

THE NIGHTSILVER PROMISE

CELESTIAL MECHANISM CYCLE I

ANNALIESE AVERY

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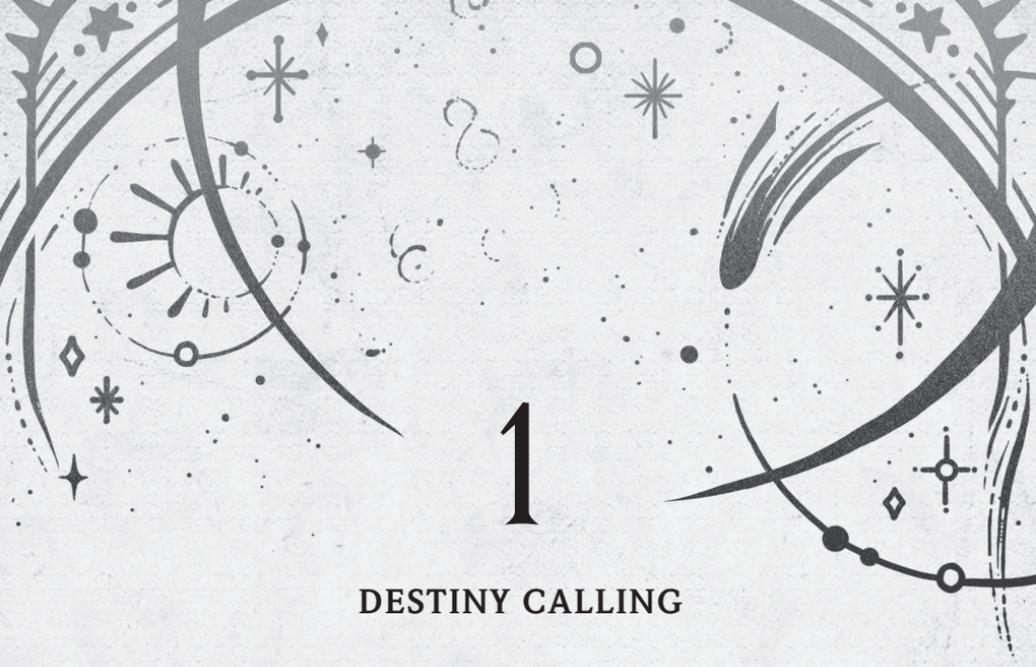
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DESTINY CALLING

Destiny was calling Paisley Fitzwilliam. She held its summons clutched in her hand.

Walking away from the aerodoc station, she adjusted the strap on her father's old dragonhide satchel, her flame-touched curls twisting out from under her woolen cap, the sound of the aeroplanes filling her ears as they lifted into the skies of London.

She glanced up, squinting into the clear winter sky. She could just make out the floating borough of Greenwich Overhead as it sat in the west away from the rising sun. By the time the sun fell this evening, the floating borough would be high in the east, welcoming the night.

A chill north wind had gripped London, its icy fingers extending out over the rest of the Empire of Albion, but Paisley paid it little

attention as she walked the frost-covered streets of Lower London. There were more important things at hand than the frozen Thames; this was the day that she had been waiting thirteen long turnings for. Today she would find out what the stars had in store for her. Paisley glanced down at the summons, the mechanized Old Celtic type crisp and black against the cream of the parchment, inviting her to discover what the Chief Designer had planned for her track. Paisley smiled as she crossed Old Broad Street and made her way toward the Mechanist chapel. She was as sure of her future as she was that the sun was made of dragon fire and the Earth of clockwork.

Paisley knew that she was going to be an explorer, just like her father.

She passed a news-smith as he bellowed out the headline from the *King's Herald*.

"Killer comet signals the beginning of the end," he called. "Lady Scientist insists it's *not* a dragon."

Paisley stopped dead at the words *lady scientist*. She snapped her head toward the news-smith and reached out for a paper.

"Oi, this ain't no library—if you wanna read it, you'll have to buy it," the gruff young man said.

