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**Here Be Dragons: Ideology and Socialisation in Young Adult Literature**

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August 1, 2017
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Abstract

Proceeding from the widely-accepted and documented principle that children’s and young adult literature plays a significant role in socialising readers and transmitting ideologies (Stephens, 1992), this thesis examines the ways that young adult literature in particular uses dragons as a narratological device to transmit ideologies. This thesis comprises two parts: a creative artefact, Displaced; and an analytical exegesis. The novel Displaced centres on Harriet, a young Australian girl who finds a dragon egg while riding home from school. When nefarious men in suits show up searching for the dragon, Harriet flees across the southeast of Australia, along the way meeting two other dragonriders who teach her how to survive. The exegesis examines three dominant ideologies – gender, class, and speciesism – and explores how they feature in a selection of popular (predominantly Australian) young adult literature in which dragons play central roles. The novel and exegesis are united in their common preoccupation with how the figure of the dragon is utilised to foreground aspects of human practices and societies. They demonstrate that dragons often play a significant role as a narratological device, and can be used variously to either reinforce or subvert a given ideology, and at times promote progressive or enlightened ideologies, enabling a critique of contemporary societies.
When I first conceived the idea for this work, I was guided by two questions. As an English teacher operating in a Victorian secondary school setting, I have a great deal of exposure to both young adult texts, and young adults themselves. Week after week, I would have conversations about the various merits of certain books, and whether they are enjoyable or not, and this, combined with the growth I observe in students over time, led me to these questions:

**Do young adult texts convey moral messages to their readers?**

**Do young adult texts need to be explicitly didactic to achieve this?**

These two questions fascinated me, not least because they tied together my three passions, and the three areas of study of my undergraduate and graduate degrees: Psychology; English, and Teaching/Education. My initial research quickly revealed that overwhelmingly, scholars agree that young adult texts have a large role in transmitting cultural values onto readers, and that in fact, the less overtly didactic they are, the more effectively they transmit such values. As a result, the focus of my thesis shifted somewhat; moving away from questions of efficacy, I instead asked myself the following three questions:

**In what ways do YA texts attempt to convey social mores and values?**

**What key ideological areas do YA texts grapple with?**

**In what ways are dragons used by YA texts as an ideological messenger-vehicle?**

I have always been fascinated by dragons, stemming not only from their prevalence in YA texts (a genre I read often for pleasure) but also with their role as a universal myth, appearing in disparate cultures, but with common attributes (such as scales, wings, character traits, etc), all despite the sometimes ancient cultures developing on different continents. The commonality of dragon myths leads the inner child in me to believe that perhaps they actually did once exist, perhaps as a lingering dinosaur, and that their remains or fossils were found by early humans, thus giving birth to the myth of the dragon figure.
Accordingly, dragons and how they are used as a narratological device became the focus of this thesis. My thesis was constructed using two distinct but complementary methodologies: first one which uses more traditional scholarly approaches to literary criticism and close reading; and a second which puts the laboratory of creative writing/thinking to work to address through creative practice the essential questions of the thesis.

The first section is the creative artefact, the novel *Displaced*, which is placed within an Australian setting. I am an Australian writer, and many of the creative works I examine are from Australian authors as well, albeit set either overseas or in fantasy realms. My Australian setting is by no means unique among YA texts, however in my extensive reading of such texts, I am yet to find a YA series or novel that depicts dragons in an entirely Australian setting, and in this sense my novel is intended as being my contribution to the genre.

The second part of my thesis is the analytical exegesis, where I carry out close readings of other YA texts, as well as my own. Through these, and drawing on scholarly works as well as studies of YA literature, I examine the three ideological strands of gender, class, and speciesism. The focus of these three ideological strands is always on how they use dragons as the messenger medium. While there are potentially dozens of other ideological strands I could have looked at, these three were selected for the broad spectrum they cover, as well as they way they all relate to significant and relevant parts of everyday life for most people, but especially for young adults who are still learning their place in the world, and who are still developing their own thoughts and moral compasses.
HERE BE DRAGONS
IDEOLOGY AND SOCIALISATION IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

No, I would not want to live in a world
without dragons, as I would not want to
live in a world without magic, for that is
a world without mystery.
(R.A Salvatore 1989)

If there were no dragons of flesh and
blood and fire, whence would come the
idea for these stone carvings?
(Robin Hobb, 2000)

The townspeople took the prince for dead
When he never returned with the dragon’s head
When with her, he stayed
She thought he’d be too afraid
But he loved her too much instead.
(J.C. Scott, 2012)

Maps used to say: “Here Be Dragons.”
Now they don’t.
But that doesn’t mean the dragons aren’t there.
(William Kent, 2017)
DISPLACED

William KENT

PhD THESIS CREATIVE ARTEFACT
PART ONE
CHAPTER 1

Harriet rode.

The ground beneath her passed quickly, and she was panting by the time she reached the crest of the hill. Breathing heavily, she wiped the back of her hand across her forehead as she unclipped her helmet and slung it over her handlebars.

There was a weathered wooden chair next to the track, and from it she knew she’d have uninterrupted views of the vista below. Mount Gambier, with its blue lakes, distant roads, and multiple camping grounds, lay nestled in the valley below, and as she always did, Harriet stayed there for a long while just enjoying the view.

She’d only lived in this small town for a few months, and the blueness of the lake still hadn’t lost its novelty. The sight more than made up for the ridiculously long climb. Harriet had heard stories of a lake out west somewhere that was bright pink. She thought that sounded wonderful, but she doubted she’d ever get the chance to see it. Money wasn’t exactly flowing like a river at home, and the last time she’d been on a holiday, she’s been young enough to still need nappies.

So for now, she enjoyed the Blue Lake. It was massive, easily a kilometre from shore to shore at its widest. Recently her PE class had come there, and they’d had to run the entire 4km track around it. Even though Harriet hated PE with a passion, it had still been one of her favourite lessons so far at her new school.

It was just Harriet and her dad, now. Her older brother had moved off to Sydney, to be an accountant at some fancy firm where he had to wear suits and everything, while her mother had passed away fifteen years earlier, a few days after giving birth to Harriet. From photos, Harriet knew that she looked a lot like her mother, with the same wavy brown hair, and blue eyes. Not that I could ever forget it, with dad saying how similar I look at least three times a week!
Even after four months, her father still hadn’t unpacked all of the boxes from their last place, but she didn’t judge him: she knew how hard it was to make a living as a farmer in the middle of a drought, and she tried to help out where she could. Plus, her father was having a hard time adjusting to the new property. Giving up the old land – the land his family had farmed for three generations – had been hard, but the drought had made staying up north economically impossible.

The seat she was on lay directly in the shadow of the huge stone watchtower behind her. ‘Watchtower’ really didn’t do the building justice: it was closer to a small fortress. The plaque on the side dubbed it Centenary Tower, built in the early 1900s to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first time Mouth Gambier had been seen by white explorers. The tower looked exactly like a medieval castle; with stone battlements, a heavy wooden door reinforced with iron bands, and a sentry post in each corner. Part of her wanted to be able to see it from the inside, but another part of her was happy to just imagine. There could be a stairway leading down into a lower fort below them, or perhaps there were still parts from cannons and muskets collecting dust in a battered chest. Either way, the entrance fee decided the matter for her: helping out on the farm was a full time job, so she wasn’t able to get any other paid work, and her pocket money didn’t stretch to cover luxuries like tourist attractions.

She stayed there for as long as she could but eventually had to leave. Even as it was, she’d have to ride hard if she wanted to feed the animals before the sun set. Her father took care of the sheep and cows, but the chickens were entirely her responsibly, and she didn’t want to let him down.

As she rode down the mountain, the sun set much faster than she anticipated, and Harriet flicked on her bike’s little headlight. Even so, by the time she passed the caravan park at the bottom her world was reduced to the narrow strip of ground immediately in front of her.

Damn it! Harriet cursed the failing light. Usually she cut through the scrubland to get back to the farm. She considered the dangers of attempting it in the dark … but she already knew what she’d do. Embracing her inner sense of adventure, she decided to cut through the scrubland anyway: it would cut six kilometres off her trip, and six kilometres was six kilometres. Besides, if she didn’t have the chickens fed by the time her father got home from his meeting, she knew he’d be disappointed, and start to ask questions about where she disappeared off to after school each day.

The path she travelled was well used, and thankfully she didn’t have too much trouble keeping to it. There were a couple of hairy bits where the dirt was obscured by leaves and she didn’t know which way to turn, but a little bit of backtracking and exploring had her back on course. When she checked the illuminated green numbers on her watch, she was pleased that the night ride wasn’t actually taking her much longer than it usually did during the daylight.
All I have to do is get a few of the Dolphin torches, and tie them to the back of the quad bike, she was already mentally congratulating herself on finding a way around her chicken-feeding problem. I’ll be able to see where I’m going, and I’ll have the chickens fed and watered and dinner on the table well before dad even pulls into the driveway!

Maybe it was the false sense of confidence, or maybe it was just the loose gravel under her tyres, but when the lightning struck the ground to her left, she went down. Hard.

Her back wheel skidded out first, and despite trying to steady herself by planting a foot, the front wheel lost traction too and she flew off the path. Bouncing off a thick tree, Harriet fell, snapping several dead branches on the way down.

Hitting the dirt with a thump, Harriet did a mental check of herself before moving. Wiggle the toes. No problem so far. Clench her fists. All good there. Move the head. Neck still works. Sit upright. Spine’s not broken.

She breathed an actual sigh of relief. She’d watched too many videos on YouTube not to understand how easy it was to do serious damage in an accident. Even if it wasn’t the law for her to wear a helmet, she still would have chosen to.

Looking around, she squinted into the darkness to survey her surroundings. She thought she recognised the general area she was in, and it was still another ten minutes of hard riding to get back to her property. Without standing up, she checked the state of her bike. The paintwork was roughed up pretty badly from the rocky ground, but other than cosmetic damage, it seemed fine. The left pedal had stuck into the ground, meaning the back wheel was off the dirt and spinning freely. She watched the spokes flicker in the reflected light, and then her eyes actually noticed what they were seeing.

Her bike had come to rest across the track, and the small headlight was pointing off the other side. Highlighted by the light was a hole in the ground a few meters off the path. If she hadn’t crashed, doubtless she would have ridden straight past, but as it was she was able to climb gingerly to her feet to investigate.

In the middle of the depression – a full arms-length below ground level – was an egg.

“What have we got here?” she asked, speaking to no one in particular. The egg was nestled in a small crater, such as would be dug by a turtle. But there was no way it could be a turtle egg. First it was too big – the size of a mango at least – and secondly, the closest beach was dozens of kilometres away. No turtle would have travelled this far inland. Plus, I’m pretty sure turtles lay more than one egg at a time…
The nest was blackened, and Harriet suspected this was where the lightning had struck. The area around the egg was scorched and smouldering, yet when she reached out, the egg itself was cold.

“Where’s your mum?” she asked, picking it up gently. The old story that an animal parent wouldn’t come back to an egg if a human touched it was a myth, and Harriet knew that so long as she was gentle, she could touch it all she wanted. “Hey? Who do you belong to?”

Putting the egg gently back down, Harriet unclipped the lamp from her bike and searched the area. She worked in ever-widening rings, just like her father had taught her to, but she gave up when she was eight meters away from the egg and still hadn’t found any tracks.

“Maybe you’ve been abandoned…” Harriet mused, fishing her school jumper out from the bottom of her backpack. “Or maybe your mum was hurt by the lightning? You look almost ready to hatch, so I don’t imagine she would have voluntarily left you alone at all.”

It was true: the creature inside the egg was definitely moving around slightly, and Harriet guessed it would hatch in the next day or two.

“We can’t just leave you out here,” Harriet immediately adopted the same tone she used with her chickens, speaking like she imagined a mother would speak. “You can come home with me. I’ll help you hatch, and dad will know what you are. He’s really smart when it comes to animals.”

Gingerly wrapping the egg in her jumper, Harriet nestled it securely on top of her lunch box in the bottom of her backpack. Putting the pack back on, she even clipped up the chest and waist straps so it wouldn’t bounce around while she rode.

It was even darker now, and the final few kilometres to the farm were done in complete blackness, without even a sliver of moon to help her. Her shortcut cut through to the side of their property, and once she’d crossed the fence, the going was much easier since they’d cleared the land for the sheep. She managed to avoid the animals themselves easily enough, but still splattered her shoes twice when she rode through fresh droppings.

At home, she left her bike and her school bag leaning against the shed while she took care of the animals. While filling up their water, she planned what she was going to cook for dinner herself, but when she got inside to start boiling water for pasta, there was a note taped to the fridge. It was from her dad, and said – along with a ten dollar bill – that he wouldn’t be home till very late, and she should just order a pizza delivery.

Harriet glanced at the clock above the stove, but she’d left it too late, and the pizza store had already closed. Besides, getting it delivered to the farm would take too long anyway. Shrugging, she left the money
on the counter and helped herself to a couple of apples. Grabbing her schoolbag, she went to her room and changed into her pyjamas.

Thankfully most of her teachers knew how busy farm kids were in the mornings and at night, so they didn’t load them up with too much homework. Cuddled up under the doona, it took her less than an hour to finish up some trigonometry questions and write the final paragraph on her Romeo and Juliet essay.

Before she turned in for the night, she retrieved the egg from the bottom of her bag. She knew that most reptile eggs needed to be kept warm, so switching her desk lamp on, she built a nest for the egg out of a rolled up towel. Strangely, she thought the egg actually felt warm already, and it felt rough, like shark-skin, rather than smooth, like the chicken eggs she handled every day.

Shrugging her shoulders at the strangeness, Harriet made a mental note to ask her father about it in the morning. He knew everything about animals, and would be able to tell her all about it.

Ripping the ‘Monday’ page off her bedside calendar, Harriet scrunched it up and threw it across the room to the bin. Nothing but net! She congratulated herself. She might not have made it onto the school netball team, but at home she was an amateur professional.

Snuggling down into the pillows, Harriet was asleep within minutes.
CHAPTER 2

Harriet missed her alarm, and her day only went downhill from there.

She barely had time to brush and floss before she stamped her boots on, and breakfast was a single apple held in her teeth while her hands packed her books into her bag. She’d missed her father – his trade fair went over into a second day – and she glanced at the egg to make sure it was okay. It had rolled onto its side, but nothing else had changed so she shrugged and decided to leave it there for the day. Her father would be able to tell her tonight what it was.

Throwing two bags of feed onto the back of a quad bike, Harriet drove them down to the chicken coop and cut them open. Usually she liked to spend some time with the birds and speak to them, but today it was all she could do to just dump the food and go. She didn’t even check their water, trusting they wouldn’t have drunk much overnight, and she left their eggs uncollected.

Harriet parked her quad bike back in the barn, but as she snapped her bicycle helmet on and slung her school bag over her back, she looked down at her watch in worry. Period one started in less than half an hour, and it was at least a forty minute ride to get there. If she had one more ‘late’, then her teacher would give her a Saturday detention. And a Saturday detention required signed parental letters, so her father would find out, and she couldn’t allow that to happen.

Considering the time again, she eyed the quad bike with a critical eye. *If I keep it to the back roads, and I don’t park it at the actual school...*

Harriet knew what she was doing was illegal, but it was hard to feel bad about it when she’d been on quads since she was old enough to walk. *I can handle one better than most adults can handle a car,* the arrogance wasn’t lost on her, but it was true nonetheless. She did make a point of putting on an extra jumper and her father’s riding jacket and helmet. Hopefully if anyone was to see her, they wouldn’t realise she was only fifteen.

Even with the extra power, she was five minutes late. She was able to talk her way down to a lunchtime rubbish-duty and an extra few questions of homework, but she was fine with that so long
as her father never knew. Her lateness did set the tone for the rest of the day, though, and when the final bell rang, she was only too happy to escape.

As much as she would have liked to visit her usual lookout, having the quad bike was an added risk, so she decided to just return home. *Probably for the best,* she decided. *I still need to take care of the chickens, and their eggs need to be boxed up and dated.* Her father let her sell the eggs they didn’t use, and the money she made was a welcome addition to her admittedly modest pocket money.

After the chickens were sorted, she made herself a sandwich and pulled out her homework, taking them both to her room to eat while she studied. She opened the door latch with an elbow, but never made it inside. As soon as the door swung open, she knew something had gone terribly wrong.

