

I know who the Mona Lisa was. I have walked through the mind of Picasso and blinked in the light of Turner. I have been to the Sistine Chapel and touched the hand of Michelangelo's God.

I can do these things and more because I possess the Ring of the Entring, the ancient power of creativity, the power behind all art and inspiration, the power that separates us from the animal kingdom, the power behind humanity.

I am Jessica Sweetshop.

The Entring is in me. I am the first born girl of one who has the Entring, and that is very rare and special, for the power of the Entring is renewed within me, strong like in the ancient times.

It awaked on my thirteenth birthday.

Long ago, a dark force used the Entring for evil. Thirteen first born females were forced to fashion a single diamond with thirteen sides. A thing of such reflective beauty was created; it glowed with the creative spirit of each first born. The diamond was set into an ivory ring. When worn, the wearer can become a powerful user of the Entring. That evil was defeated and now I own the ring.

-Prologue -

The mirror was steamed up and he wiped a hand across the glass and stared at his reflection. Even through the warm mist of the bathroom and the streaks of water running across the mirror surface he could see his weariness, staring back at him, accusingly.

He slowly moved the toothbrush across his teeth, eyes still fixed upon his image. "Another day begins, my friend." He said dryly to his unsmiling self and he let out a deep, minty sigh, rinsed and prepared to go to work.

"We could manage you know, Bob"

He stretched his arms into his big overcoat. "It too much of a risk, Jen, we've been over this. We could lose everything, the house, our home, our future...it's just too risky."

She looked at him and he avoided her gaze. She noticed how his shoulders hung slightly forward, like a man without hope, resigned to what life has dealt him and her heart sank for she loved him and she knew his life would be her life. She bit her lip as her resentment swelled. "So we live like this? Day to day, week to week with barely enough to scrape by? Dragging yourself to that factory, it's destroying you, can't you see it Bob? It's destroying us..." She was crying now and she was angry with herself because she knew he did it for them. The risk was great but surely it was better to risk than to slowly fade away. Each day a little piece of Bob died and she knew a piece of her died

with him. She sat heavily onto a chair “All that training and studying, for what...?”

Bob stiffened “Fine, I’ll just pack my job in shall I? I’ll do it today; I’ll give them a call now shall I? Hello, it’s Bob here, just calling to say I’m not coming to work today, or any other day for that matter, you see, my wife has persuaded me to become self-employed, as an artist no less. It doesn’t matter that I’ve lost the will to paint, that I have a mortgage, bills, food and clothes to pay for, I’m just walking out and I’m going to use the meagre savings we have to fund my lack of talent before we finally go broke and lose everything, Ok? Thanks, bye!”

She buried her head in her hands and wept as the door slammed shut and in the next room her baby started to cry.

He stood on the door step, regretting his outburst. The cries of his baby son piercing his heart as he turned up the collar of his overcoat against the winter wind. “It’s too risky” he confirmed to himself and he pushed off the step and headed up the street towards the grey towers of the factory standing bleak and cold against a steel grey sky.

“Too risky” he repeated, and he tucked his head into his collar, oblivious to the icy drizzle which had started to fall and now swept about him “Too risky, it’s just too...”

“Hey, Mister!”

A hand grabbed his arm and he blinked in startlement as the huge lorry thundered past inches from his nose. The ground shook under the weight and he could smell the diesel of its great engine and his ears filled with its clanking roar – and then it was gone.

“Are you ok, mister? That was a close one; you should pay more attention when crossing the road you know.”

He looked around in confusion to see a girl, dressed in a bright pink coat and matching woolly hat. Her bright pink nose poked out above her scarf which was wrapped around her face against the cold. Her eyes were big and smiling and he immediately came to his senses.

“Oh, bloody hell! I’m so sorry, I was miles away, I could have been killed...” and he paused in mid-sentence, his mind raced with that thought; Jenny and the baby, what would have happened to them...?“You saved my life young lady, what’s your name?”

“My name is Jessica Sweetshop, pleased to meet you...” and she held out her hand.

“Bob, I’m Bob, nice to meet you Jessica Sweetshop.” He shook her hand, which felt warm, very warm, a warmth which ran up his arm and through his whole body. The sensation made him feel dizzy. He stumbled to the ground.

“Are you ok Bob”

“Yes, I, I’m fine...just a little shaky, from the near miss I think.”

