. “Anyway, I can’t stop, I’m late for the meeting of the Elders.” He resumed his trot down the Main Street, not stopping to check if Paolo had read his lips.

Paolo watched the man as he crossed over and turned into the alleyway that led to the town hall’s side entrance. He was used to the cruel jibes from the men—there were those who were still jealous that Paolo had been spared when their own children had been taken to the mines.

Still deep in thought, he walked past the rows of stone buildings in the centre of the township and he realised, no matter what the others thought, he was lucky he hadn’t been sent away. Better that he forget his guilt at not being able to save his father, and find a way to bring them back. Even if it meant a fight to the death. A village with no children was barely more than a ghost village. And a boy who couldn’t look after his younger brother—and worse, who couldn’t remember his mother’s face—was little more than a ghost himself.

He shook himself out of his reverie and followed the man.

When he arrived at the town hall, he saw that the men inside were engaged in animated discussion. He knew he’d need a good field of vision to read their lips, so he looked for a window to spy through, and moved around to the side of the building.

He found a good spot and pulled over a wooden crate

from a building across the way, placing it under the window. He raised his head slowly and peered inside.

Inside the room Paolo saw all twenty-five of the township's Elders.

On the far side of the room he saw Andreas, standing on a box of his own. He was in animated discussion, gesticulating and occasionally pointing outside.

Paolo focused in on the man. Ever since they shared a cabin, he had learned to read Andreas's lip movements, even from a distance.

"We must defend ourselves against Ma—" Paolo couldn't lip-read the word fully, but the way Andreas spoke the name contemptuously, it was obvious he was referring to Makthryg.

"He might have some \_\_\_ and \_\_\_"—Paolo didn't quite catch the words as Andreas picked that moment to turn around and make eye contact with each of the men—"but he is still a man like us—and there is only one of him against all of us." He straightened and spread his arms wide. "I say we make a plan and bring this evil to an end. Who will be with me?"

Paolo saw a number of nods around the room and some hands raised. Then Marco, one of the longest-serving Elders, stood. From where Paolo was standing, he looked like he was trying to avoid eye-contact, as if what he might say would challenge Andreas.

"I know I speak for a few of the older members here when I say that perhaps the time has come to stop fighting Makthryg and live alongside him. We must negotiate with him and make a \_\_\_\_." Paolo missed the last word, but he assumed Marco was suggesting making a deal with the sorcerer.

Tomas, Andreas's good friend who also shared the cabin with Paolo, stood. "Marco, we need to find a way to free us

from this nightmare. Makthryg refuses to collaborate and my suspicion is that he is after more than just ruling this township. We must find a way to bring back our women and children for good. I say we fight!" Tomas sat down, looking around at the others, many of whom were nodding, and held grim expressions.

Marco stood firm. "And what if we lose? Makthryg and that demon of his, Valkrog, will kill us all."

Andreas held up a hand. "No, Marco, I believe he needs us. I believe he has an ulterior motive, though for what, I cannot fathom."

Tomas stood again and faced the group. "And in any case, even if we don't fight, in my opinion we are still the losers—and I for one am not prepared to live with that."

A short man sitting to the side stood up, red-faced. "I'll tell you what I heard," and he turned to face away from Paolo, who was now forced to watch Andreas's face for any reaction.

Andreas paled and his face fell. Paolo saw the other men looking at each other, some with raised eyebrows and questioning faces.

The man turned back and now Paolo could see his ruddy face and his mouth once more. "You saw what that evil bird did to the boy's father many years ago. Need we risk its wrath again, now that it's in the killing mood? I say we find the boy and we give him up to Makthryg in return for peace!"

The hall erupted into chaos, and with everyone standing and talking at once it was impossible for Paolo to glean any more information. He was about to step down from his crate when Andreas, who was holding both arms high trying to calm everyone down, spotted Paolo at the window.

Paolo froze, trapped in Andreas's gaze, when suddenly Andreas recovered, broke eye-contact with Paolo and waved everyone to sit. The men took their seats and he glanced back

one more time. With an almost imperceptible movement of his head, he motioned Paolo to leave. Paolo jumped down from the crate and ran, thinking furiously. Why did Makthryg want him? How could he avoid being given up by the townsmen?

Paolo returned to the cabin he shared with both Andreas and Tomas, lit some candles and lay down on his bed. Exhausted from a long day delivering seed, he was now doubly tired—and stressed.

He yawned and let his mind wander over what Marco may have said to the men in the hall. Would Andreas end up agreeing? What could Makthryg possibly want from him? Why him? The thought was still lingering in his head when he fell asleep.

... and the girl's face hovered over him, floating above the bed. Paolo sat up, startled and shrank back against the pillow. The girl again. Why was she always in his dreams?

The girl smiled and floated away towards the door, beckoning Paolo to follow and holding her finger up to her lips, motioning him to be silent.

Paolo got out of bed and followed her out of the door, and floated behind her, drifting down the lane to the forest.

"Where are we going? What is your name?" Paolo was surprised to hear himself speak. He was even more surprised when the girl turned to float backwards and answered him.