The papers on her desk had been scattered over the floor, the chair had been tipped over, and the blankets on her bed scrunched up to one side, dangling down a little to touch the floor.

“What the…?” her first thought was that they’d been robbed, but that didn’t make sense. The rest of the house hadn’t been touched, and even if they had been robbed, why would they target her room specifically? She didn’t have any money or jewellery, and even the TV was one of the old box ones that couldn’t even get proper reception. *I only use it for watching old Disney VHS tapes.*

Harriet was just about to call the police when her eyes fell on the scratched up top of her desk, and the scattered bits of shell that littered it.

The egg!

As realisation dawned, she quickly stepped inside the room and closed the door. *If it can do this much damage to a bedroom in only a couple of hours, then there’s no way I’m about to let it loose in the house.*

“Where are you?” she spoke into the stillness, putting her books and food down on the bed. “Come on out … I won’t hurt you.” Tiptoeing silently, Harriet moved around. She checked the back of the desk, under the cabinet, and between the cupboard and the side wall, but there was no sign of the lizard. *And it has to be a lizard. No snake could have hatched an egg that big, and only a lizard could cause this much mess.* She eyed the egg’s shell fragments again, and beyond them the scratches on the desktop. *Plus, no snake could make marks like that. They’re from claws!*

Getting down on her knees, Harriet looked into the dark space under her bed while keeping a protective hand raised in front of her face. It was the last hiding place in the room, and unsurprisingly, it was where she found her new charge.

“Come on out,” she coaxed, speaking into the darkness. All she could see was a pair of yellow eyes. The rest of the lizard’s body was lost in the gloom. “Come on…” she tapped the ground in front of her, hoping the vibrations might cause it to move.
The technique had the desired effect, but it worked much better than she could have hoped. With an angry sound that was a mix between a growl and a squawk, the lizard ran out at her. Harriet recoiled, removing her face from ground level as fast as possible and jumping up onto the bed.

The animal was the size of her forearm, and wasn’t shaped like any lizard she recognised. It had the same scaly skin, but the colour was all off. Instead of earthy colours – browns and greens and reds – it was blue. *And not just any blue, but the same pale blue as a cloudless sky on a summer day.*

The animal stopped a few centimetres short of where her fingers had been. It looked up at Harriet, snapping its little jaws angrily and puffing its chest in and out.

“What the hell are you?” she asked curiously, backing up slightly to give it some more room. It came forward another few steps away from the bed. “You’re not like any lizard we’ve studied at school. You must be an energetic one though, to do so much damage to my room.” She wasn’t angry at the creature. It couldn’t help itself: it was only a few hours old, so it’s not like it knew any better. She only had herself to blame for leaving the egg alone in her room without a proper cage around it.

Harriet sat on the edge of the bed, reaching out a hand to grab a sandwich half. The reptile followed her hand, but she found that once the animal saw the food, it didn’t take its eyes off it. To test the theory, Harriet held the sandwich up in the air. The reptile’s neck craned back to look up. Moving again, Harriet brought the sandwich down to the side. The serpentine eyes followed it unfalteringly.

“You’re hungry,” she realised, putting the sandwich half down on the floor. Curling her feet up onto the bed, she removed them entirely from the creature’s field of view.

The reptile took the bait and leapt upon the food. It chomped into the bread, but rather than biting some off, it flicked its head and tossed it aside. Next it removed the lettuce, tomato, pickles, and even the carrot slices. Only when it had reached the layer of thickly cut salami did it start to eat. Its whole body was involved in the process, and Harriet used its distraction to study it properly. The colour wasn’t the only thing unusual about it; its body was also strange to her eyes. It was long and thin, and the neck and tail were each as long as the body itself. The legs were wiry, and from the way the animal walked, Harriet got the impression that it would grow into them sooner rather than later. The end of its tail ended in a frilled point, almost like an old arrowhead, and there was a flap of skin on the bottom of its neck that bulged slightly while it ate, like a balloon filling up and emptying with air.

“You’re beautiful!”
The conclusion was not a hard one to reach. The animal’s scales shimmered in the light as it moved, and the colour alone was something Harriet could have watched all afternoon without getting bored. As if the animal could actually understand her, it cooed softly, making a significantly different vocalisation to its earlier squawk, this time sounding similar to the coo of a baby smiling at a mother’s face.

Not all of the creature was lovable though: its claws and teeth were wicked-looking white points, and Harriet suspected they were razor sharp, despite hearing that most freshly-hatched animals took several days for their claws to harden up. They were certainly enough to scratch the top of her desk, and they made short work of the salami. Once the meat was gone, the creature looked up at her questioningly.

“Are you still…” Harriet trailed off as the lizard tried to jump onto the bed next to her. Its back legs weren’t strong enough for the height yet, and it fell short. Its front legs found purchase in the edge of the mattress, and its little claws cut deep grooves into her wooden bed frame.

Crying out in annoyance at the extra damage, Harriet reached out to grab the animal, but before her hands could make contact, two massive wings unfurled itself from the animal’s back. In wide-eyed shock, Harriet watched as the … thing … flapped a few times, and scrambled up onto the mattress. It looked at her with a sense of accomplishment, then immediately sprang towards the other half of the sandwich.

Even if she’d have wanted to stop the creature, Harriet was in too much shock to do so.

What did I just see? That thing has wings? There’s no such thing as a reptile with wings. Only birds can fly.

The new information confused Harriet completely. She mentally made a list of all the reptiles – it had to be a reptile, with scales like that – but she couldn’t think of what it could be. It has legs, so not a snake. It has wings, so not a lizard. All her options were coming up short. There was one thing … but it surely couldn’t be that, so she kept working through the list. Too big for a skink, but too small for a monitor. Still no fit. And it can’t be that … they’re only a myth. They’re not real.

She pushed the crazy thought to the back of her head, and kept working her way through all the reptiles she knew. Definitely not a turtle, since it has no shell. Can’t be a GilaMonster. They’re only found in Mexico. As more and more animals were eliminated, her crazy notion seemed increasingly likely. But it was crazy, so she continued. Too strange to be an iguana, and the shape’s all wrong for a crocodile…

It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. The only description it matches is …

A dragon.
She barely allowed herself to believe it, but the truth was staring her in the face. Scales, wings, long tail, capable of flight … these were all classic traits of a dragon. But they are only stories. They’re not real.

But then … stories usually started out with a grain of truth, didn’t they?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the phone ringing in the kitchen. Closing the door carefully behind her, Harriet bravely left the creature alone again. She had to take the call while standing at the counter, because her father refused to let them have a cordless phone. If was funny: he trusted her to go out camping in the far reaches of their property for days at a time, and he trusted her with dangerous farm equipment – harvesters, quads bikes and old paddock bashers – but he was still scared about her being able to have a private conversation with a boy. He just kept telling her that he’d been a teenage boy once, and he knew exactly what teenage boys were after.

“Hello?”

“Hi, honey. Only me,” her dad’s voice echoed down the other end. There was a lot of noise in the background, and her father was obviously in a large room full of very talkative people. “I’m going to be home late again. These damn people keep trying to sell me their brand of tractors. I’m not buying anything yet, of course, but it’s still good information to have for the future. There’s some money in the top draw of my dresser, if you don’t mind having pizza two nights in a row.”

“It’s fine,” Harriet responded politely, with no intention of touching the money or having pizza. “Hey dad, do you believe in dragons?”


“No, I’m serious,” Harriet insisted. “Do you think they could exist?”

“Dragons are make-believe. You know that…” her father sounded distracted, and the noise in the background was getting progressively louder. “Honey, I have to go. Do your homework, don’t stay up too late, and we’ll talk about this in the morning. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Harriet hung up, collecting a can of Coke and the rest of the salami from the fridge before returning to her closed bedroom door. Before she opened it, she took a deep breath, preparing herself for what she wanted to do next.

“Right,” she sat down on the bed, cutting off a thick slice of salami and then breaking it in half. “Now, you have to promise not to bite me, okay?”

The dragon – for that’s what it had to be – didn’t answer her of course, but it did take a tentative step forward, eyes glued to the salami. Harriet put it on the bed an arm’s-length away from
her, and it stepped up to devour it. When that piece was gone, Harriet gave it another, but this time put it a few centimetres closer to her.

Over the next ten slices, she worked the dragon closer and closer, until it finally took the eleventh piece right off her jean-clad knee.

*Now for the hard part…*

Holding out an extra-thick slice, Harriet let the dragon take the meat straight from her hand. The thicker slice meant the dragon had to go back for several bites, but not once did its teeth touch her skin. Harriet almost thought it was being gentle with her, but that was insane. *Reptiles don’t understand ‘gentle’, and certainly not a newborn.*

Taking her experiment one step further, Harriet cut off an even thicker slice of salami. She was almost at the end of the log, and knew that it was now or never. While the dragon nibbled away at it, she reached out her other hand and stroked it softly along the back.

It was a gentle touch, done only with the back of a single finger. The dragon didn’t react, and slowly Harriet began to grow more confident, using her whole hand and a bit more pressure.

The dragon continued to eat, but now there was a soft rumbling coming from within its body. *It’s literally vibrating with pleasure,* Harriet realised, and when the slice of salami ran out, she hurriedly held out the rest of the log so she could keep petting it.

The end of the log took the dragon several minutes to work through. When it finally finished, the dragon looked around for more food, but there was none to be had. Sniffing the air, its slitted nostrils opened and closed in its search, while its eyes contracted as it chose different focal points around the room.

*It’s so intelligent. Even though it is only a few hours old, it can still examine its surroundings for food and danger…*

Blowing out a lungful of air, the dragon curled itself up in Harriet’s lap. Its long neck and tail folded themselves over the body, and then the wings opened up to envelop it all like a blanket. The creature’s breathing slowed down, and within a minute it was sound asleep.

Moving gently, Harriet picked the creature up, shifting it to one hand and stooping to grab the towel off the floor that had formed part of the egg’s nest. The towel was ruined, so it would be fine for a bed. Bunching it up into a little well, Harriet put the dragon into it, letting it rest on the desk undisturbed.
For the next few hours, Harriet just sat there in wonder. Her backpack – along with her homework – remained out in the hallway, completely forgotten. The closest she came to any real learning was a Google search for ‘dragons.’

As she’d expected, the search returned pages and pages of mythology, but the only people who claimed to have seen them were the same people who claimed they’d been abducted by aliens, so she gave them little credence. The closest she came was the Wikipedia page about Komodo Dragons. Those dragons lived in Indonesia, thousands of kilometres away and on the other side of an ocean. She read the entire entry on them, and her dragon could have been a Komodo, but Komodos didn’t have wings. \textit{And none of them were blue.}

\textit{What are you?} she wondered, looking at the sleeping beast. When it wasn’t ripping into meat, it actually looked quite calm and cuddly, and the way it cocooned itself in its wings reminded her of a baby swaddled in a blanket.

Her father had been sceptical about dragons, and she couldn’t blame him. The facts were pretty hard to deny. There had never been a single reputable example of a dragon being seen. They were like vampire or werewolves. They simply didn’t exist.

And yet, there one was

Troubled and confused, Harriet made a brief attempt to clean her room up before changing into her pyjamas and crawling into bed. She was only just managing to fall asleep when she was jerked back away by a scratching sound, followed by a soft flapping. She frowned: it sounded like a person trying to clap using only one hand, and she had no idea what it could be.

There was a soft thump, and a weight pressed down on the end of her doona. As it started to move upwards toward her head, she realised with a start that the dragon had flown to her bed from the desk. Harriet’s body had been curled up slightly, and the dragon made a few circles in the gap between her chest and her knees. Once it decided it was comfortable, it plopped itself down.

Harriet smiled.

Evidently, her dragon didn’t want to sleep alone.
Harriet missed her alarm again the next morning.

Her dragon didn’t.

Harriet was jerked awake with a double assault: the first was a sharp pain to her nose from where her dragon had bit her, and the second was the aural assault from her extra-loud alarm clock.

Reacting to the noise first and the pain second, Harriet switched off the alarm before glaring at the little monster.

“What did you do that for?” she cursed at the thing while rubbing her nose. Pulling a little makeup mirror out of her side table, she examined herself. Thankfully hadn’t broken the skin, and there was no blood.

“Still wasn’t a very nice thing to do…” she wasn’t about to let the animal off the hook easily, or let it think that that type of behaviour was okay. “From now on, absolutely no biting! Your hear me?”

Rather than looking contrite, the dragon just looked up at Harriet, an eager expression on her face. Without even being aware of why, Harriet had begun to think of her dragon as female. If you were a boy, I think you’d be a much darker blue. Like a stormy ocean rather than a summer sky.

The dragon lowered itself down on its forelegs, and the gesture was so reminiscent of a puppy that Harriet was able to duck out of the way in time to avoid its energetic leap. Unlike a puppy though, the dragon never had to land, and flapped around the bed in circles. The wings were each as wide as the dragon was long, and were made of a gossamer membrane that reminded Harriet of a bat, or maybe even a Pterodactyl.

“You’re in high spirits this morning,” she observed. Harriet herself was not a morning person, and not even the novelty of a dragon was enough to get her excited. Her father always joked that it was incredible Harriet could come from such a long line of farmers and still not be able to function properly before 9:00am.
“I’m hungry,” Harriet decided, speaking out loud for the benefit of the beast. “I’m sure you are too, but if I leave you alone, you can’t destroy my room again, okay?”

The dragon landed on the now vacant pillow and sat down. While Harriet pulled on her slippers, she did not move a single inch. That’s promising, at least.

Her father was at the breakfast table when Harriet entered the kitchen. He had a mouthful of cereal, so nodded when he saw her. There was a plate of buttered toast in front of her seat, and under the guise of pouring herself some juice from the fridge, Harriet shoved a small grocery bag of beef into her pyjama pocket. If dad asks where the steaks went, I’ll just tell him I cooked them up for dinner last night.

“How’s it going love?” her father hadn’t seen her in two days, and as rude as it was, she didn’t stay and chat.

“Good, dad. How was the conference?”

“The same as every other year. These southerners are a bit more eager to sell than the ones back home, but nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“That’s good. I’m gonna eat in my room. I’ve got a little bit of homework I need to finish. Can we have a proper catch up tonight?”

“Sure, go! School comes first. I’ll feed the chickens this morning. They’ve probably missed me anyways.”

Harriet didn’t argue, and took her plate of toast back to her room. When she entered, the dragon didn’t wait for her to get the meat out, but jumped towards her. Its little claws latched onto the thigh of her pyjamas, and its long neck snaked into her pocket.

“Hey, just wait a moment and I’ll get it for you!” The dragon’s claws were digging painfully through the thin material, and the lightweight pants were struggling under the weight. Quickly putting her plate of toast down, she grabbed the animal bodily with one hand and pulled her up. She was standing about a meter away from the edge of her bed, and deciding to try something, she threw the dragon gently up into the air towards it.

The dragon’s wings naturally unfurled, and without effort it began to fly. Its whole body took on a more streamline position, and it lazily flapped a few times to stay up. Once she’s up in the air, she can stay there easily. It’s the take-off that her muscles are still trying to master.

The dragon swooped around and flew back to her. Landing on her left shoulder, it managed to lay itself across the back of her neck without digging its claws in once.

“You’re getting better,” Harriet encouraged, pulling the bag out of her pocket. Ripping off a tiny chunk of meat, she lifted it up to its mouth. Harriet had been slightly sceptical about giving it raw
meat, but her dragon ate the piece with gusto. *I guess humans are the only species that have to cook their meat first…*

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Harriet fed the rest of the bag to the dragon, and by the time it was done, her belly bulged like a snake that had just eaten a rat. Immediately after the last bite was swallowed, the dragon leapt off Harriet’s shoulders and sailed down to the bed. Curling up, it went straight back to sleep.

*I'm in a food coma,* Harriet laughed out loud, and the dragon cocked an eye open at the sound. Grabbing her school bag, Harriet left the creature where it was. Hopefully the dragon would sleep the rest of the day away, but even if it made some noise, her father would be out in the fields with the animals, so he shouldn’t hear a thing.

“*I’m off,*” she called out to him as she kicked a leg over her bike. After their conversation last night, she was reluctant to tell her father about her new pet. *Besides … she’s the only one of her kind in the whole world, and I’m the only one who knows.*

Harriet only listened to her teachers that day with half an ear, instead spending her lessons doodling names in the back of her exercise book. Most of the girls in class did the same, but rather than writing initials in a love heart, Harriet was deciding what she wanted to name her dragon.