“Perhaps you should go home and not go to work today.” she said, pulling her scarf down from her face to show him a broad smile. “Well must go, I’m meeting my friend at the station, it was nice to meet you Bob”

“And you too, Jessica, thank you again.” And he watched her walk merrily on her way – was that ring on her finger glowing? He let the thought drop as he stood on the kerb looking at the factory, at the grey towers, the grey sky. He looked around and the whole world seemed to be in monotone, like an old black and white film. Then he saw it, a flower, a small single flower growing out of a crack in the frost bitten pavement, bright blue, a blue that pulled him towards it like a beacon. He bent down and stared in wonder, the colour seemed to dance around him, flitting through all shades of the spectrum, he touched the petals and again felt warmth flowing through his arm and into his body and he began to feel something which he thought had died within him forever. He felt inspired. He wanted to paint, to draw, anything – everything! “To hell with the factory!” he declared “You were right, Jen, I’m coming home, it *is* worth the risk!”

And he turned his back on the factory and started to run.

The little flower quietly burst into a shower of tiny stars and disappeared with a pop. In the distance thunder rolled gently against the colourless skies.

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“Jessica... Jess, over here!”

The train had pulled into the station on time and I stood excitedly on the platform. The doors opened spilling out crowds of people and I was soon swamped by a sea of grey overcoats and umbrellas popping open against the cold drizzle. I strained on my tip-toes to see where the voice was coming from and through the swarm I could see a red-gloved hand rising above their heads and waving frantically. I shouted “Millie... Millie is that you?” The bustling, jostling people cleared as suddenly as they had arrived and as the last of them filtered out of the station, I was left standing there alone and confused...“Millie?” I repeated.

“Boo!” A hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me round as I yelped in fright. I gasped and started to laugh “Millie! You rotten cow!”

My cousin, Millie Iridum was to stay at our house for a week. Like me she was taught at home and both our parents thought it would be a good idea for her to come down and take part in a course dad had arranged with the local historical society about Roman Britain. Dad said "Remember, Jessica, she does not know about the Entring, her father has asked that we keep our family gift a secret until she is older." Although Millie is the same age as me, she is not a first born female and the Entring is not as strong in her family.

Her dad, (Uncle Alderan Iridum) is a Professor of Chemistry and spends much of his time hidden away in his laboratory. Her mother (Aunt Celestine Iridum) used to be a teacher at the local comprehensive school but gave it up to teach Millie at home.

I was really looking forward to seeing Millie; she was always good fun to be with, but she did have a liking for playing practical jokes! She was about my height, with jet black bobbed hair which today was mostly covered in a bright red bobble hat, matching her gloves. Bright green eyes shone from her ivory round face, her cheeks red tinted from the chill of the air, her breath condensing against the cold through a broad grinning mouth. A thick ankle-length blue coat fitted snugly around her and hung an inch above her suede green boots.

"Couldn't resist that one Cousin!" She giggled, "Come on, the course doesn't start 'till tomorrow, we've got all day to have some fun and catch up with each other" and she grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the station.

The burger restaurant was quite empty and felt warm and welcoming after the cold of the station. I popped a 'chicken' nugget into my mouth and wondered if the free toy that came with my meal really was 'free' or was the meal free with the toy? Millie was chatting away between big mouthfuls of cheeseburger; "...and then dad shouted 'everyone out of the house!' and there was a big bang and the house filled with green smoke and then dad came staggering out of his laboratory looking like the Incredible Hulk, only skinny, it was so funny, although mom was yelling at him 'my new carpets, ruined!' ha, ha, ha, oh Jessica, you should have been there!"

"Oh Millie, sounds like it's all go in your house, your poor mother must have been horrified!"

"She soon calmed down though, turned out that the green dust lying all over the house dissolved after a day or so, leaving everything it touched sparkling clean! Dad had accidentally invented a new household cleaner that cleans by itself – the only thing is, he doesn't know how he made it and mom won't let him try and recreate his experiment in case he actually does blow the house up!"

She stuffed the last of the burger into her mouth. “Anyway, how about you Jessica, I bet its not as exciting in your house, I mean, you can’t really get into trouble playing around with some old paintbrushes!”

I knew she was teasing me and I wanted to say that those paintbrushes have taken me places and adventures she could only imagine, but I had promised dad that I wouldn’t say anything about the Entring or my gift. “I’m quite happy playing around with my paintbrushes, thank you very much, cheeky girl!”

“I’m only joking!” she said laughing, “How’s you mom, is she still making sure you brush your teeth in the morning?”

I started to laugh “With a name like Sweetshop...”**YOUR TEETH MUST GLEAM!** we both shouted with a giggle.

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With our bellies full, we wrapped up warm and headed into town to look around the shops and pop into the museum. For all her playfulness, Millie had a genuine interest in History, and was looking forward to the course which would begin in the museum the following morning. Today, she wanted the opportunity to have a look around and familiarise herself with its various departments and displays.