Paisley reached inside the folds of her thick woolen coat. As she handed over a silver sixpence, she saw the man look at her left wrist; her sleeve had ridden up to show her thick dragonhide bracelet. Paisley blushed as she tried to ignore the narrowing of the

man's eyes and the dismissive way he thrust the change at her. After today, she would never have to wear the bracelet again; her track would be revealed and her stars would shine brightly for all to see.

She walked slowly as she read the paper; her mother's name leaped out at her.

Celestial Physicist Professor Violetta Fitzwilliam, the first and only woman to hold tenure in the floating borough of Greenwich Overhead, has been credited with finding a fast-moving comet, Comet Wolstenholme, named after the Professor's grandfather, who was also a scientist. The comet is set to light up the skies over our glorious Empire and the savage nations of the Northern Realm within the next few days.

The Guild of Mechanists are reassuring concerned citizens that if Fitzwilliam's claims are true, then the comet will be part of the Chief Designer's plan.

However, there are those who believe that all is not well in the Celestial Mechanism.

Concern is growing that this so-called comet is none other than Malgol—the Great Dragon prophesied by the Dragon Walkers.

Given the Professor's own tumultuous track, there may be some truth to this. Readers may remember that Professor Fitzwilliam is the wife of the late Knight of Albion, sworn protector of the George and commander of the League of Explorers, Sir Edmund

Fitzwilliam. Sir Edmund died almost four turnings ago in the Empires to the East while on a diplomatic mission for the George. She is also mother to a crippled son and a teenage daughter, who is reported to be trackless.

The Professor is hosting a lecture this evening on her discovery, which the *Herald* will report on tomorrow. For those wishing to know more about the prophecy, turn to page eight.

Exasperated, Paisley pouted as she folded the newspaper and stuffed it into her satchel. *Great Dragon, indeed.* Mother had been tracking the comet for weeks, measuring its progress as it moved along its unseen track in the Mechanism. The idea that it could be a Great Dragon was utterly unscientific!

And as for her being trackless . . . well, she was about to fix that.

The clock tower struck as she hurried up Wormwood Street; the Mechanist chapel dominated the road with its domed roof and twisting corner spires.

Paisley reached out for the central cog on the chapel's ornately decorated door and paused.

She looked behind her at the busy street, at the people passing, sure and steady on their daily tracks. Her breathing came fast.

What if her stars weren't to her liking?

What if the destiny she had planned for herself was about to be stolen by her stars?

Paisley inhaled deeply, the air filling her lungs with little icy

stabs. She held it for a moment, then let it out in one go, her hot breath steaming like a dragon's.

It would have been so much easier if she had just received her stars when she was a baby, like almost everyone else did.

Everyone she knew already had their track. It was customary that a person's destiny was given to them at some time during their infancy. They would grow up, secure in the knowledge of what their track had in store for them.

But not Paisley.

She'd had thirteen turnings of dreaming and hoping. Of working out for herself what her track held. Now she had her own plans for her future. Plans that the Chief Designer had not drawn up.

It was rare for a person to go so long without knowing their track, but not unheard of. The Mechanists only ever revealed a destiny when the stars said it was the right time to do so. For some reason, Paisley's stars had been waiting till this very moment.

But now that she was finally about to be told her path in life, a cold doubt crept over her.

Paisley lowered her hand from the door and chewed her lip.

What if the Chief Designer had something in store for her that she didn't want?

She'd kept the summons a secret from Mother and her younger brother, Dax, for that very reason. She could go home now and no one would know. She took a step back and turned to leave.

Then stopped.

Looking down at the summons letter, she unfolded the envelope and tipped out the small copper disk inside. Not for the first time, she ran her fingers over the grooves at the edge of the disk and the scratches that crisscrossed its surface—these small lines and notches would mark out her fate.

She looked back over her shoulder, toward the news-smith. No one would sneer at her lack of guiding stars again.

She clenched the token in her fist and pushed open the chapel doors, ready to face her future.