The obvious choice was ‘Draco’, but she dismissed it right away. Obvious was boring, and her dragon was anything but that. ‘Blue’, ‘Skye’, and ‘Marine’ were all rejected straight away, and all for the same reason.

*I need something cool…*

She liked ‘Sapphire’, or even the variation ‘Saphira’, but when she said it a few times aloud, she realized that it was the same name as a dragon from a book she’d read, and she’d hated the book.

*Something original…*

Turning her attention away from the dragon’s colour, she focused on what it could do: fly. ‘Airborne’…? ‘Apollo’…? ‘Icarus’…? *Gah! All of these sound stupid. Too militaristic, and Icarus isn’t even a girl’s name!* She considered ‘Harrier’ briefly – like the jumpjet – but decided that the name was narcissistically close to her own, and could get confusing.

*Abh … this is useless!*

Throwing her pen down, Harriet leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. Her classroom was next to the oval, and there was a PE group out playing footy. She watched them exhaust themselves under the bright sun, and her eyes were drawn upwards. Except for a single wisp of fluffy cloud, the sky was completely bare.
A cloud, she toyed with the word, repeating it several times in her head. *Comes and goes. Lives in the sky. Can be calm and beautiful, but it can be a massive danger to anyone caught unawares if it decides to turn violent.* The more she thought about it, the more fitting it sounded.

Cloud. *The dragon’s name is Cloud.*

Harriet continued to contemplate the new dragon’s name while her eyes followed the PE students. As she watched, four men in black suits and sunglasses walked out onto the oval and started speaking to the teacher. Or, more specifically, one of them started speaking to the teacher, keeping him occupied while the other three moved among the Year 9 students, grabbing them by the shoulders to speak to them. Harriet frowned, wondering what it could be about. Even out here in the country, they had strict rules about strangers being allowed onto school grounds when students were there.

Before she could study them too intently, the bell for lunch rang, and Harriet was reminded of how hungry she’d grown. She’d bought a few sandwiches with her, but even after eating both of them, she still felt ravenous. She used some of her precious money and bought a burger from the canteen, but even that – which was usually enough on its own to fill her up – didn’t satisfy.

Feeling starved, Harriet endured the final period of maths. She wasn’t the only one who wasn’t interested that day, and thankfully the teacher just had them working at their own pace out of their books. Harriet’s pace was somewhere between a standstill and a stop, so she’d certainly have a lot of homework to catch up on later.

When she collected her bike from the school shed, the men in suits were still at the school. This time, they were hassling a few of the Year 12s, asking them if they’d seen anything strange in the area recently. The 12s were sceptical about the strangers, but they still answered, albeit reluctantly. None of them had seen or heard anything out of the ordinary. As Harriet was leaving, a teacher ran quickly out of the grounds and started to yell at the men in suits, but they refused to leave.

Shaking her head, Harriet rode straight home. She didn’t know why the men in suits were there, or what they were wanting, but their appearance in town so soon after the arrival of her dragon couldn’t mean anything good.

Her hunger continued to grow while she rode home. By the time she got around to taking care of the chickens, it had gotten to the stage where she was actually tempted to crack a few eggs straight into her mouth. Once her chores were done she raided the fridge, but a half a bowl of pasta and an entire bottle of lemonade weren’t enough to satisfy. Swearing in frustration, she grabbed a bag of shaved sandwich meat and retired to her room. Her dragon was flying in circles when she entered, and it chirped happily and landed on her shoulder as soon as the door had closed.
any kind of affection towards Harriet, the dragon – Cloud – sniffed the air and dipped her head straight down to the bag of ham.

“Eat slowly,” Harriet chastised Cloud, who looked like she would gobble the whole bag down in seconds. “You’ll give yourself indigestion.’

The dragon showed no sign of slowing down, so Harriet bravely pulled the bag away, avoiding the snapping jaws and angry glares.

“If you can’t eat properly by yourself, then you don’t get to eat,” Harriet’s own grumpiness about being hungry was showing itself. With measured slowness, she fed Cloud, watching slice after slice disappear down its gullet. Strangely, as the dragon ate, Harriet felt her own hunger diminishing. By the time the bag was empty, the dragon’s belly was too bloated for it to be able to take off, and it promptly fell backwards onto the bed, already asleep. Harriet found her own hunger had disappeared entirely, and this confused her.

_How does that even work? It’s as if I was feeling its hunger in my own body. But that was impossible. Almost as impossible as a dragon appearing in the middle of the bush?_

She conducted an experiment the next day. Skipping both breakfast and lunch, she felt her hunger growing increasingly worse. On the way home, she stopped by the butcher and picked up some beef off-cuts. The ham had been the last meat in the fridge, and she knew the dragon would be angry if it didn’t get fed. Once again, even though she hadn’t eaten herself, as soon the dragon’s hunger was sated, so too was her own.

_We have a connection, she realised. I can tell what she’s feeling._ It also explained why she would feel so satisfied and content while the dragon was drifting off to sleep. The dragon was full, happy, and warm, and it was projecting its emotions to her. _I’ll have to be careful with this. I can’t get stupid and forget to eat myself!_

The men in suits were at school that second day as well, and this time, it wasn’t just the year 12s they were bothering. While Harriet and the other Year 10s were on break, the Suits moved among them, rudely demanding information on anything strange that might have happened in the last few days. Harriet avoided them for as long as possible, but when they finally caught up to her, she just fobbed them off, saying that she hadn’t seen anything, and that if they didn’t back the hell away from her, then she had a rape alarm in her back pocket that she was more than willing to activate.

After school, as she was wheeling her bike away from the shed, she overheard two of the Suits arguing among themselves.
“This is useless!” the first one spat angrily. The top button of his shirt was undone, and the tie was slightly loose.

“We persevere. The radar clearly showed it appearing in this area,” the second Suit was dressed immaculately, from his wing-tip boots all the way up to his perfectly styled quiff.

“But what would a bunch of kids know?”

“Kids see everything! And they gossip non-stop! And if they’re not the ones responsible themselves, then they probably live with the ones who are.”

“But we haven’t even seen any—”

“We’ve all read the reports,” the first Suit broke in harshly. “What more proof do you want? The Company doesn’t make mistakes. They wouldn’t send us here for no reason. We need to find this thing, and we need to cage it, before it can do any harm to innocent people. And then we need to rip it apart and figure out exactly what the hell it is.”

Harriet didn’t hang around to hear any more lest she look suspicious and draw attention to herself again. Kicking her bike forward, she pedalled home as fast as she could. Ignoring the chickens completely, Harriet slammed the door to her room shut, threw herself into the middle of the bed, and wrapped her arms around her waiting dragon.

“I’m not letting anyone get you,” she promised, the adrenaline and fear causing unwanted tears to leak out of her eyes. “You’re mine, Cloud, and I swear I’ll protect you!”

It took several hours of rocking there with the dragon before she was calm enough to go attempt to cook dinner. Even so, she burnt the meat, and the veggies were half-raw. Graciously, her dad made no comment, about the dinner or about the neglected chickens – and Harriet disappeared off to her room without even thinking about dessert.

“What are you, really?” she asked her dragon, bouncing it slightly on her knee. “Why are people hunting you, and why do they want to lock you in a cage? You wouldn’t hurt anyone … would you?”

The dragon made no response, but it met her gaze evenly. It had grown several inches over the last three days, and it was now big enough to be able to look her in the eye when it was standing in her lap.

With those troubling thoughts bouncing around in her head, Harriet ripped the ‘Thursday’ page off her calendar, and tried unsuccessfully to get some sleep.
Friday did nothing to help Harriet’s uneasiness.

The men in suits were still at the school, and they were still asking questions to every student they could corner. Harriet listened to them talk, and the way they spoke and the way they asked questions without actually mentioning what they were after confirmed her worst fears.

They were after her dragon.

And not only that, but the men were armed. She saw it when one of them bent over to retie his shoelace. Under his left arm he had a black leather holster, with a sinister silver pistol tucked inside. As soon as she knew what to look for, it wasn’t hard to see that all of the other Suits were armed as well. *Who are these people?* None of them had identified themselves as being police or government, and none of them carried a badge. *This isn’t America, where people can just walk around carrying guns. Who the hell are they, and how do they know about my dragon?*

Whatever the answer was, Harriet vowed that they would never get their hands on Cloud. As much as it would hurt her to do so, Harriet would rather see the dragon released into the wild than live in some cage with the Suits poking and prodding her. The fact that the Suits had been at the school for three days running meant they knew the dragon was in the area, and they were not going to give up easily. If Harriet decided to release the dragon, she wouldn’t be able to do it anywhere nearby: that would be the same as just handing Cloud over to them.

Using the computers in the school library, Harriet planned her journey. She looked in the area for a large National Park, and while there were a couple really close by, she opted for one to the east, on the other side of the border and well into Victoria.

“Lower Glenelg National Park,” she tested the name on her lips and decided she liked it. Glenelg was a palindrome, which she knew about after studying them in English last semester. She read up on the park, and found that it had a large assortment of small wildlife, but no large animals.
It would be easy for the dragon to hunt for food, and nothing there would be able to threaten it easily. *It’s perfect!*

Opening up a new tab, she brought up a bus timetable. There was a bus that went from Mount Gambier to Portland. It was a two hour journey, and from there she could walk or hitchhike up to the park itself. The bus tickets were pricey – they would cost her over half of her savings – but it would be worth it to make sure Cloud was safe.

She cleared her browser history before she logged off. There was little chance the Suits would be able to log in and view her usage, but she’d seen too many detective movies to leave it to chance.

That night, she took care of the chickens with detachment: her brain was already planning her journey. Take the bike, so her father would think she was close. Catch the bus from just outside town, so no one would see her leave and get suspicious. She could leave tonight, have all of Saturday with the dragon finding her new home. Release her on Sunday, and be back on Sunday night ready for school the next day, and with none the wiser about her little side trip.

She didn’t take much with her beside the bare necessities. Her small tent, a change of clothes, a mosquito net, and a sleeping bag. The top of her pack was stuffed with ham and raw beef, as well as a small bag of oranges. Harriet wasn’t a big eater, so the oranges would last her the whole weekend. The beef would last the dragon the night, and the ham would have to do her for the morning. *I wonder if a dragon can get sick from unrefrigerated meat? We’ll just have to take our chances.* A sick belly was better than a life in a cage as some curio or experiment.

Cloud would live free: Harriet would at least see that much accomplished.

The top third of the bag she kept free. At the last moment, when everything else was ready, she called out to Cloud by name. The dragon took off from the desk, flapping hard to come and land on her shoulder. Stroking her along the back of the neck, Harriet crooned at her, telling her what a good dragon she was, and how they were about to go on a secret adventure.

“Now, you have to get in the bag,” she said. “But it’s only for a few hours. When you come out, we’ll be in a totally new home. One where you can fly around all you want. You can hunt, and roar, and I’ll come visit you all the time but no one else will ever know you’re there.”

Despite trying to sound upbeat, Harriet couldn’t help the note of sadness that crept into her voice. She wasn’t unpopular at school, and she had never been bullied or anything like that, but country kids didn’t live average lives, and most students – like herself – had chores to do in the morning and evenings. That didn’t leave a lot of time for a social life. It had been nice to have a proper friend, even if it had been an animal, and even if it had only been for a few days.
She stopped by the back fields on her way out. Her father was taking care of the sheep, and had one of them overturned to examine a tick on its stomach.

“Going camping for the weekend,” Harriet said, after making polite small-talk and catching up on their day for several minutes. Their new property was massive, and had several areas of dense bushland with a river running through, so camping trips were not uncommon for her.

“Have you finished all your homework?” He was her father, after all, and he certainly had his priorities straight.

“Yes dad,” she sighed like a typical teenager, lying through her teeth.

“Where are you going?”

“I thought I’d explore the area a bit. Maybe hike around the Crater Lakes.”

“Do you have a first aid kit?”

“Yes,” she answered quickly, almost managing to keep a straight face.

“You don’t. Go get one. And take the spare phone.”

“Yes, dad,” she sighed, walking back to the house.

“And Harriet?” her father called after her when she was almost out of earshot. “Have a good time!”

She waved back, smiling. She didn’t know if her father was the best one in the world – she hadn’t met them all, after all – but he surely had to be up there. How many other dads would be comfortable with their sixteen year old daughter going off on her own for a few days?

After collecting the first aid kit and the spare mobile phone – the one she was only to use in emergencies, because she “wasn’t a useless city kid who had to text her friends and update her Facebook status every ten minutes” – she collected her bike and left the farm.

She didn’t ride far, barely a hundred meters from the edge of their property, before she left the road and stashed her bike in the thick bushland. Covering it with a layer of trees branches and leaves, she examined the site from the road, but couldn’t tell anything was there. That ought to be safe for a few days, she decided. Where she was going, she would have no need of a bike.

The first bus stop outside town was a decent eleven kilometres away. She was a country girl, though, and kept up a good clip, managing to catch the 4:55 one. The driver didn’t look twice at her as he exchanged her notes for a ticket, and with a relieved sigh, she plopped herself down in the backseat.

There was no one sitting within four rows of her, so she allowed herself a quick check-up on Cloud. Opening the zips on the top of her bag, she peeked in. Cloud was still where Harriet had left
her, curled up on top of the sleeping back. As the light hit her eyes, Cloud blinked a few times up at her, but she seemed to understand the need for secrecy, for she didn’t make any noise, and she made no attempt to try and get out.

“Good girl,” Harriet whispered under her breath. “Only a couple more hours, and then I can let you out.”

Rather than exciting, the bus ride turned out to be as boring as every other bus trip Harriet had been on. They passed paddocks, farms, and trees, and after two entirely uneventful hours, Harriet strapped on her pack and got off the bus in Portland.

It was after 7:00 by that point, and Harriet knew that she’d never make it all the way up to Glenelg before the sun set. She’d planned for this, though, and set out towards Mt Richardson, a much smaller park to the west. It only took her an hour to get there, and while the park was devoid almost entirely of human activity, it was too small for a dragon to live in, and it was too close to a city for Harriet’s liking. Still, it would make a good place to camp for the night.

The dragon watched her curiously as she set up her little tent. Harriet never expected Cloud to help, but she was quite surprised when the dragon actively got in her way. Grabbing one of the tent poles in her small jaws, the dragon pulled at the pole and bought the whole thing down when Harriet turned to get the top-sheet from the pack.

Swearing in frustration, Harriet tried to chastise Cloud, but the dragon merely flew in circles around her head, chirping happily.

“You’re an idiot,” she said lovingly, tears springing to her face as she realised how much she had grown to like the little monster. *And tomorrow I’ll have to say goodbye forever.* She’d told Cloud earlier that she would come and visit … but she wouldn’t. A clean break was best, and if she kept coming to visit then she could never be sure she wasn’t being followed. Harriet knew she couldn’t live with herself if the Suits caught Cloud because of her.

At the site of her tears, Cloud stopped her chirping and landed on Harriet’s shoulder. Nuzzling against Harriet’s neck, Cloud stayed there until the tears subsided, and even then she wouldn’t leave her shoulder perch. Harriet carefully finished erecting the tent, and by the time she had her sleeping bag laid out, the sun was just finishing setting.
They made good time in the morning.

By 7:00, they had the tent packed away and breakfast finished.

By 8:00, they’d cleared the northern border of Mt Richmond National Park.

By 9:00 they were into Glenelg National Park, and by 10:00 they were so deep that no matter what direction Harriet looked in, she couldn’t see any signs of human activity.

“Great,” she said cheerily to Cloud. “Now we just need to find you a new home.”

The two of them continued to walk deeper into the park. With no fixed destination in mind it didn’t matter where they went, so Harriet picked the path of least resistance and walked down into a valley heading west.

“If you see somewhere you like, then let me know,” Harriet spoke to the dragon, knowing it couldn’t understand her but still feeling the need to communicate. After she’d discovered she could feel the dragon’s hunger within her own body, she’d decided they had a bond, and it would be rude to just travel in silence.

As Harriet walked, the dragon flew in front of her. She’d put Cloud back in the bag while she moved from one National Park to the other, but otherwise she was happy for the dragon to get some practice flying and being in the fresh air. After all: Cloud is going to live here for the rest of her life, so she has to get used to it sooner or later.