I had visited the museum on many occasions with mum and dad and knew it well. For my family, museums can sometimes provide a totally different experience! Old and ancient artefacts could have been created by artists with a strong Entring gift and that power can still be felt, especially in paintings. Dad had helped organise the displays for tomorrow’s course, making sure none of the artefacts contained strong Entring influences. Sometimes the Entring is so strong that it can connect directly with me, with unpredictable results. Not long ago I was transported thousands of years into the past by the Entring power contained within a cave painting. Since then we have always been careful when approaching unfamiliar works of art. *Yes Millie, it’s quite boring playing around with my old paintbrushes!*

The main entrance to the museum is a grand affair, with tall yellow stone columns rising high either side of glistening granite steps which lead up to two huge oak doors framed in ornate stone, above which is carved the words: “Their past, present and future. Your future, present and past”

The big wooden doors swing open automatically as we approach (a sign of our ‘present’) and we enter the large, airy foyer. The room is circular with doors leading away to different areas of the museum. The floor is cool and marble. High above, a dome of stained glass scatters gold and blue light across the clean beige walls. To our left a man sits at a polished dark wood

desk. He smiles and raises his hand to the rim of his cap. "Morning ladies, how are you young Jessica? And who's this you have with you?"

"Morning Mr Ali, this is Millie, she's staying with me for a couple of days and will be attending the course here tomorrow. We're just popping in to have a quick look around."

"Hello Millie, ah, the Roman Britain course? It is looking most excellent; you will have a great time learning about the Ancient Britons and the Roman Empire. The displays are nearly finished, Mrs Atwood is down there now and will be pleased to have an extra pair of hands or two to help out!"

"C'mon Millie, you're going to love this!" and we raced out of the foyer through a door leading to 'Department of Prehistory and Europe'. The museum was quite empty as we hurried past ancient art and archaeology of Europe from the earliest times to the present day, past scenes depicting life in stone age Britain, the Magdalenian depictions always sent tingles down my spine and I would be reminded of Lula and our adventures in her time. We descended down a wide spiral stone staircase following a sign which said: 'Britain under Roman Occupation' the bottom of which stood some double doors. We pushed them open and Millie gasped.

"Oh, this is good" her voice was low; she didn't want to break the spell. The recreation was very convincing. The museum had dedicated a whole floor to the construction of part of a Roman town. We were looking up a street, in Roman Britain!

We stepped quietly onto the rough road of stone and hay; market stalls ran either side displaying a wealth of produce and wares. Stone and earthen ware pottery, fruit, vegetables, various meats, chickens and rabbits (all fake but very convincing!) were laid out. Behind the stalls stood facades of Roman buildings, some were two or three stories high, nearly touching the great steel beams of the museum roof. The stone walls were whitewashed and had small pine-shuttered windows, some with loosely hung bright red drapes. To our left the stalls were set in-between a colonnade of stone pillars, behind which were more whitewashed buildings. At the far end of the street stood a large building with tall stone columns, a flag hung from its great arched roof, and above the columns was a carving of a large eagle. Steps ran up in-between the columns towards two tall doors. It really was quite magical.

"Who's there, who is that?" A voice called out from somewhere...we looked around. "Jessica? Is that you? I'm up here, you're just in time!"

Out of one the third floor windows a waving arm suddenly disappeared and we could here the sound of feet echoing off metal steps. "Ah, girls, just in time, the workmen have just left, the display is nearly complete!" Mrs Atwood almost fell through the door as she burst onto the street! Behind her I could see the steel poles of the scaffolding which must be holding up the facades.

“Mrs Atwood, this is my cousin, Millie. She will be attending the course tomorrow...”

“Excellent! Nice to meet you Millie, you’re just in time!”

I looked at Millie and back at Mrs Atwood. “Time for what?”

Mrs Atwood’s face was beaming as she opened a pair of shuttered windows to reveal a control panel full of switches “Time for this!” With great ceremony, she pressed a single green button, and then came the sound of gears and whirring, like the sound a lift makes. High above our heads, a great sheet was being slowly drawn across the room, hiding the museum roof above and when it finally clunked into place, we were in near darkness, just the faint glow of the roof lights shining through from above the huge sheet that now covered the entire room. Mrs Atwood pressed another button and the ceiling lights went off, leaving us in total darkness. Millie put her hand on my arm.

“Don’t worry girls” said Mrs Atwood, sensing our nervousness. “This is the best bit!” And she pressed yet another button. Suddenly, a light began to flicker in one of the windows, and then another and another! Lanterns hanging across stalls blinked into life and the columns of the large building at the end of the street began to glow a warm pulsing orange as larger lanterns began to throw their light.

“Jessica, I can feel a breeze!”

A gentle gust of wind brushed passed my face and I could hear the faint, muffled sound of music and people, lots of people, all talking at once, like a crowd on market day! With my mouth wide open, I looked at Mrs Atwood, who was grinning from ear to ear! “Look up girls!”