"My name is Sarina," she said, "and I have something to show you. Follow me, it's quite safe."

Smiling, she rose up into the air and started to float over the treetops. Paolo had no choice but to float up with her and across the forest. They descended in the clearing, near to the log where he had felt the strange forces a few days ago.

"Look," Sarina said, "have you seen this before?"

She floated over to the ground next to the log and pointed to the grass and moss. It was glowing a deep blue, emanating

from under and around the log.

“Not as clearly as that on the ground.” He looked back at Sarina, puzzled. “Actually I’ve only ever seen it on my hands and on the ground when I pushed hard into the moss.” He grimaced as he remembered that night and Valkrog’s attack.

Sarina pointed to his arms. “Like that you mean?”

Paolo turned his palms up and stared at the deep blue glow. “Yes. Like that.” He looked back up at Sarina. “What does it mean?”

Sarina shrugged and said nothing.

Without warning a loud screeching noise enveloped them both, and they clamped their hands over their ears in agony. Paolo looked up to the sky and gasped. “It’s the creature! Run!” But his legs would not work, and he could not get away—

Andreas closed the door behind him and saw Paolo sitting up in bed looking at him. “Paolo, you look like you’ve seen a ghost! Did that sticking door wake you up? I must adjust the frame.” He bent down and peered at the door, closing it and then with a strong yank of the handle, wrenched it open again with a shudder, causing the entire cabin to vibrate. He nodded. “Yes, I’m sure that’s what must have woken you.” He sighed and straightened, placing his hands on his hips and looking over at Paolo.

“But tell me, Paolo, what were you doing spying on our meeting?” Andreas kept his eyes trained on him as he walked over and sat down in the chair near the bed.

Paolo wriggled in discomfort, picked up the notebook on the floor next to the bed and held up the pencil in an unspoken question. Andreas nodded and waited for Paolo to write his answer.

Paolo held the notebook closer to the candlelight and scribbled his response, then handed the notebook across. When Andreas had finished reading, he put the book down

and fixed Paolo with a pained gaze.

The door opened and Andreas and Paolo saw Tomas grinning at both of them as he entered and closed the door behind him with a firm kick.

“What’s so funny?” Andreas asked, puzzled.

“I told that angry old man to go and get some sleep and think about what he can do to help, rather than telling everyone what they are doing wrong! I’ve been waiting to have a chance to set him straight for years,” then his voice fell quiet and his face dropped as he saw the look on Paolo and Andreas’s faces. “What happened?” Tomas raised his eyes at Andreas and moved to sit down so he could see both of them.

“Paolo is scared he’s going to be given up to Makthryg because some of the Elders will give in to his demands,” Andreas said with a grim expression, looking back over at Paolo.

“How did he? Oh.” Tomas looked at Paolo as it dawned on him that Paolo had eavesdropped the meeting. “It seems our little friend here has some pretty good spying skills.”

Paolo made a gesture with his fingers.

“Aye, I know, Paolo, not so little eh?” Tomas said, smiling.

Andreas stood up and paced the floor. He stopped and faced Tomas.

“I don’t believe for one moment that Makthryg has any intention of returning the women and children, whether he captures Paolo or not. Our only real hope is to try to discover what he really wants from us and why he believes Paolo is a part of that.”

Tomas grunted. “Hmmp. It’s one thing to discover what he wants and another thing completely to prevent him getting it.”

They both looked at Paolo, as if looking at him might reveal the answer.

## SARINA'S NIGHTMARE

Paolo knew he might have the answer to some of their questions, but something told him that right now wasn't the best time to tell them about the log and the blue glow. And especially not the time to tell them about the blue-eyed girl.

Not until he had a better idea himself. He turned over to go back to sleep and to avoid the searching looks from Andreas and Tomas.

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Paolo felt himself drop out of the sky, and directly down towards the red-tiled roof of a house in the middle of a neat row of brick houses, with neat fences and neat green lawns. He twisted in the air to look at the roofs he was falling towards. Why was he so calm when he was falling so fast?

Without thinking, he slowed until he floated to a halt on the roof of one of the houses.

He turned around and looked for a way down. He almost fell backwards off the roof when he saw the blue-eyed girl hovering in front of him.

"Is this real or a dream?" Paolo asked, feeling a little silly as he realised it must be a dream, since he was able to speak.

The girl said nothing, but took him by the hand. They floated off the roof and down to the grass, where she sat down and patted the grass for him to sit next to her.

"I suppose it's as real as we make it," she shrugged. "Lately I'm not really sure about anything actually. Anyway, my name is Sarina. Pleased to meet you," and she stuck out her hand towards Paolo, who looked at it, confused.

"Well?" Sarina said, "aren't you going to shake my might-be-not-real hand then?"

Paolo hesitated, then held out his hand, wondering if he would feel anything, or if as soon as he touched anything the illusion would be shattered. He was astonished to feel Sarina's hand as real as he would any person's.

"My name is Paolo, and I already know your name. Or

did you forget? And you're the only person who can hear me. In my real world, I am deaf and mute."

Sarina looked shocked. "What? You already know my name? How? And I'm the only one who can hear you? In your world you are mute?"