The dragon didn’t show any signs of discomfort or fear at its new surroundings. Quite the opposite, it was happy to whizz this way and that, snapping at bugs and insects as they flew through the air, and one time even darting down to pounce onto a skink that had been unlucky enough to sun itself on a nearby branch.

Watching the dragon, Harriet felt better. This is where it’s meant to be. Not cooped up in some bedroom, where it has to stay hidden and by itself most of the time. It’s an animal, and it should live in the wild.

Harriet let Cloud lead the way, and by mid-afternoon she had become totally lost somewhere in the central eastern section. She had no fear of being lost out here permanently: she had her sleeping bag and tent if she had to spend the night, and getting out was just a matter of choosing a direction – east, south, or north – and following it for ten or fifteen kilometres until the edge of the National Park.

This wasn’t her first foray into the wilderness, and she’d come prepared.

Sometime shortly after 4:00, the insects went disturbingly quiet, and the birds in the canopy began to sing more softly.
“Back in the bag now,” Harriet decided, opting for caution. Maybe it was a premonition or maybe she was just being overly protective, but either way, the decision paid off.

The first she knew that the Suits had found her was the calling out between them.

“I can see something!” the voice was less than twenty meters behind her, and when the reply came, it was even closer.

“Where? I can’t see anything in this bloody underbrush!”

“To the north. Like two dozen meters.”

Harriet abandoned stealth. Breaking into a run, she spared only a single glance behind her to confirm it. There were three Suits within sight, and their black formal attire stood out starkly in the natural surroundings. There was just something about a tie and cufflinks that screamed ‘out of place’ when squelching through mud and animal droppings.

Leaping over fallen logs, Harriet broke north. She didn’t know how far into the park she’d come, but she’d been walking for a few hours, so she should be closer to the northern border than the southern one she’d entered from. Praying that she could get away in time, she gave it all the speed she could. On her back, Cloud jostled and jolted with each bump and jump, but to her credit the dragon didn’t utter one sound of protest.

Maybe she can sense how urgent the situation is, Harriet mused, stepping over a small stream and then having to scramble upright when the bank on the other side turned out to be just soft mud. She almost lost a boot there, but thankfully her laces went halfway up the calf, and they’d been tied tightly.

The Suits couldn’t say the same, and she smiled at the curses that came from them when one got their expensive wing-tip trapped in the bog.

Hopefully that buys us a few minutes, Harriet thought grimly, trying unsuccessfully to put on even more speed.

It bought them more than that, but eventually the Suits managed to close the distance again.

In front of her, the trees began to thin, and suspecting what was about to happen, Harriet shielded her face as she broke through the last thicket of shrubs and onto the road that dissected the forest.

Eeney … meeny… meiny … GO!

She picked a direction at random and begun to run. After the first few meters – once she was sure the mud had been removed for the soles of her boots – she moved from the side of the road to the asphalt itself. With the easier surface, her speed picked up and she finally began to grow in confidence.
The sound of tyres behind her almost caused her heart to stop, but thankfully it wasn’t a corporate-issue black beast … it was just a beat up Volvo. As it approached a still running Harriet, the car began to slow. The driver, a woman in her sixties or seventies – rolled down her window. “Are you all right, dearie?”

“Not really,” Harriet replied breathlessly, stopping altogether. “I was camping with some friends, and a few of the boys started to get a little too touchy-feely.” The lie came easily to her lips.

“Oh Lord,” the woman made a cross across her chest. “Get in, love, I’ll get you somewhere safe.”

Harriet didn’t need to be asked twice. Running to the other side of the car, she slid into the passenger’s seat, bag – and dragon – tucked between her knees.

“Where do you live?”

“Sydney,” more lies rolled off her tongue. “But I’m staying up in the Grampians with my family and some friends. A few of us decided to come down here for the weekend. Kinda regret that decision now.”

“Well, you’re in luck. I live just south of there, in Dunkeld. I can drop you off back in Hall’s Gap and it would barely be out of my way,” the lady smiled across at Harriet, and she felt obliged to return the gesture, even as she looked fearfully out the back window.

“Can we drive?” Harriet panicked. “I don’t know how close behind me those boys were, but I really don’t want to stay and find out.

“Of course, love.” The woman put the car into gear and pulled away. Harriet watched the rear windshield as they pulled away. “What’s your name?”

“Rachel,” the lies were coming thick and heavy, so she saw no reason to stop.

“I’m Doreen. You just sit back and relax, Rachel,” the woman grasped the steering wheel like a child clutching at their first lolly. “I’ll get you back to your family in one piece. Don’t you worry, those boys won’t get to you again.”

Sinking down into the seat, Harriet absentmindedly pet the top of her backpack soothingly. She tried to think calm thoughts towards her dragon, but found it impossible to share the woman’s confidence.

*How the hell did they find me…?*
CHAPTER 5

“Thank you!”

Harriet squinted into the rising sun, waving as the car disappeared around a bend. The woman – Doreen – had been insistent. When the light had started to fade halfway to Halls Gap, she had insisted Harriet – or Rachel, as she’d gone by – stay with her at her house in Dunkeld, and continue on in the morning. Harriet had been slightly hesitant to impose, but it was the dragon who decided that matter for her: Cloud needed somewhere safe to stay for the night, and Harriet figured that if the woman turned out to be some sort of creep or sex offender, then the dragon would be able to chew her face off or something.

But nothing had gone wrong; quite the opposite, in fact.

Doreen had been so nice, Harriet had actually been able to forget the men in suits for a short while. The old woman had kept Harriet up for hours, telling Harriet stories about her son and three grandkids, all of whom lived in Perth. Doreen’s husband had died years earlier – “smoking two packs a day will do that to you dearie!” – and Harriet sensed that Doreen was just as glad for the company as Harriet was for the safe bed for the night.

That mooring, Doreen had even cooked her a nice fry-up, and less than an hour after Harriet licked the last of the eggs off her fork, Harriet was safely in Halls Gap and Doreen was on her way.

Harriet hadn’t been to Halls Gap before, but her father had told her stories of coming here with his friends as a young boy. He’d grown up in the area – which was how he got the new contacts and offer for the farm – and he used to camp out here all the time with his buddies. Of course, they’d spent most of their time drinking and doing stupid things, but he always tried to gloss over those bits while telling the stories.

It was not a large town – basically just a single main street and a few offshoots – and from where she’d been dropped off outside the post office, Harriet could see up the side of the mountain
to the Pinnacle – one of the tallest places in Hall’s Gap and, according to her father, an “absolute bitch of a climb to get to”.

That’s where I want to be, she decided. If I can’t see a safe place from there, then I won’t be able to see a safe place from anywhere. Thinking about it again for a moment, she reconsidered. Actually, if I can see it from there, then it can’t be safe. I’ll climb to the top, map out where blind spots are, and then take it from there.

With that decision sorted, Harriet stopped by the General Store. Like most small country town stores, it was also the DVD store, the cafe, the camping store, and the tourist information centre.

The first thing she did was look at a bus timetable, and worked out that if she was back on the main street by 5:00 that night, then there was a bus that would take her straight back to Mount Gambier, and have her home by 9:00. It was probably a little later than her father would like, but it was the best she could do. It was a Sunday, and the only other bus that was running left at midday, which was way too early.

Purchasing a ticket in advance, Harriet watched the remainder of her pitifully few notes disappear. She still had two oranges for herself, and with the last of her coins, she bought some scraps of the cheapest meat she could find. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do for a final meal for Cloud. After this, she’ll have to start hunting for her own. I couldn’t afford to keep feeding her anyways, so it’s for the best that she’s going free today.

There were roads that led up to the Pinnacle carpark, and from there it was a ‘medium-to-hard climb to the top. Lacking a car, Harriet was forced to walk the whole way, and she was tired before she even got to the bottom of the mountain. Passing the carpark, where families were unloading from minivans, she looked at their freshness with envy. With her back damp with sweat, she finally began up the proper path.

It started out as a gentle walk, but it soon became challenging. The path disappeared, and she was forced to navigate her way from one signpost to the next. Going by the distance markers, she was almost halfway up – and only four hours in – when the gurgling sound of a stream enticed her to have a rest. Following a gap in the tress, she trailed around and up a small ridge to a stream. Following it upstream, she was rewarded for her bush-bashing by the appearance of a small waterfall after another twenty minute walk.

“Break time,” Harriet decided, plopping herself down and fishing out Cloud and their food. She threw the meat to Cloud, who snagged each piece out of the air. Kneeing by the pool at the bottom of the waterfall, Harriet washed the blood from the meat off her hands before tucking into her own orange.
While Harriet ate, Cloud was more than happy to while the time away playing in the water. The dragon chirped happily as she zoomed back and forth through the water, ducking in and out of the spray and flapping over to Harriet to coat her as well.

“Leave off,” Harriet laughed, waving the dragon away. “Just because you’re having fun doesn’t mean I need to take a shower as well!”

Harriet sat on some rocks nearby while Cloud had a play. After the stressful few days she’d had, the moment of peace was a welcome change. It was good, and it was good that in the days to come, she would have this moment to look back on.

The last moment when everything still made sense in the world.

The last moment before it all changed.

The barking was what first alerted her. She assumed at first that it was just a family and their pet, but then she remembered how strict Australia was with their National Parks. Absolutely no dogs allowed, with no exceptions.

“Cloud,” she hissed, opening up the top of her bag. “Get in.”

The dragon stopped frolicking and immediately flew over. Harriet quickly emptied her pack. Tent, foam mattress, empty water bottles, and assorted camping tools were discarded onto the rock. The only thing she kept was her sleeping bag, which acted as a cushion for Cloud in the pack. If it’s not the Suits, I can always come back for it all … but if it is the Suits then I need to be able to run. Quickly.

Harriet shut Cloud back inside, and by this stage the dragon was so used to it that it barely even uttered a growl in protest. Buckling the pack on, Harriet ran towards the noise, crawling through the bush for the final few meters to the slight ridgeline. The path she had taken to get to the waterfall had involved circling upwards in a wide horseshoe. From her vantage point, she was able to see down to the forest below.

Sure enough, there were men in suits following in her footsteps. This time, she didn’t have to wonder how they were following her: each man had a huge German Sheppard on a long leash, and the dogs had their noses to the ground.

“Fuck!” Harriet said a word that she knew would have earned her a grounding from her father. It seemed appropriate though, given the circumstances.

Scooting backwards and trying not to be seen, Harriet ran back to the waterfall. If the Suits followed the path she’d taken, then that gave her a twenty-minute head start.

Probably less, since they’ll be travelling faster than I am. Harriet cursed herself for her earlier laziness. It was stupid to think that just because she’d hitchhiked to a new area, that Cloud was now safe.
Moving at a jog, Harriet began to climb higher. She’d been halfway up the mountain when she’d stopped, and she knew that at a fast walk, it would take over an hour more to reach the Pinnacle. She couldn’t afford the luxury of a fast walk, and even though she made her body do what it was told, her legs and thighs were burning in a way she’d knew she’d regret that night. *If I’m free and safe to feel the pain tonight, then I’ll deal with it then.*

The going was not easy, and more than once she slipped on loose slate, only to fall down a moment later with a grazing of hands and a scraping of arms. *For the rest of my days … so long as I live … I promise I will never visit this cursed place again!*

Her inner ranting did nothing to help ease the terrain, and all she could do was soldier through the pain and keep moving upwards.

The path moved from loose flat rock to boulders that she had to jump between. There was a narrow canyon she had to climb up the middle of, and at the top of that there was another fake summit that she had to go up and over. Her heart was pounding, and she swore violently at whatever fool had written the advisory sign for the climb.

*If this … death march … is considered a ‘moderate-to-difficult’ climb, she puffed, then that person must have given Mount-freaking-Everest an ‘easy’!*

She did make it to the top, though. She was sweaty, and red, and her breath was coming only in pained gasps, but she beat the men to the Pinnacle.

Her father had been very descriptive when he’d talked about his boyhood adventures here. Harriet suspected he’d believed she’d never visit the park, otherwise he wouldn’t have told her all of the dangerous places.

The track – if it could even be called that, made up of nothing more than an orange arrow painted on the cliff and rocks every thirty meters or so – directed hikers to the Pinnacle vantage point made famous in all the brochures. What the ‘track’ didn’t lead to, though, was the old ‘Nerve Test’ located a few hundred meters along the cliff to the west. The rangers moved the track away from there and started discouraging people from going, because there were simply too many people hurting themselves trying to do it.

The Nerve Test was simple: there was a narrow string of rocks – each no wider than her two palms side by side – that led out over a drop off. The rocks extended horizontally while the ground on either side fell sharply. For the first step in the series, the drop off was only little – less than a meter – but by the time you got to the end rock – one two short meters away – the drop off plummeted to
over twenty meters. If you could keep your nerve and not look down, you’d be alright. *But one slip off the narrow line of rocks, and a broken leg would be best-case-scenario…*

Harriet looked around for a way down the other side of the mountain, but nothing easy presented itself. She wasn’t stupid enough to actually do the nerve test, but she had though the drop-off would be scalable.

Behind her, she heard the barking dogs again.

The Suits had caught up to her.

Looking at the drop off again, Harriet reconsidered the distance.

*I guess…*

If she could keep to the right, she would avoid most of the larger boulders. And it was only the first bit that was *really* steep: after that it evened out. Kind of.

*Here goes nothing…*

Harriet took her pack off and held it in front of her. Drawing a final deep breath, and glancing over her shoulder for one last look at the Suits closing in, she leapt.

The initial fall wasn’t so bad. It was only three meters straight down, and she was able to absorb most of the shock with a roll.

But then came the rest of the slope.

For hundreds of meters she fell; rolling and slipping on the loose dirt and stones. Her shoulders regularly banged against trees and logs, and it took all her willpower not to protect her head with both her arms. Instead, her arms were wrapped protectively around the backpack, shielding her dragon from the worst of the hits. There was no way she could have stopped all of them, and each pained cry the dragon gave was an extra jab to her heart. Belatedly, she regretted not taking the dragon out and letting it fly down, but if the Suits were chasing her based on a theory, then she’d rather die than give them confirmation that what they sought was within their sight.

It felt like she fell for hours, but it couldn’t have been more than a minute. She ended up flat on her back, looking up at the steep slope she’d just come down. The ridge she’d jumped off was at least a couple of hundred meters above her, and she could see the silhouettes of the Suits staring down at her. None of them made to follow her down her treacherous descent, and she smiled when she realised her gambit had worked.

She’d bought herself some time. Not much, but enough to put a little distance between them.

Opening the top of the bag, Harriet crawled to her feet and checked on Cloud. The dragon was battered and angry, but when it saw Harriet’s bleeding face, its chirps took on a concerned tone.
That’s my girl, Harriet smiled down at it. Even after the beating it had taken, it was more worried about Harriet than herself.

Running was beyond her now. Her left knee had been pretty badly banged up in the fall, and the ankle could barely support her weight. Hobbling along like some deformed racer, she continued down the slope as it evened out, smiling grimly in satisfaction when she finally hit level ground.

The valley she was in now was heavily wooded, and she made sure to keep herself well under the canopy. If they had a watcher with a scope situated up on the ridge, then he could be calling out directions to the other Suits. For over a kilometre she carried Cloud, refusing to let her out of the bag because she still feared being spotted. If she hadn’t been running for her life, she might have been able to appreciate some of the beauty that was around her. Natural waterfalls, stone formations, and towering Eucalypts were all taken in with panicked eyes.

At one stage, the only option ahead was to continue down into a second smaller gully that hopefully led out of the ravine. She tried to take it slowly, favouring her good leg, but the shale underneath her boots was slippery, and she lost traction.

Banging her head yet again, Harriet tumbled down to the bottom of the slope. Caught unawares, this time she hadn’t been able to protect the bag, and there were pained squawks coming from inside.

Harriet tried to stand, but her head swam so painfully that she was forced to sit back down.

So this is how it ends…

After several long minutes, when the sounds of boots crunching on the loose rocks grew close, she forced herself not to cry. I tried, she sent to Cloud, knowing that her words weren’t good enough … could never be good enough to make up for the life of imprisonment that awaited the creature.

Opening her eyes again, Harriet shaded them from the sun as she looked into the faces of her captors.
“Hello?”

Her captors were shorter than she’d imagined, and they weren’t wearing the same suits as the rest of their group.