The setting sun had lit the sky above the large columned building, throwing deep orange and yellow beams onto the clouds which were drifting lazily across it. I let my eyes drift with them across the length of the room where the rich colours faded into deep blue which in turn faded into the star scattered dark blue of the oncoming night.

“It’s early evening, on a late summer’s night” Mrs Atwood whispered. It creates the best illusion, any lighter and you start to see the joins!”

I turned to Millie, who was now sitting cross-legged in the middle of the road looking up at the ‘sky’. “Millie, are you okay?”

“This is brill, this is just sooo brill!” She jumped up, “Jess, this is superb, it’s so real! I mean, it’s winter outside, and here we are on a warm summers evening in Roman Britain!”

“Glad you approve, young Millie, you and Jessica can help me with the finishing touch!” Mrs Atwood marched off towards the columned building at the end of the street. “This is the senate house; all great cities of the Roman Empire had one” She explained. “See that flag?” She pointed to the deep red flag which hung from the arched roof. In gold were the letters ‘SPQR’. “SPQR stands for ‘Senatus PopulusQue Romae’, which means the ‘Senate and People of Rome’. It was the motto of ancient Rome and was used on most state building and monuments of the time.” We followed her up the steps to the two tall doors; she opened a small panel to reveal a keypad and tapped a

code into it. The doors swung silently open and we peered into the dark of the doorway. "Come on in, nothing to be worried about" Said Mrs Atwood "just need to find the light switch" and she disappeared into the room.

We went in after her.

"Where is the damn switch? Ah, here it is!" Her voice echoed slightly indicating a fairly large space about us. My head began to tingle. The room suddenly lit up revealing a giant bronze statue of a Roman riding a horse; he was holding his arm out, hand spread flat as if about to pat something. The statue was mounted on an ornate marble plinth, it loomed ominously over us. I froze, this wasn't supposed to be here, and the tingling was spreading through my body.

"This is the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius, the last true Emperor before the Roman Empire began its decline. His full title was *Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus* and was Roman Emperor from 161AD to his death in 180AD."

Mrs Atwoods voice was becoming faint and the room seemed to sway, I had to move away, I was too close to this statue, the Entring was in it and it was strong!

"It's a bit of a coup actually" she went on "We have it on special loan from the Musei Capitolini in Rome! It was a last minute acquisition, ah, yes, direct from the Palazzo dei Conservatori itself! Go on Millie, you can touch it, feel the history!"

I watched in slow motion as Millie stretched up her hands to join Mrs Atwood in touching the horses bronze hoof. I raised my hand towards them, the ring on my finger was glowing white and I tried to shout but the Entring was working and nothing could stop it now. The sculptor's energy ran through every centimetre of the statue, all the pain, the sweat, the fear, the anger, the passion and the joy, I can feel it and taste it because the Entring gives the gift of creativity, the gift of dreams and sometimes nightmares.

The world goes white; there is no swirling of colour. There is no sound.

Then darkness. I hear a cough. "Hello?" I whispered.

"Jess, is that you, what happened?"

Millie? "Millie is that you?"

"Who else would it be - Mrs Atwood can you put the light on again?"

Mrs Atwood? "Mrs Atwood?"

"Yes, Jessica, don't worry, lights must have shorted out. They did glow quite bright for a second there, wait a minute, here's the door..."

"No! Mrs Atwood, please, wait!"

The doors swung heavily open and we blinked in the bright light. Almost at once we were engulfed by the loud sounds of many people talking and moving around and the clatter of things and the sounds of animals and the smell – oh the smell! Mrs Atwood stood still, like the statue she did not move. Her mouth was wide open and her eyes were fixed on the scene outside the

doors. A little bit of saliva dribbled from her mouth and she started to make a gurgling sound. I quickly pulled the doors shut and once again we were in darkness.

“So, it is true. You do possess the Entring!”

Millie was standing next to me, quite calm and her words threw me “Millie, I – I, how...?”

I overheard my dad speaking to your dad, a while ago now, about a cave painting and something called the Entring and the power within you to be affected by it, you can be drawn into other worlds. Dad was excited and wanted you to visit his laboratory but your dad was dead against, something about you not being a science experiment! I thought I must have misheard although I was going to ask you about it, Jess, it's real. Isn't it?”

I tried to gather my senses. “Yes, Millie, it's true but I've never taken other people with me – I didn't know it was possible, there is so much I don't know about the Entring. It's as if it has a mind of its own sometimes!”

The gurgling sound had grown louder. “Mrs Atwood!” I grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “Mrs Atwood, it's me, Jessica, you're okay – Mrs Atwood, can you hear me?”

Millie opened one of the doors just enough to let a bit of light in.

“Jess – Jessica?”

“Yes, Mrs Atwood, it's me Jessica. Millie is here as well, I am afraid I have a bit of explaining to do and I think you had better sit down...”