Paisley's boots clipped across the stone floor. Her eyes followed the twisting pillars of cogs as they slowly rotated up to an inky black ceiling. The ceiling shone with the light of a thousand false stars, each one a replica of a true star, each one turning in the heavens in the exact position of its counterpart.

She focused on one small bright star, and a flicker of hope burst up inside her. Maybe her stars would be aligned with what she wanted after all—otherwise, why would the Chief Designer allow her to wish for it if it wasn't in her track?

Above the dais hung the Doom. Paisley had often sat in the pews and examined the brightly painted scene while the Mechanist priest read from the Blueprints, the ancient teachings of the Chief Designer.

The Doom depicted two stories. One told of how the Chief Designer had forged the looping golden tracks of the Celestial Mechanism in the breath of the Great Dragons, their fire as bright

as the gleaming tracks and glinting in the light of the false stars of the chapel.

She had often heard the tale retold in the reading of the teachings—of how dragon breath had made the sun and the light, and the Chief Designer had invented the night so that the stars might guide us.

The second story showed the fate of the Great Dragons, their punishment for turning away from the Chief Designer and forging their own way in the world: a vibrant image of the First George confronting the Great Dragon, Ealdordóm, the first to be banished. In his hand, the George held his lance, Ascalon. The lance was said to have been designed for the George so that he could fulfill his destiny and rid the world of the Great Dragons, just as the Chief Designer had planned.

Paisley had often felt that the fate of the Great Dragons ought to have been different. They had not deserved to die just because they wanted to live their lives in their own way. Paisley had spent her entire thirteen turnings living her life in her own way; the idea that she would soon be powerless over her destiny made her wonder if it would be better for her to remain trackless.

However, the teachings of the Blueprints were very clear that everyone had a track that must be kept to, and it was finally time for Paisley to receive hers.

The schematica was waiting for her on the dais. Her left wrist tingled in anticipation.

Like most Mechanist machines, the schematica was elegant in its design. The slot at the top was just the right size for the copper disk, and the circular hole at the front was just the right size for her hand.

Paisley could feel the rise and fall of her chest now.

This was it.

The cogs of fate had already turned for her, and she was about to know what her track held. Excitement jostled with fear, and won out.

She held her breath as she placed her left hand into the machine, palm up, and then placed the disk in the slot with her other hand. For a moment, nothing happened, and then the machine closed around Paisley's forearm, trapping her hand and wrist inside.

Her breathing quickened; she felt a clamminess come over her.

Paisley's wrist began to burn. She bit her lip, and tears sprang to her eyes. But the pain subsided in a moment. The schematica opened, and Paisley tentatively pulled her hand out.

She held her arm up to the light, studying the smattering of golden stars on her wrist.

Paisley smiled. She finally had her track. She was just like everyone else in the Empire.

But there was something strange about her stars. In all the charts she had ever seen, the golden dots were scattered over a circle, defining its circumference, filling its surface. But her stars were scattered in a semicircle, as if it was missing its other half.

From the bottom of the schematica came a long piece of parchment. It had Paisley's name typed on it in Old Celtic.

Below her name was a drawing identical to the stars on her wrist.

Paisley looked beyond this at the series of symbols and detailed explanations. She translated each one quickly; they told her what type of person she was and how the cogs of her track would turn.

She smiled broadly, reassured at the strange grouping of her stars as everything she read about herself rang true. Her stars said that she was brave and loyal. That she stood by the truth and would fight for the rights of herself and others. Her stars said that she put the needs of others before herself and that she should be aware of her own needs and interests from time to time. Then she paused.

As Paisley translated the last section of her chart, her mouth became dry. She read the lines once, twice, a third time. Her breathing came fast, and her heart sounded in her ears. Fear gripped her.

You will be brave. You will try your hardest. You will have far to go, but you will not have long to travel. You will suffer great losses. Your stars say that you will fail. Your stars say, Paisley Fitzwilliam, that before the end of your fourteenth turning, your cog will cease, your track will end, and you will die.