In fact, they weren’t wearing suits at all.

There were two of them: a man who looked to be about 25, and a woman who looked a little younger, maybe 20 or 21. They were both dressed in dark jeans and sturdy black leather boots, but their jackets were what set them apart. They were made of leather, and cut like a motorbike rider’s: snug around the body and with no collar. The man’s was a standard black, but the woman’s was a deep blue: the same blue as a sapphire when it catches the light. The jackets were not normal leather, but instead had a distinct diamond pattern, as if the leather hides had been draped over a sheet of chicken wire.

“Hello?” the woman looked down at Harriet and repeated her question again.

“Hello,” Harriet responded dumbly, sure that she should be in cuffs by now.

“Is this the one,” the woman looked at the man, who closed his eyes for a moment before responding with a nod.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “She’s the one. She reeks of it, apparently.”

Harriet didn’t particularly enjoy having her personal hygiene called into question, but she made no response. The woman knelt down beside her. Now that her eyes had adjusted to looking up at the sun, Harriet could finally examine her face. She was beautiful. There were no two ways about it. Wavy blond hair and soft rounded features. Long legs, full lips and a nice smile.

*Beautiful…* Harriet sighed, envious despite herself. *I’ll never look as good as that in a million years.*

“Come on,” the woman smiled, and her face became – in Harriet’s eyes – even more amazing. “Let’s get you up. We have to get out of here.”
“W-what?” Harriet was confused, and she clutched onto her bag tightly. No one was going to take Cloud away from her.

“Get up,” the man looked down on her, and his voice held none of the warmth the woman’s had. “We have to get out of here before they figure out how to get down that mountain.”

“Who are you people?” Harriet had hit her head more than a few times in the last ten minutes, and she was having serious trouble focusing on the rapidly changing situation.

“We’re the people who are going to keep you alive. Now quick,” he grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet. “Before the Nightmen get here.”

Harriet snatched her hand away from his. Stranger danger, you weird Emo. “I’m not going anywhere with you people.” On the run for her life, the last thing she was about to do was tag along with a couple of leather-clad strangers. Who the hell even wears leather in a hot forest anyway? That in itself was enough to make her sceptical.

“Thanks for helping me up, but I’m going a different way.” Clutching her bag to her chest, she began to hobble away, praying that Cloud remained silent long enough to get out of earshot. Harriet managed a good ten meters before the two of them easily caught up to her – and how pitifully slow they’re going shows just how broken I am – and restrained her with a hand on the shoulder.

“Don’t be an idiot,” the man barked, further confirming Harriet’s assessment of him. Even his friend is getting annoyed with him.

The strange woman glared at him. He opened his mouth again, but her hand curled into a fist, and he shut it with a snap

“What Kit’s trying to say,” she spoke much more reasonably. “Is that these woods are full of bad people. Really bad people. They are following you, and we can get you to safety.”

Really? They’re following me? I never would have guessed, you idiot! “I’m doing just fine on my own, thanks.”

“Really?” Kit’s voice was again harsh, and the woman shot him another angry look. “Because you look like you just came off second best in a fight with a rock. So how about you start showing some gratitude and let us help you.”

“Just walk the hell away from me,” Harriet warned. “I’ve been trained to fight, and if you try to touch me, I’ll break your freaking arms!” Inspiration came to her. “Why do you think those people are after me? Huh? It’s because I almost killed a man. He tried to rape me, so I beat him half to death!”
Without thinking, Harriet acted like the animals she farmed. She puffed out her chest and held her arms out from her body a bit, making herself look bigger and more intimidating.

Obviously, it failed.

These two strangers were humans, not animals, and they saw her for what she was: a small and battered girl who was way out of her depth.

“You done?” the tone the man used was the same one her teachers had when the year 7’s tried to act up. The tone that said: *I’m sick of your drama, but I’m too polite to say it to your face.*

“Just … stay away from me.” Harriet backed up a few more steps.

“You need to decide, lady. Them, or us? If you don’t make a choice right now, then soon the matter will be taken out of your hands entirely.” He closed his eyes for a minute, scrunching up his nose before continuing speaking as if nothing had happened. “Those men have already found a way down the ridge, and they are calling in reinforcements. They’ll be here in minutes.” Harriet still looked undecided, and he harshly finished. “Look, you might think coming with us is a risk, but going with them is a certainty. Certain death, that is. I’d take a risky way out over a certain death any day of the month!”

“O… Okay, I’ll go with you,” she cast a nervous glance back over the ridge to where the Suits had been.

Harriet could walk, but she couldn’t walk fast. Kit saw this immediately, and he wasn’t shy about pointing it out.

“Look, I don’t mean to get so hands on … but if those people catch us, they aren’t going to hold back. We need to get out of here, and you can’t manage that right now.”

So saying, he picked her up bodily, throwing her over his shoulder.

It was the first time a boy had carried Harriet, and she had to admit, she’d imagined it going down a lot differently. *Maybe some flowers. Maybe a romantic meal. Definitely music. Always music.* She crossed the items off a list that would now never happen. *And I was definitely going to be held lovingly in his arms … not tossed over his shoulder like bag of compost.*

Still, she couldn’t deny the fact that even with her weight added, the man could move. The ground beneath her whizzed past. The two strangers – she still didn’t know both their names – moved through the forest like they were born to it. Leaping from one rock to the next, skirting around trees and sidestepping boulders and fissures, there was not a single moment when the two did not seem utterly confident and completely sure of their footing.
Kit took the lead initially, and the woman trailed behind by several meters. After a few kilometres, she sped up and took the lead, but Kit would still call out directions every so often.

“Left. They’re in the valley next to us.”

His directions were never preceded by a look around or a phone call or anything. He was somehow just able to know what was going on around him. Harriet watched him closely, but she couldn’t see any little screens or phones where he could watch satellite imagery. Who the hell are these people?

Her thoughts were never voiced aloud. As wary as she might be of them, she could recognise what luck she’d had meeting them, and how effective they were at evading the Suits. Even after an hour or more slung across his back, with nothing to shield her ribs from his bony shoulder but a few layers of clothing, she made no complaint at the way they worked.

“Cut through the trees ahead. After a hundred paces there should be a natural path down into the next ravine,” the next set of mysterious directions came with no more explanation than the rest. The woman showed no hesitation, and she followed exactly where he’d said.

“Over that ridge,” the man said. His long strides climbed the rocks faster than his companions – despite his burden – and with him back in the lead, the instructions stopped.

But their pace did not.

If anything, they stepped it up. The two were uncanny in their ability to navigate the rough terrain, and their stamina appeared to be limitless. After an hour of carrying Harriet, the man wasn’t even breathing heavily, let alone showing signs of discomfort. The fitness levels these two had would have put an Olympian to shame. Even after an hour and a half when they decided to stop, they looked like they were fresh out of bed.

“We’ve got some breathing room now,” the man decided, finally letting Harriet down. They’d made it north so far that they were at risk of breaking through the northern border of the National Park. “Now we can take care of the trail.”

“We’ve been running over rocks,” Harriet was puzzled. “We haven’t left a trail.”

“Not footprints,” he explained. “Your scent trail. The one the dogs are tracking. Here,” he pulled a rag and a spray bottle out of his back pocket. The bottle looked like a miniature can of spray-paint. “Hold this rag up to your face.”

“What?” Harriet’s distrust roared straight back to life. “Is that soaked in chloroform or something? I’m not going to let you rape me!”
“What? Rape you? Soaked in what?” Kit looked genuinely confused, but the woman stepped up quickly to explain.

“It’s to protect your eyes and mouth. The Nightmen are following you because the dogs can smell the dragon’s odour on you. It’s really distinctive. In order to throw them off the trail we need to make your scent disappear, and we do that by covering it up with something stronger.”

“Dragon? What nonsense are you on about?” Harriet feigned ignorance, suddenly feeling very wary. ‘What? What?’ I must sound like a broken record, stuck repeating the same word over and over again. She sniffed subtly, but she couldn’t pick up on anything strange about the way she smelled. Certainly nothing different enough for others to follow her because of.

“Don’t play dumb. We know about the dragon egg you found. And we know about the dragon that must have hatched from it.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about.”

“What the hell else would they be hunting you for?” Kit exploded angrily, obviously mad at wasting precious time, and eating into the small lead they’d managed to gain.

“You reek of dragon!” even the woman was looking annoyed now. “You can’t hide it from them, and you sure as hell can’t hide it from us. If there are any two people on this gods-forsaken rock who know what a dragon smells like, it’s us.”

“H-how do you know about dragons…?” Harriet was suddenly nervous.

“We know about a lot of things. Now, hold this over your face, I’m going to spray you, and you won’t like what this will do to you if you inhale it.”

Harriet opened her mouth to protest, but the man raised the canister anyway. His hand tightened on the handle, and Harriet hurriedly covered her face.

It was like being squirted with a water spray. The mist hung heavily in the air before settling onto her body, soaking into her clothing and leaving a damp sheen across her skin. Harriet tried to place the smell, but she couldn’t. The closest she could think of was some kind of bastardised mix of oranges and old soggy newspapers.

“There. That ought to do it,” the woman spoke into the silence, and Harriet took it as a sign that it was safe to lower her face-shield.

“Who are you people?”

“Scales! We never introduced ourselves,” the woman was genuinely apologetic. “I’m Elayne, and this is Kit.”

“No,” Harriet shook her head, “I mean, who the hell are you?”
Kit looked her straight in the eyes, and when he spoke, his answer was the absolute last thing Harriet had been expecting.

“We’re dragonriders.”
“You’re … what?”

*There’s that magic word again…*

“Dragonriders,” Kit repeated. “And you are one too, now. We are a very endangered breed, so trust us when we say we definitely have a vested interest in keeping you alive, and out of the Nightmen’s hands.”

“Who are these Nightmen you keep talking about?” Harriet latched onto the one piece of information her brain could process.

“The men who were chasing you. The men who are *still* chasing you. Speaking of … we’ve been here long enough. We need to keep moving.” He took a few steps towards Harriet and made to pick her up, but she stumbled back out of his grasp.

“Hold up,” she was assertive now, and there was no confusion in her voice. “Explain yourselves. I’m not going anywhere until I know who the hell you both are, and I’m certainly not going east. I live to the west, and if I’m not home by tonight then my father will send out a search party!” *And he’ll be looking in the wrong state completely, so he’ll never have a hope of finding me…*

“There’s no time to go west. If you have family there, then I suggest you telephone them,” he said the word telephone as if the concept was foreign to him, “and tell them you won’t be home for a while. Your only priority right now is that dragon, and making sure it stays safe. If those men catch up to you – and they will if you act stupidly – then they will kill you. And they will take your dragon,
and they will lock it in a cage for the rest of its life. Trust me, they’ve been hunting us for years. We need to go east. To Sydney”

“Why on earth would you think I would go east with you?” They didn’t seem to grasp the core thrust of her argument. “Getting away from some obviously shady people in a forest is one thing, but I’m not going to travel halfway across the country with a strange couple I’ve just met. Do I look like an idiot? And that doesn’t even answer my original question! How can the Suits even know about dragons? Up until a week ago I thought they were only a myth. Dragons aren’t supposed to be real! They are just stories to excite children. Actually, forget the Suits… tell me again please, how is that you two even know about the dragons? And how did you know about me?”

“I told you,” Kit explained it slowly. “We are both dragonriders. We know about dragons because we both grew up with them, and we know about you because as we said earlier, you reek of dragon flesh, and our own beasts were able to smell you out from a dozen leagues away! And as for Sydney, we have a base there. We can be safe for a while.”

“I don’t even know what a league is!” Harriet exploded, getting frustrated. “Speak English, and tell me how you found me.”

“We’ve been dodging the Nightmen for years. When they all suddenly disappeared and stopped trying to find us, only to converge on one location, then we figured that they might have found something here worth checking out. And we were right. They found our egg, which was lost to us, and which we have been hunting for eight years.”

“Your egg?” Harriet was loath to let anything think they could take ownership of Cloud.

“Of course it’s our egg. Who else’s would it be? As far as we can tell, we’re the only two living dragonriders on this gods-forsaken hell you call a planet.”

“You keep claiming that. Prove it,” Harriet called his bluff, but he didn’t take the bait. Looking over to Elayne, he gave her a simple order.

“Call her.”

Elayne closed her eyes briefly for a moment. When she opened them again, both she and Kit tilted their heads back to look up at the sky.

Harriet followed their gaze. The sky in this area was overcast, with light grey clouds blotting out the sun and speaking of the rain that would fall tonight or tomorrow. After a few seconds, the clouds directly above them grew darker. It wasn’t a flash-storm, but the silhouette of an animal dropping down from above.

Harriet was stunned.
The dragon only passed low enough for an outline to be visible thought the clouds for a few seconds. Anyone not looking directly at it would have missed it entirely, and even if they were, the glimpse would have been so fleeting that it would have disappeared before they could figure out what it was.

“She’s so huge,” Harriet breathed. And the dragon was: even from the ground it was obvious that the outline belonged to an animal the same size as a small plane. From nose to tail it would have been the same size as a train carriage, and the body itself would have been the size of a camper van. Then there were the wings! If Cloud’s wings were big enough to envelop her whole body while she slept, then Elayne’s dragon’s wings could have enveloped a small house!

“Yeah she’s pretty big.” Elayne smiled.

“How could I not know about this?” Harriet asked. “How could have been kept secret? Surely she would have been seen by a radar or something? God, even just by someone looking up at the wrong moment!”

“It’s the scales,” Kit replied. “They dragons aren’t from around here, and whatever it is your radars are set to catch, it certainly isn’t them. As for people seeing them…” he shrugged. “People see what they want to see, and they want to see things they believe in. If the dragons were ever seen, it would be from a distance, and people would just assume they were imagining it, or that it was just a bird really high up.”

“Will Cloud grow that big?” Harriet’s brain was already back to her own dragon.

“Depends on the breed,” Elayne replied, picking up immediately that Cloud was the dragon’s name. She was smiling to match the expression of awe on Harriet’s face. “Some grow bigger than others.”

“How big will Cloud grow? And how long will it take.”

“I can’t tell that until we see her. As I said, all dragons are different, and I have no idea what breeds sired the egg she hatched from.”

“You can see her, if you want,” Harriet offered, overcoming her natural instinct to keep Cloud hidden. These people were obviously special, and if she wanted to learn more about dragons – and keep away from the Suits – then she would need to start trusting them.

“Where is she?” Kit asked, and for the first time that day, Harriet got a glimpse of how friendly he could be when he wasn’t fleecing for his life.

“In my bag,” Harriet pointed to the bag Elayne had left propped up against a tree.

“What?” The two dragonriders reacted with identical shock and horror. “She’s in there?”
Elayne ran to the bag and ripped the straps open. Cloud was still exactly where Harriet had left her, and true to form, she hadn’t made any noise the entire time to give away her presence. One she could see daylight, though, she obviously saw no need to stay confined, and took to the air with frenzied wingbeats. Rising straight up, she pinpointed Harriet immediately and flew down to land on her shoulder.

Cloud curled her body around the back of Harriet’s neck in her usual perch, but this time her tail wrapped around the front of Harriet’s neck protectively and her wings flared wide to make the two of them seem bigger and more imposing. Harriet didn’t think it was possible, but in that moment she fell just a little bit deeper in love with her dragon. Even against overwhelming odds, in the face of a potential threat the dragon only had one thought in mind: to defend Harriet.

Elayne and Kit had watched the whole process unfold in shock, but when their eyes rested on Cloud for several seconds, Harriet saw their shoulder’s slump.

“What’s wrong?” she was suddenly fearful. Is she too small? Have I not been feeding her properly? Maybe she’s sick … or deformed … or disabled. “What is it?” her brain had gone into worst-case-scenario.

Elayne and Kit exchanged loaded glances before Elayne sadly replied. “Nothing, Harriet, Cloud is fine. It’s just that … we were hoping for a red.”
“A red?”

Of all the answers Harriet had been expecting, that certainly must have been down towards the bottom of the list.

“I told you,” Elayne explained softly, “there are many breeds of dragons, and each of them is vastly different. They grow to different sizes, have different bone and scale structures, and they have different … abilities.”

“Abilities?”