"Yes. We've met before, in one of these"—he struggled to find the right word and failed—"real-dreams."

She fell quiet and her shoulders slumped.

"What's the matter?" Paolo said.

"It's so confusing. Sometimes I wonder if I've just gone completely bonkers. All this 'your world' and 'my world' and weird dreams that seem real ..." she trailed off and stared into space for a while before continuing.

"Like I said, lately I'm not sure about anything much. In my world I love to paint, draw and write but ..." she lowered her head.

"But what?" Paolo wanted to help. After all, this girl was the only person who could actually hear him—and speak to him.

Sarina looked back up at Paolo. "I'm hopeless with numbers, maths and almost anything to do with science." She looked back down at the ground. "My mother has been taking me to all these experts who want to poke around in my head and find something wrong." Her eyes glazed over as she remembered something and she shuddered. "She just doesn't understand."

"That's like lots of things," Paolo said. "At first I wasn't very good at calculating the seed spreads in the fields"—he saw from her confused expression that she didn't understand exactly what he meant—"but now it's really easy." He looked at Sarina. "Don't you have a good friend you can ask for help?"

"Oh, Georgia tries to help, but I think I'm a hopeless case. The numbers just swirl into a fuzzy mess in my head and I

can't make any sense of it, it's no use!" She hugged her knees with her arms and buried her head.

"Do you mean like this?" Paolo said and he waved some shimmering coloured numbers into existence in the air in front of Sarina.

She looked up and stared at the numbers floating around—then Paolo waved his hand around some more and messed all the numbers up. Sarina turned to Paolo with wide eyes, a question forming on her lips. "How?"

Paolo erased the fuzzy numbers with a wave of his hand. "If you ask me, I don't think the how is important, you just have to believe you can do it."

"You can do all that, yet you can't speak or hear in your world?"

Paolo looked glum. "It is the result of one of Makthryg's curses that went wrong."

"Who's 'Makthryg'?"

"He calls himself a sorcerer and I think he wants to be the ruler of our world. He's taken over the fortress on the top of the hill. The townsmen are scared, but they won't bow down to him. He cursed a half-bird, half-man creature into existence who does his dirty work, and recently he has been flying in and out of the township and terrorising the townsmen. The same creature who killed my father." Paolo sighed.

Sarina's head jerked up. "Your father was killed?"

"He was trying to protect my mother and my new-born brother, and stop them being sent away with all the others. I was only nine and I wasn't there. If I had been, maybe I could have stopped the creature incinerating him." He sighed. "Lucio would be five now, and I've never had the chance to play with him."

"I'm so sorry. Why did this Makthryg want to send the women and children away?"

“He wanted to control the townsmen, and he also needed workers for the mines he’s been drilling in the west. The women and children work in the mines, and unless the townsmen do his bidding, they won’t be coming back. They’ve been gone five years now.”

“Why didn’t he send you away then?”

“That’s how I got the deaf-mute curse. Makthryg captured me—he was looking for my father because he thought he knew the whereabouts of a particular substance. I wouldn’t tell him where he was and he got angry and tried to make me talk using a curse. But it backfired and had the opposite result. All I remember is a searing white pain and running into the forest. I think Makthryg let me stay as a reminder to all the men what might happen to them or their families if they stood in his way. Now they all avoid me, or poke fun at me. They think I bring them bad luck. But I can’t hear them anyway, nor say anything to defend myself.”

Sarina took Paolo’s hand. “I’m glad you knew your father. Mine died just before I was born. I bet you miss your mother though.”

Paolo looked up with tears in his eyes. “I miss her a lot. But no matter how hard I try, I can never remember her face. Am I bad because I can’t remember?”

Sarina held him while he cried.

“We make quite a pair don’t we. Me the crazy artist who can’t do sums; and you, locked up in your own world, with all your friends sent away. Well, I’ll tell you what, I’ll be your friend.”

Paolo pulled away, held her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. “Thank you. I’m lucky I’ve found people like you. My father’s friend, Andreas who took me in, is another. Andreas takes me seriously and will ask for my opinion. He knows I’m able to solve things even some of the Elders cannot. But nothing will stop me finding my mother. I have

to see her face again.”

Sarina was rubbing the back of her neck and wore a puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong?”

“Someone is watching me—” she whipped her head around to look up and pointed. Materialising on top of the roof was a partly transparent, bird-like creature. “When you said half-bird, half-man, do you mean that half-bird, half-man-like ‘thing’?”

“Yes,” Paolo said, looking to where she was pointing, “that creature. Which means we are in danger. We need to get out of here. Now.”

Paolo stood up and pulled Sarina up by the hand and they started to run, when, bit-by-bit, the world dimmed and faded to black, leaving Sarina’s voice echoing in his head. “Help Paolo, help!”

Then there was nothing.

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ABOUT ROBERT SCANLON

Born in Australia, Robert was whisked back to England where he spent his childhood. After many years complaining about the weather, he did the only sensible thing, and moved back to Australia. Queensland actually. Where he enjoys walks along the beach with his wonderful family.

(Pssst. He still complains about the weather if it gets too cold!)

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