“Well … for example, my blue. She’s a firebreather. Blues are also large – the second largest breed there is, equal with the greens and second only to the coppers. The greens are firebreathers too, but they’re much rarer than the blues. Our old Captain, he had a green. Lance, he called it.” Elayne was rambling slightly, but Harriet didn’t interrupt her. “The coppers are the largest, so they don’t get any special abilities, but they are also the strongest, and their scales are the hardest. That means they can take a real beating without getting hurt, and they can uproot even the largest trees. Coppers can also carry multiple riders if needed, even when the men are loaded down with weapons and armour. The oranges are a little smaller than the blues and greens, and instead of fire they have acid sacs in the bottom of their jaws. And the acid will melt steel, and it burns through flesh like a weight through water.” She took a deep breath. “And then there’re blacks, of course, like Kit’s Nighteyes. They’re the smallest breed – no bigger than two fat cows, really – but they are also the fastest, and they have the
best vision, which makes them perfect for scouts or for night-time sentries. They can even see in the dark as clear as day.”

There were several horrifying and archaic descriptors the innocent-looking woman used, but Harriet didn’t even raise an eyebrow. “And reds?”

“Reds can…” Elayne faded off, and Kit answered quietly.

“Reds can teleport.”

Harriet must have had a sceptical expression on her face, for he followed it up quickly with. “Yeah, I know. Sounded crazy to us, too. But it’s true. It was because of a red that we ended up here, and we were hoping yours was a red, so it could take us home.”

“Home?”

“We’re not from around here, Harriet. Obviously. When was the last time you saw a dragon?” the question was rhetorical, and he did not wait for her to answer. “A red dragon was transporting our group between two distant locations. Elayne and I were the last of the group, and the smallest. Eight people had gone before us, with the same red going back and forth to make the trip. He could only take two at a time, see, since he had to have skin-to-skin contact with the passengers. Anyway, after so many trips he must have been tired, because far from arriving at the same place as the rest of our family, we ended up here.”

“You … you’re family?” Harriet looked between the two, obviously surprised and obviously having misread the situation.

“In every way except blood.”

“But, didn’t the rest of your family come back for you?”

Kit laughed bitterly. “I doubt they even know where we are. The red that was transporting us was … different. Both he and his rider were what you might call ‘special’, and if he even made it back home himself, I doubt he would know where to come get us from. I think his simplicity and his exhaustion just combined to throw us way off course. We were counting on the egg hatching a red to get us back. It must have fallen out of my saddle bags during the trip, and because it was smaller it took a lot longer to arrive than us.”

“So you’ve been here for longer than the egg?”

“Aye,” there was that bitter laugh again. “We’ve been here for eight years.”

“But I don’t get it? You’re dragonriders! You literally ride dragons, so why don’t you just fly back to wherever it was you were living? Even if it was in like Europe or Russia – or even Canada or something – you could have made it back years ago if you just took it in stages.”
“We aren’t from Europe. Or from Russia. Or even Canada, although our search for the egg has taken us to all of those places. We’re from a place much, much different to your world. I don’t even think it is on the same planet.”

“So you’re aliens?” Harriet felt a spike of fear.

Kit laughed. “No, we’re not aliens. Our world, the actual earth itself, could have been identical to yours, if not for the people. The same sun, the same oceans, the same beaches.” He laughed again. “Hell, even the same damn carrots. It could be the same planet … just a different version of the planet.” He looked up at the sky. “Planets… Do you know, before we arrived here, we knew almost nothing of the heavens? The sky, yes – we do ride dragons, after all – but nothing beyond that. It was a much simpler place, our home. We didn’t have electricity, or cars, or airplanes.”

“Where was it?” Harriet was genuinely curious, and this sudden revelation was enough to drive all thought of the Suits from her mind.

“The Kingdom of Brock,” Elayne answered.

“And before that, from the Dragonlands across the sea.” Kit added. “If there was ever another name for that continent, it is lost to time and history.”

“What was it like? Brock?” Harriet was beginning to realise that they weren’t joking. These people actually came from a different planet.

“Peaceful,” Kit sighed. “I think the first good night’s sleep I ever had in my life was our first night in Brock. Elayne grew up there, but I was already a man by the time I arrived.”

Harriet looked at Kit again. He couldn’t have been more than 24 or 25 years old now, and he’d said he’d been on Earth for eight years, so Harriet had her doubts about whether Kit’s definition of a ‘man’ matched her own. She wasn’t one to stop a good story though, so she didn’t question him.

“The country was just on the losing end of a war when we arrived, but our arrival changed all that. Within a year the fighting was done, and they were at peace again.”

“So you were soldiers.”

“He was,” Elayne nodded at Kit. “Kit was the Company’s scout. I was only a recruit. Kit still outranks me,” she smiled ruefully. “My dragon had only just hatched, and was only a little bigger than your Cloud is now when we ended up here.”

“If Brock was so great, why did you ever leave?”

It was Kit who answered. “It was the Captain’s decision to leave, not mine. I’d follow him to the fires of hell and back, but, scales! … I wish we’d stayed in Brock.”
“It was home,” Elayne smiled wistfully. “Everything made sense there. No one tried to hunt you down,” she smiled. “Or … at least … when they did, they fought under a banner and had an army at their back, so you always knew where you stood. None of the Nightmen coming to get you when you least expect it.”

“It sounds … different.” Harriet didn’t know what to say.

“It was,” Kit said. “You’re world is strange and fast-paced. And the people in it are violent in a way that would put the worst of our soldiers to shame. The way you treat each other, and the planet…” he shook his head. “We could be here all day. We need to leave.”

“Wait,” Harriet held up a hand. Kit had already started to walk away, but he stopped at her request. “You never answered my question. Will Cloud grow as big as that one?” Harriet glanced upwards to show which dragon she meant. “And will she really be able to breathe fire?”

“You better take this one,” Kit passed it off to Elayne. “You’re the expert on blues.”

“May I see your dragon?” Elayne asked politely, holding out a hand.

“Go on, fly over there.” Harriet coaxed Cloud, and the little dragon flapped over to land on Elayne’s outstretched arm. She didn’t walk up and curl itself around Elayne’s neck like she did to Harriet, but instead just sat down in her palm and watched, wings still spread wide to balance.

“You’re beautiful,” Elayne complimented the dragon as she stroked its scales with her free hand. Under the guise of giving it a thorough petting, the dragonrider examined every inch of the little creature. Raising her voice, she spoke words that were obviously intended for Harriet.

“She’s perfectly formed, and she shows the normal signs of growth. How long did you say she’s been out of the shell for?”

“Five days.”

Elayne’s eyes widened. “No … that’s not possible. Surely you’re mistaken?”

“No, I know the exact day of her hatching.”

“But … she’s big enough to have been out for a month already. She’s already double her birth size, and she’s larger than any five-day-old has a right to be. What have you been feeding her?”

“Ham, mostly. Some raw beef offcuts, and a little bit of salami. Oh, and she ate a skink once, and like a hundred mosquitoes.”

“Incredible,” Elayne breathed. “I have no idea how big Cloud will grow, or if she will ever flame. If she were a normal blue then I could say. Hell, if she were any breed I was familiar with, then I could say.”

“What do you mean? Her scales are blue. You’re looking right at them!”
“Look at the difference, Harriet.” Elayne held the arm of her free hand alongside Cloud’s back. “This jacket is made from the scales of my blue. There might be slight variations between dragons, but almost every blue I’ve ever seen hatched looks identical.” There was a huge difference in the shades: Cloud was a pale sky blue, whereas the jacket – and hence Elayne’s dragon – was more of a deep ultramarine.

“There could be any number of explanations,” Kit hurriedly spoke to reassure a panic-stricken Harriet. “It’s possible Cloud is a new species … one that we haven’t encountered in three thousand years of meticulous breeding records…” Kit’s voice trailed off, realising his mistake. “Or – more likely – she is simply reacting differently because she was born on a different planet. Maybe there is something in the air that’s caused her colouring to change. Or maybe there was a variation in the shell. It could have been what she’s been eating; and that would also explain how she’s growing so fast. There are just too many possibilities to narrow it down. Teeth and tails! It could even be a residual effect from the transportation. My dragon was down for a week after we arrived, and it was full-grown to begin with. I can’t imagine what effect the transition might have had on an egg.”

None of this was doing anything to help calm down Harriet, who was growing increasingly worried. Cloud, sensing Harriet’s distress, flew back over to her and wrapped her small body around her neck. Soon you’ll be too big to do that, Harriet though sadly, stroking her dragon’s stomach.

“The main thing to remember,” Elayne spoke soothingly, “is that Cloud is healthy and happy in every way, and even a blind man could tell that she loves you more than life itself. You two have a great bond. And now we just need to get you to safety.”

“Where is safety?” Harriet asked bitterly. “Is there even anywhere on this planet we could go where the Suits couldn’t track us down?”

“Oh, there are a few places,” Kit spoke wryly. “The Nightmen don’t know all our secrets. We need to head east, but before we do that we need to make sure they can’t follow us. I won’t have them learning about Sydney. We’ll go north, leaving a trail behind us, and then cut back down through Melbourne, just to be safe.”

The two of them made to depart, but Harriet still had a few reservations. Her dad would be worried sick about her if she didn’t come home tonight. She couldn’t just disappear. Not only would that be cruel to him, but he wouldn’t just give up on her. He would have the SES and the state police out canvassing the area. There would be signs and billboards, and ads on the television. She didn’t even know if they did those little ‘missing child’ pictures on the side of milk cartons in Australia, but
knowing her dad, he’d find some way of introducing it. If he thought she was alive and missing, there was nothing he wouldn’t do to try and find her.

That’s how much he cared.

She couldn’t just vanish, so she steeled her nerve and pulled out the emergency phone from her pocket. Somehow, in all the tumbles and falls she’d taken, the phone had escaped unscathed. It spoke more to the resilience of plastic phones than it did to luck, and she once again laughed at those folks who brought all the latest and greatest bits of technology, only to have to replace them in a month when they broke. *Nothing beats an old Nokia…*

Dialling the only number saved into the phone, she held it up to her ear and waited.

“Hello?”

“Hey dad. It’s me.”

“Oh, hi honey. Enjoying your trip? Need me to come pick you up?”

“I’m having fun. And no, I don’t need a lift.”

“Are you sure? It’s getting late, and you’ve got school in the morning.”

“I know. Dad … I won’t be coming home tonight. I might not be home for a little while.”

“What?” there was a strange tone to her father’s voice, one she hadn’t heard for a long time. *Not since my brother decided to move away.* “What are you talking about? Answer me, Harriet.”

“I … I just need to work through some things, dad. I want some time to think, and to be alone.”

“What are you talking about? You’ll be home tonight, and you’re going to school tomorrow. I don’t care if you—”

“Dad! Dad, stop! Just listen. You’ve raised me well. I know how to take care of myself. I just … I need to do this okay. I’m sorry. I’ve got to go now, but I’ll be in touch when I can. I love you.”

“I love you too” he replied. “Always. But Harriet—”

“Goodbye.”

Harriet hung up the phone, and snapped it in half. Harriet was well aware how easy it was to trace a phone. She’d seen *Taken* like four times now.

It was a flip phone, and it broke apart easily. Pulling out the battery and sim-card, she smashed them to pieces on a rock, and buried the whole lot in a hole as deep as her elbow. Brushing the dirt off her hands, she didn’t look up at the other two until the job was completely finished.

“North,” she said, her voice detached and emotionless. “Let’s go.”
PART TWO
Harriet actually squealed a little when Mildura came into view.

They’d been on the run from the Nightmen – as she now thought of them – for almost two weeks now, and while heading north, they had covered the better part of seventy leagues. She knew this, because Kit would keep a daily tally of their progress.

Having no idea what a league was, Harriet had poured over the map until she could tell that they’d covered 335 kilometres, and that one league equalled roughly five kilometres. When asked about the measurements, Kit and Elayne had just shrugged, and said that leagues were the standard units back where they came from, and that kilometres were a completely foreign concept. In some ways they’d adjusted to a new world surprisingly well … and in others it was like they just didn’t bother.

The journey had taken them twelve days, solely because they’d had to do the entire thing on foot. And just about the only thing worse than having to walk 335 kms on foot was knowing that two others were having to do it as well, and that it was entirely because of you.

Public transport wasn’t an option: the Nightmen had the bus stations and main roads under heavy observation. They also had checkpoints set up on all major roads leading away from the Grampians, so even hitchhiking was out of the question. Plus, if we were to just disappear completely, then the Nightmen would have no option but to go back to Mount Gambier, and start pressing my father for information. So long as the Nightmen thought they were on their trail, Harriet knew her father was safe.

The obvious escape method was via dragonback – they were dragonriders, after all – but Harriet knew the suggestion hadn’t been made because Cloud was nowhere near big enough to
support Harriet’s weight. She had thought about doubling up and riding on Elayne’s dragon with Cloud still in the bag, but when she’d suggested it, Elayne had gently but firmly dismissed it. That would slow the dragon down too much, and be too much weight for her dragon to take comfortably for long. Plus, the slower flying speed meant the risk was too great that they’d be spotted.

And so, they had walked.

Walking was not fun, and whatever small novelty there might have been about seeing the countryside wore off around the forty or fifty kilometre mark. They’d had to avoid major roads and towns for the most part, which meant they’d travelled a lot of gravel backstreets, and had cut across more than one farmer’s paddock.

Every two days or so, Kit would carefully leave a small bit of evidence of their passing. Not much – just a discarded drink bottle, or an empty chocolate bar wrapper – but enough that when combined with Cloud’s distinctive scent, would let the Nightmen track them for a little longer. He was careful to leave only evidence of Harriet’s passing. As far as the Nightmen were concerned, Harriet was operating alone, and she was getting no assistance from anyone else.

So long as they continued to believe that, their little group of dragonriders had an advantage.

Kit had decided that when they got to Mildura, they could stop for a night and stay in a proper place, then in the morning press north for one more day before cutting back south, and cease leaving a trail.

Harriet had worried about stopping the trail, but Kit assured her that after so much distance covered, and all leading in a particular direction, the Nightmen would try to track them for weeks more before they gave up and returned to Mount Gambier.

The hotel they checked into wasn’t anything spectacular – just a cheap dive on the outskirts of town – but after so long in the wilderness, a hot shower was enough to satisfy Harriet. The fact that she got to sleep on a mattress for a night was just an added bonus, and even the loose spring that poked into her roughly wasn’t enough to dampen the experience.

The next day, they pressed on till mid-afternoon. They only covered twenty kilometres or so, but it was far enough out of town to continue their northern trajectory and to point the Nightmen off towards Broken Hill, and beyond that to Alice Springs. Kit arranged the last bit of evidence carefully, and when he was satisfied that it looked authentic, he smiled at them for the first time in a few days.

“Alright, time to head south again. Let’s go to Melbourne.”

“Kit, I can’t do it,” Harriet had been thinking the thought for a few days, but it was only now that she allowed it to be given voice. “I can’t walk to Melbourne, and I sure as hell can’t walk from
there to Sydney. I don’t know what type of superhuman strength they breed the people with on your planet, but here I’m just a regular sixteen year old. My legs are shot, my back is tired, and my shoulders are bruised black and blue from this bag.”

It was all true, especially the shoulder-bruising.

For the last twelve days Kit had made sure Cloud had a ready supply of good quality meat. Some of it had been purchased from butchers and from farmers, but the vast majority had been hunted by Kit himself. He had a small bow and a quiver of arrows that had appeared throughout the first night – no doubt retrieved from his supplies strapped to his dragon’s saddle way up in the sky – and it was with these that he kept them all fed. As it turned out, Cloud had a love for rabbit, and while Harriet could stomach the gamey meat, she would never relish it the way Elayne and Kit seemed to.

All those meals, though, had worked a miraculous change on Cloud, and the little dragon had doubled in size again. Her body was now as big as a medium dog, and her wings were over two meters from wingtip to wingtip. Kit and Elayne were surprised at how fast she was growing, but they said as long as she kept getting food, then her growth should continue along at a steady rate.

It was good for Cloud – and in a few months, it would be good for Harriet – but for the moment, the dragon was at an awkward stage where she was too heavy to carry for long periods, but her muscles were not yet strong enough for her to fly all the time either. So far they’d been managing with an uncomfortable rotation of the two, but neither Harriet nor Cloud was particularly thrilled with it, they just couldn’t see any other option.

“We need to keep moving,” Kit responded to her initial comment. “If we stop now, then the Nightmen will catch up to us within the day.”

“I know that, and I understand the need,” Harriet said reasonably. “I’m not arguing that we don’t need to keep moving, I’m just saying that I can’t walk to Melbourne.”

“Cloud’s not big enough to carry you,” Kit was struggling to see what she meant. “And a motor vehicle is out of the question right now.” Even the way he described cars and buses was from another time. Motor vehicle…

“I don’t know,” Harriet shrugged. “I’m just saying, it’s like 600kms from here to Melbourne, and my feet can’t handle that.”

Kit frowned, but he didn’t argue the point. “Umm…” he thought about the issue, and Harriet could see the cogs turning over in his mind as he cast his eyes about. “We could…” he kept searching the area around them, as if the trees would suddenly inspire him. “Got it!” his eyes had come to rest on the farmhouse closest to them, over two fences and across a wide paddock.
“What are you thinking?” There was none of the suspicion in Elayne’s voice that Harriet would have had: she trusted him completely.

“If we can’t ride our dragons, then we’ll ride something else…”
“I … don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

Harriet looked nervously at the three horses, but Kit simply held the reins of them all, grinning from ear to ear.

“Look at them,” he admired. “They’re in perfect condition, come from good stock, and I got them for a good price,” his voice lowered slightly. “Even if I did have to pay the man triple to ensure he stayed silent about the sale…”

Elayne chose the closest horse and swung up into the saddle in one fluid movement. From their expressions, Harriet knew they expected her to do the same, but she held back.

“I…”

How was she supposed to tell them that she didn’t know how to ride a horse? She might have been a country kid … but she wasn’t an eighteenth century country kid. She could drive a car and ride a bike, and that had served her well so far in life. *How do I deal with this? Especially after he’s obviously gone out and spent a lot of money after I complained about having to walk.*

“What?” Kit mounted the second horse, still holding the reins of the third. “You don’t want to walk, and that’s understandable. Let’s ride instead.” He looked at her, but when she made no move to mount, his eyebrows shot up suddenly in realisation. “Of course, a new horse and you’re nervous. Here, I’ll help you mount.” So saying, he dismounted and walked the two riderless horses over.

“Wait,” Harriet backed up a few steps, away from the animals that came up higher than her head. *Why did he have to pick such big ones?* “I don’t actually know how to ride?”
Cloud was having her own reservations about the beasts. She’d backed well away from them, and while she wasn’t cawing angrily, Harriet knew her body language spoke of a dragon that was ready to pounce the moment she was threatened. The horses, of course, had no such intentions, and while Harriet and Kit spoke they munched lazily on some of the grass underfoot, one of them going so far as to raise its tail and poo. Loudly. *Eww…*

“How can you not know how to ride a horse?” Kit was incredulous. “I’ve encountered some humans who can’t. Useless peasants the lot of them. But you grew up on a farm. This is in your blood.”

“This is the twenty-first century,” Harriet took the defensive and retorted angrily, but was met with blank faces. “I use a quad bike for my farm work. I’m not the Man from Snowy River for Christ’s sake!” The reference was obviously lost on the dragonriders, for they looked at her with blank stares. Shaking her head in annoyance, Harriet rudely added. “I’ve never been on a horse in my whole bloody life!”

“Here, come on over then and I’ll show you,” Kit waved for Harriet to walk over to the horse, and she did so with great trepidation. Grabbing her hand, he brought it up to the creature’s muzzle and gave it a stroke. “See?” he said, still guiding her hand up and down the side of the horse’s face. “He likes you. Just be nice to him, and he can be your best friend in the world.” Cloud gave an indignant squeak at this, and Kit quickly smiled in reassurance. “Well … maybe your second-best friend…”

Harriet continued to stroke the horse’s head, and when she thought it was time to stop, the beast obviously had other ideas. Stepping forward, it butted her gently in the chest a few times until she started back up again.

“See?” Elayne laughed, clicking her horse over to stand next to them. “He already likes you. Now try to mount. Kit will show you how, and he’ll hold the horse steady.”

Following Kit’s instructions, Harriet stood on the right side of the horse. Placing one hand on the front pommel of the saddle and the other on the rear swell of leather, she slid her left foot into the stirrup and mounted the horse in a motion that could never have been called smooth. *Elayne made it look so easy,* she lamented, remember how the other woman had mounted the horse seamlessly. *I’ll never be as good as her.*

“Now the trick is,” Kit taught her, “you always have to make sure your feet stay in the stirrups.” He fiddled with the straps under the saddle, shortening them so the metal rungs were at the right height. “You can’t have your foot too far backwards or your toe will fall out, and you can’t have
them too far forwards, or you won’t be able to balance properly and you’ll fall off. You want them to be about here,” he guided her foot so that the ball of her foot was resting on the tread. “Good, keep it right there and you’ll be fine.”

While Harriet had been worrying about her feet, Elayne had smoothly guided her horse away with her knees to a point about twenty meters away. “Now,” Elayne called across the distance. “Ride towards me.”

Harriet kicked her heels in slightly, like she’d seen cowboys do in the movies. The horse didn’t move so much as an eyelid.

“Harder,” Kit instructed. “Be firm with the animal, and squeeze inwards with your thighs and calves. When there’s pressure on its sides, the horse will know you’re ready to move.”

Harriet tried what he said, squeezing firmly with her thighs and calves, and then digging her heels in much harder. This time, the horse lumbered into a slow walk. He was moving in the entirely wrong direction, though, and it was only after Kit called out that she thought to use the reins in her hand to guide it back around. It took her almost five minutes, but she finally stopped her horse next to Elayne’s with a satisfied smile on her face.

“Nice work,” if there was any condescension in the dragonrider’s tone, then she hid it well. “Remember to keep squeezing tightly with your legs. You’ll hurt tonight, and tomorrow you’ll ache, but it’s good for you to learn proper form to start with, and in the long run you’ll thank me for it.”

Harriet nodded, but she had no idea what Elayne was talking about. *Riding a horse surely couldn’t be much different to riding a quad bike,* she tried to give herself confidence, *and I’ve been doing that my whole life.*

The three of them set off across the paddock. Kit took the lead, as always, and they instructed Harriet to stay in the middle until she was comfortable with riding. Her horse would have a natural tendency to follow the one in front, and in case something went wrong, Elayne would be right there behind her.

Harriet copied the movements and actions of the other two, but even so she found that she was nowhere near as good as them. They moved with a grace that spoke to years of practice, and Harriet briefly wondered what sort of life the two of them had lived. They’d said that the place they’d come from hadn’t had electricity or anything, so maybe horses were the way people back there got around.

Elayne assured her that they wouldn’t go beyond a walk that first day, and even at such a sedate pace, Harriet found herself struggling at the start. The horse didn’t always want to go in a straight line,
and Harriet would be lulled into a false sense of security over the course of an hour, only to have it suddenly disobey her as it wandered off to the side of the gravel track to nibble on some grass. Kit laughed at her frustration, but not in a mean way: it was the laugh of a friend sharing in another’s misfortune. The camaraderie behind it didn’t stop Harriet from going beet red every time it happened, and she was thankful for Elayne’s patient instructions. By the end of the day, she might not yet have been an expert rider, but she could at least guide the horse where she wanted, and had no more fear of falling off.

If someone had have asked Harriet a week ago, she would have been of the firm belief that it was almost impossible to get from one place to another in Australia without using sealed roads, but as it turned out, there were hundreds … if not thousands! … of backstreets running between paddocks and farmhouses. She knew their mode of transport would wither away when they finally reached the outskirts of Melbourne itself, but for now they could travel on horseback and not even attract attention.

All throughout that first day, Harriet caught Kit and Elayne sneaking glances up to the sky. They tried to hide it, but it was impossible to keep anything secret when you travelled with someone all hours of the day. Sadly, Harriet realised the two were looking to sneak glances of their own dragons, and Harriet was again reminded that if it wasn’t for her, the two of them would be off living their own lives. They’d made the choice to help her, and it was because of her they’d been forced to be separated from their own dragons.

As Harriet spent more and more time with Cloud, she began to appreciate just what a sacrifice that was. Cloud wasn’t just a pet to her … she was a best friend. If Harriet was feeling happy, then Cloud was there to share the joy, and if she was feeling down, then her dragon could sense it, and would be at her side in an instant. Calling her a ‘best friend’ might have actually been a disservice, for surely no mere best friend could have even been so intuitive and selfless.

The realisation of what the others were sacrificing on her behalf caused a definite drop in her spirits, and the happiness and pride she’d felt at learning to ride a horse diminished significantly. That night, she barely spoke while Kit cooked the two rabbits he’d shot, and if the other two thought it was just because she was tired, then she wasn’t about to correct them.

They’d warned her that her muscles would ache, but as she fell off to sleep tucked away in her sleeping bag, she again scoffed at how weak they thought she was. Her body was a little sore, but it was nothing she couldn’t handle. Her father hadn’t raised a whiner. They might be there super-cool
dragonriders, but I’m not a helpless damsel. I’ll prove to them I can look after myself. And I won’t be an excuse for them to be parted from their own dragons.

Realising that she’d forgotten to spray herself and Cloud down, Harriet kicked herself out of her bag. Kit and Elayne were still awake, but Harriet couldn’t bring herself to meet their eyes while she collected the spray from her saddlebags and gave her dragon a once over. It still boggled her mind that this glorified air-freshener was powerful enough to keep the Nightmen away, but she couldn’t argue with results: it had been several days since she’d last seen the Nightmen, and not once had signs of them appeared after Kit stopped leaving his deliberate evidence.

Still angry at herself for the inconvenience she was causing, but slightly mollified by the success of their escape, Harriet fell off into a troubled sleep.

Things were different in the morning.

For one, she ached.

_A lot._

The dull throbbing in her muscles the previous evening had intensified overnight into a burning bushfire that threatened to consume her. The very effort of sitting up in her sleeping bag seemed insurmountable, and the thought of walking over to where Elayne and Kit were preparing breakfast was a thing of dreams. The worst affected areas seemed to be her legs and lower back, but she didn’t think she could find a single bit of her body that didn’t hurt some amount.

“What’s happened to me?” she asked frantically, moving nothing but her neck to stop the shooting pain.

Kit smiled over at her. “You rode a horse for an entire day, with no practice. Your muscles will be hurting. You were using muscles yesterday that you’ve never used before, and they don’t like it.”

Harriet muttered a few curse words at him, but that only caused him to roar with laughter.

“We all had to go through it at one point. Think of it as a rite of passage. But look on the bright side; it only gets easier from here. Once you build those muscles up, they’ll stay there for the
rest of your life,” he thought about it for a bit. “Provided you don’t give up riding horses that is, but I don’t see why anyone would ever want to do that.”

Harriet muttered a few more choice words, and Kit laughed again.

“Don’t blame the horse. It’s not his fault you’re out of practice. He was well behaved the whole day for you, and you should be thankful for that,” Harriet looked anything but thankful, and Kit finally offered the cherry, “Come on, get out of your sleeping bag, and Elayne will help you out. We have a bruise balm we give to new riders, and that should help with the muscle ache. The first hour or two of riding today won’t be fun, but after that your body will get back into the swing of it, and your legs and back will loosen up again.”

“Do I have to get back on the horse today? Can’t we just take a break and have a day off?” She looked around them: they were camped in the corner of a random paddock, under the shade of a huge Eucalypt. It was a pretty place, all things considered, and she could have happily stayed there all day.

“Not a hope,” Kit didn’t even consider the idea. “We have over 120 leagues to cover, and we can’t spend the day lying about.”

True to his word, Kit collected a jar of ointment from his saddlebags, and discretely went for a walk to allow Elayne to help Harriet rub the ointment into her thighs and back. While she was waiting for the balm to start working, Harriet mentally did the maths in her head, calculating that the 120 leagues Kit had said lay between them and Melbourne was just over 600 kilometres.

“How far can a horse travel in a day?” she asked Elayne.

“Depends on how hard you want to press them, and how much you care about their lives. If you’re willing to run them into the ground, you might be able to cover sixty leagues a day. Or if you had a few horses that you could swap between, then you wouldn’t tire them out as much and could go for longer. Most of the time though, if you’re just travelling normally, I’d say ten leagues a day would be about average.”

“Ten leagues,” Harriet calculated. “Fifty kilometres doesn’t sound like much? You could just walk that far.”

“True, but then you’d have to carry all your own supplies on your back, and you’d actually have to go through a lot of effort. Horseback might not necessarily be faster in the long run, but it sure is a lot more comfortable,” Elayne finished putting the last smear of ointment onto the back of Harriet’s legs. “Well … more comfortable once you’re used to it, of course.”
Harriet groaned, but when she rose to pack her gear away and feed Cloud, she did feel slightly better. Breakfast made her feel human again, and after a few hours in the saddle, the pain had subsided to a dull throb.

After lunch, Kit decided to introduce her to a trot: the next speed up from a horse’s walk. Harriet didn’t like it at all, finding herself unable to adjust her body to the bouncy rhythm. When they finally moved from a trot up into a canter, even though they were travelling faster it was a much easier ride: the horse’s movements were smoother and easier to match. The three of them – and Cloud – continued for the rest of the afternoon alternating between a walk and a canter, with some periods in between where they would get off and walk, so as to spare the horses entirely. It didn’t feel like they were making much progress, but when Harriet checked the map before bed, she was forced to admit they were churning up the distance.

When they factored in the time it took to find diversions and alternate routes, they calculated it would take almost least three weeks to reach Melbourne, and from there they would still have to go north to Sydney.

Looking over at the horses softly whinnying to each other next to their camp, Harriet didn’t know whether to swear or sigh.

The second morning, the pain was still present, but it had subsided a great deal, and Kit waited barely an hour before he offered her the next speed.

“Want to try a gallop?” there was a mischievous expression on his face, and Harriet found herself matching him grin for grin.

Cloud moved herself from the back of Harriet’s saddle to the back of Elayne’s. Harriet nudged her horse up next to Kit’s, and with the same patient tone he always used when teaching her, he showed her how to lean into the saddle, and how to adjust her weight for the different movements the horse would make.

“A gallop is the smoothest the horse will ride, but it is also the scariest. The ground will speed by below you, and there’s absolutely nothing between you and it except for a very, very, short fall.” He smiled. “So, don’t fall off.”
He took off, and as his horse increased in speed, so did Harriet’s. In the space of fifty meters they were up to a canter, and in another fifty more, the horses were in a full-blown gallop. Harriet smiled, feeling like a Melbourne Cup jockey. She still didn’t look down, though.

Behind her, Harriet heard a familiar squawk, and taking her eyes off the path for a moment, she turned to see Cloud had left Elayne in her wake. Flapping hard, the little dragon was trying to catch up to Harriet, and it was only now that Harriet truly appreciated how much she had grown.

Cloud was now the size of a chubby toddler, and her wings could have wrapped around the horse Harriet rode. It was a wonder she still fit inside the camping bag at all, and in another week she would be too big even for that.

It took Cloud only seconds to close the distance, and once she’d caught up she only flew alongside Harriet for a few moments before she shot ahead. Her reptilian lungs voiced a throaty roar, and Harriet knew in her heart that it was a challenge.

“Hyah!” she kicked her heels into the horse’s flanks, and it sped up slightly more. Kit had fallen back a little by now, and Elayne was still well off in the distance watching them.

It was just Harriet, Cloud, and the horse.

Laughing, Harriet whooped and leant down even lower into the saddle. There was fifteen meters between Harriet and Cloud, but the horse was catching up fast.

Harriet laughed again, hair whipping around in the wind.

More speed…
Bendigo was a milestone.

Not only did it mark the start of the second week on horseback, but it also coincided with the one-month anniversary of Cloud breaking out of her shell. To look at her, you would never guess she was only thirty days old. A steady diet of fresh meat had allowed her to grow to the size of a large Labrador, and her wings were now so big that she no longer had trouble taking off and landing, and instead found that her biggest problem was finding places to fly. Cloud could no longer zoom through the closely-spaced tree trunks, and it had been weeks since she’d been able to stealthily pounce on a skink or lizard.

It had reached the stage that three days out of Bendigo, Cloud had actually split Harriet’s backpack at the seams. She had been riding in it less and less, but when they passed through human areas she had no option but to wrap herself in her wings and crawl inside. Despite her size, her hollow bones still made her lightweight enough for Harriet to be able to carry her.

Just.

Bendigo was been different to all the other towns they’d passed. Rather than just skirting around it, Kit had actually volunteered to mind the horses and Cloud while Elayne and Harriet had gone on a shopping spree. First up had been a new jumbo-sized backpack for Cloud, and then the two of them had gone clothes shopping.
At the end of the day, their purchases had been more practical than indulgent – new jeans and shirts for both of them, and new boots for Harriet – but that didn’t stop them from sighing wistfully over the pretty dresses in one of the boutique shops.

Elayne made a comment to Harriet that while there were many things she missed about their old lives, the clothing was not one of them. In Brock, Elayne had said, the people had dressed for practicality, and silks and gowns had been reserved only for the most special occasions. And, as a dragonrider, her clothing had been more practical than most, and she’d never been considered important enough for anyone to buy her nice things.

“What do you mean, you weren’t important enough?” Harriet had asked incredulously. “You rode a massive fire-breathing dragon!”

“No, then I didn’t. I was only eleven when I bonded with my dragon, and before that, I was an orphan. A maid who cleaned the chamberpots of lords more influential and important than I could ever aspire to be. And even after I bonded her, we were a country at war, and my time was taken up with developing the bond. The war was over before I was old enough to ride her properly, and then there was the accident where we came here.” Elayne had looked at Harriet sadly, her hand still clutching the ruffled fabric of the dress. “Kit is the real dragonrider. At least he has known the freedom of flying through open skies without anyone hunting him. The only times I’ve flown freely with my blue have been at night, or in areas where we were so isolated there was no chance of being spotted. The problem with those areas though, is that they are so inhospitable you can’t stay there long.”

That conversation had put a serious dampener on their shopping trip, but it had proved enlightening for Harriet. Over the days, she was piecing together the various comments Kit and Elayne made, and was starting to get an idea of what the world they’d come from had been like.

Once the two of them managed to tear themselves away from the clothing stores, they made one final stop, and bought Harriet a better quality sleeping bag, and a sturdy knife for her to wear on a sheath belted to the side of her leg underneath her jeans. Because of the very strict knife laws in Australia, Harriet couldn’t wear the blade openly, but both Elayne and Kit insisted she needed it. When you were caring for a dragon, they’d said, an honest blade had a hundred uses, from helping to shape their sharp claws to cutting ropes and straps used to secure items to their backs. Which, at the rate Cloud’s growing, could be happening sooner rather than later.

Kit and Elayne assured Harriet that Cloud was growing healthy and strong, but she could see by their shared glances and late night whispered conversations that Cloud was progressing much faster than what they were used to. Their group had to make camp earlier and earlier each day so that Kit
could go off with his longbow to hunt a brace of rabbits. The two larger dragons – who were still travelling with them apparently, although Harriet hadn’t seen hide nor tail of them since that first glimpse of the blue through the clouds – were able to fly off to isolated areas to hunt their own food, but Cloud had no such luxury.

Her wings might have developed, but her stamina had not, and the fact they always camped in areas humans could be in meant she was never able to hunt freely. Watching Kit walk off every evening to collect food for her dragon filled Harriet with such a sense of shame and inadequacy that she actually asked Elayne to teach her how to shoot herself.

Elayne, like Kit, was more than proficient with a bow and arrow. Both of them shared a disgust for firearms, and were of the firm belief that they allowed a person to be dangerous without going through the years of training that helped one to decide when the use of a weapon was appropriate.

Talking around the campfire, Kit had commented that while a bow could be equally as deadly as a gun, becoming good with a bow required hundreds of hours of practice over the course of years, rather than an hour-long briefing and a leather holster. Both he and Elayne argued – and Harriet was forced to agree - that the years of practice was also mental training, teaching you respect for the weapon and the power you held, and giving you the discretion to decide when its use was appropriate.

When Harriet had first asked to be trained to shoot, her only thought had been so she could provide for Cloud without needing to rely on anyone else. Elayne had been quick to point out that Kit was happy to help, and that in a few months the issue would become moot anyway, since Cloud would be big enough to fly far enough away to hunt where there were no humans. Harriet had listened, but she had still insisted. She wanted to learn to shoot.

The next morning when she woke up, there was a new bow and a quiver of arrows lying next to her bedroll. She knew that the other two sometimes saw their dragons in the middle of the night, and she assumed they’d collected these from their stores tied to their dragon’s saddles.

The bow was a beautiful thing, and Harriet knew at once it had come from their old world. The construction of the bow spoke to years of practice from a master, and there was no sign of the uniformity produced by modern machines. Even unstrung, just holding it filled her with a sense of power, and a belief that there was nothing the world could throw at her that she couldn’t handle.

The feeling was short lived.

“Stand side on,” Kit instructed, guiding Harriet’s body so that her feet were shoulder-width apart, and she was standing parallel to the tree she was aiming at. Elayne had volunteered to do the hunting that morning for Cloud’s food, claiming that while her and Kit were equally as good with the
bow, Kit was the better teacher. The target they had selected was a thick tree about ten meters away, and Kit had marked out a circle on it by rubbing the wood with cold charcoal from the previous night’s fire.

“No, you’re using broadheads,” Kit warned. “These are the heaviest arrows you’ll ever fire. Normally you’d only use these against a man in armour, or against another dragon, but we’ll use them today because they are the most resilient. If we were just to shoot normal arrows into a tree, after a few shots they’d break and be useless.” The logic was sound, so Harriet didn’t argue. “The trick to archery is smoothness. Smooth draw, steady hold, and smooth release. No sudden jerks, or your arrow will fly off course.”

Harriet lined up her arm, and Kit guided her through the drawing process. Once the arrow was nocked, she held onto the string with three fingers: one located above the arrow and the other two located directly below. Pulling back, she drew the bow until the fletchings on the side of the arrow were far back enough to brush her ears.

“Good,” Kit said. “But I can see that you’re using your arm muscles.”

“Oh, of course I am,” Harriet said, her voice strained with the effort of holding it.

“You should use your back muscles instead.” Kit ran two fingers along the back of her shoulderblades, either side of her spine. “These two here are bigger and stronger than your arms. Make them take the strain, and you’ll be able to shoot for longer without tiring yourself out. Plus, your arms won’t wobble as much, so you can be much more accurate.”

Letting down the arrow without firing it, Harriet tried the draw again, this time forcing her shoulderblades to push themselves together. As uncomfortable as it was, she could admit that it did seem a lot easier than just relying on her arms alone.

“Now line up the tip of your arrow. At this distance, you want it to be almost exactly in line with the target, and a little bit higher than where you want it to land.”

Harriet adjusted her aim accordingly, and when Kit gave her the all-clear, she released the string. The bow snapped forward in her hand, and as the string went taught, the arrow shot forward. The shaft flew to the right, missing the tree by a good meter and disappearing off into the paddock.

“Not bad for a first effort,” Kit’s words were in stark contrast to Harriet’s inner dejection. “And now you get to play a fun game called ‘arrow hunt’.”

“What?”

He grinned at her. “My arrows are expensive. I’m not leaving one lying in the grass. Off you go.” Harriet didn’t move. “Go on, the sooner you find it, the sooner you can have another shot.”
That was enough to decide her, and with a sigh, she went in search. It seemed like a fool’s errand for a long while, but after fifteen minutes she finally found it embedded almost entirely in the grass. It was lying flat just below the surface, and the only thing visible from above were the wisps of grey goose-feather fletching.

“Got it,” she held her trophy triumphantly above her head, and Cloud – who’d been watching the whole thing – gave a little coo of encouragement. Running back to where Kit was waiting with the bow, Harriet nocked again and took aim.

“This time, take it slowly. Make sure you’re on target, and when you release, don’t jerk your fingers. Just slowly uncurl them.”

Harriet followed his instructions, and this time she managed to embed the arrow into the trunk of the tree. It was still a meter higher than where she’d been aiming, but at least it was progress. Looking at Kit, she raised an eyebrow, and he smiled.

“Nice. Now try it again.”

He pulled another arrow from the quiver and passed it to her. Evidently, now that she could hit the target, she wouldn’t have to collect her arrow after every shot.

“Who taught you how to shoot?” Harriet was curious, as Kit hadn’t mentioned his family or his friends at all. In fact, except for a few tidbits here and there, he rarely spoke about his old life, or the old world he’d come from. Harriet gathered that it was a medieval-type world, with no access to modern technology, but beyond that she didn’t know much. The two of them had such pained expressions every time she brought it up that she soon stopped asking. The wound is still too raw, especially after the disappointment of Cloud not being a red.

“The Captain,” he responded simply, answering her original question. “He taught me everything I know.”

“The Captain?”

“Torven. He was the leader of the Lancers – the dragonrider group I was in. He took care of us, organised our employment, made sure we were fed every day, and he also trained us. His green was the first dragon I ever flew beside, and it was from him that my black learned the proper flying formations.”

“He sounds wonderful.”

“He was,” there was a wistful note in Kit’s voice. “I was only five when the Cap found me. I was an orphan, and surely would have been dead in a few years, either from gang fights or starvation. The Dragonlands were no place for a boy on his own, especially one who didn’t know how to fight
The Captain gave me the opportunity to bond the new black he’d hatched, and I’ve never looked back. He wasn’t just a leader for me, he was a father…” his voice turned bitter. “Or … as close to a father as most men will ever know.”

Harriet sensed she was approaching a really sensitive subject. If this Torven was as important to Kit as he claimed, then he must no doubt still be feeling the pain of being separated. Especially when he was still so young when their accident happened. He was only fifteen or sixteen when he arrived on Earth. No older than I am now. Harriet thought about all of the hardships she’d been through over the last few weeks, and then tried to imagine going through all of those with no knowledge of how the modern world worked.

Her respect for Kit and Elayne grew tenfold.

“Shoot again,” Kit said, not unkindly, and Harriet knew that he was done speaking about his past for the day. Still, she filed the information away, and added it to the growing picture she was forming about the two dragonriders.

After the thirtieth arrow, Harriet lost count of how many shots she fired. She still missed the tree a fair bit, but over the course of an hour, her aim slowly improved, and Kit had her stand a few meters further away. She’d just successfully made a shot from twenty meters when Cloud gave an exited roar: the same sound she always made when she was about to get fed.

“Back!” Elayne called cheerfully from the other side of the paddock. Her unstrung bow was held loosely in her hand, and there were three rabbits tied to the side of her belt. Her signature blue leather jacket had been removed, and she’d looped it through her belt on the opposite side of the rabbits. Harriet sympathised: the days were growing warmer as the height of summer approached, and the hour or so of archery practice had worked her up into quite a sweat. “Got a newspaper too!” Elayne offered the crumpled paper once she was close enough.

Harriet smiled. Since they’d been on the road, they had not had access to regular news. Kit and Elayne didn’t understand her desire to stay up-to-date with things occurring on the other side of the world, but Harriet had always had an interest in politics and world events, and when she read the paper it felt good to have some normalcy restored to her daily routine.

Plus, she always felt the need to flick through the front section – the local news – looking for a story about a missing child. She hadn’t contacted her father in three weeks, and she knew he must be worried sick about her. Every single time they passed a farmhouse or town she was tempted to use their phone to call him, but she knew that doing so would not only put a target on his back, but would undo all the careful travel they’d done and lead the Nightmen straight to them. No, it was best for all
concerned that there be nothing more linking Cloud to her father … but that didn’t make it any less hard.

She was only halfway through the paper by the time Cloud had finished gobbling down her rabbits. As always, that was the cue for them to mount up and start their travel for the day. Swinging into the saddle, Harriet once again marvelled at how riding now seemed second nature to her. *Was it really only two weeks ago that I’d never been on a horse before? It seems now as if I’ve spent my whole life on it.*

Leaning down to stoke the side of her horse’s neck fondly, Harriet clucked and urged it onwards. Falling into line behind Kit, she prepared herself for the long day ahead.
CHAPTER 12

The last fifty kilometres were the hardest.

As they got closer and closer to Melbourne, it became progressively harder to find backroads and paddocks to cut through, and since there was no way they could ride their horses on the main roads without drawing attention, they decided to ditch them in Sunbury, a small town in Melbourne’s northwest.

Kit took care of the arrangements, leaving the beasts with a farmer along with a small sum of money to pay for their care, and the promise that if the three of them didn’t return in the next two weeks, Kit would mail the letters of ownership to the farmer, and he could just keep them. Either way, it was a lucrative deal for the man, and he was more than happy to provide the three of them with a hot meal and some sandwiches for the road.

The signs on the side of the road said that Melbourne Tullamarine Airport was twenty kilometres away, and in an uncharacteristic show of softness, Kit allowed them to take the bus.

The bus terminal at the airport was also the starting place of the Skybus: a service that ran directly into the city, and a service which Kit decided – much to Elayne’s and Harriet’s relief – they would take advantage of.

It was late in the evening when they arrived at the airport, and despite the bus running every half hour through the night, Kit decided they’d wait until the early hours of the morning before using it, so when they arrived at the city their mock confusion and disorientation would appear to be like any other person who’d had an early-morning international arrival.
Normally Harriet would have hated having to stay at the airport for nine hours, but three weeks on the road had changed her perspective somewhat. The airport had a changeroom equipped with hot showers, and after a few hasty purchases from the gift shop, she was luxuriating under the hot water. It seemed like she was only under there for seconds, but when Elayne finally collected her and passed over a gaudy ‘G’day: Australia #1’ towel, over thirty minutes had passed.

“I don’t think I’d be exaggerating,” Harriet spoke to Elayne as the two of them dried off their hair, “when I say that was unquestionably the best shower of my life.”

“I’m still getting used to them,” Elayne confessed with a smile. “The fact you can just turn a knob and have hot running water flow out … there was magic in Brock and the Dragonlands, but nothing could match that. The first time I saw a shower all those years ago, Kit had to come and drag me out of there,” she giggled. “I’d been there for three hours.”

“So how did you wash yourselves?” History had never been Harriet’s strongest subject, and she was having mental images of muddy rivers and lakes. “How did you get your drinking water?”

“We had wells, and servants would haul up bucket after bucket, then place them in a huge kettle over the hearth to heat up. Once they were boiling they were carried to the person’s room – which you hoped weren’t so far away that the water would cool again – and then pour into a big copper tub.”

“Sounds … time consuming,” Harriet made sure not to criticise or demean Elayne’s world.

“Oh, it was … especially since for the most part, I was the servant. Most times I was lucky to be able to use my Lady’s bathwater after she was done with it, and I got to bathe at least once a week, so it was more regular than most!”

Harriet shook her head. Her world must have stunk! All those people riding around on horses all day, fighting and working up a sweat and then not bathing regularly … ew!

Kit was waiting outside for them when they finally emerged. While they’d washed, Cloud had been in the backpack, locked away in one of the huge storage lockers that had been available for rent. Harriet hated leaving her there, but they’d spent the last couple of days just camped in the one area to give her time to stretch her wings and enjoy flying around. The few days they were planning on being in Melbourne would not be pleasant for her, but there was no option other than to avoid the city altogether. And Melbourne is crucial. If any Nightmen are still following us, that’s where they’ll make their move. Hopefully we’ve lost them all already but if not … we can’t let them know about Sydney!

As compensation for Cloud, Harriet had filled a second backpack with dried beef jerky – very expensive, but paid for by Kit and his seemingly endless wad of money – that would keep her occupied.
for a long time. The beef was hard and took a while to digest, so once Cloud had eaten it all, she would just fall into a food coma and sleep the time away.

It wasn’t ideal, but it was the best they could do.

When the time came, Harriet collected her bag and the three of them boarded the bus. The tickets were expensive, but once again, Kit was there with a pocket full of money. The trip into the city, at least, was relatively short, and it was just approaching 5:30am when they disembarked.

“Let’s find somewhere to stay.” Kit was tired, and it showed. “Have you been to this city before?”

“Never,” Harriet replied. “You?”

“A few times, years ago when we first started looking for the egg. We didn’t stay long though, and everything was so new that we spent most of the time indoors, figuring out how this world worked.”

“It must have been hard to adjust. Electricity, the internet, cars, hot water…” she realised just how monumental the challenge was. “I’m impressed you didn’t go crazy.”

“It was close,” Elayne said darkly. “If it wasn’t for our dragons, and if we hadn’t had each other…” she left the thought unvoiced.

“We’ll find somewhere nice to stay,’ Harriet decided. “Somewhere where the showers are hot, and the beds are soft. And somewhere with a big room where I can let Cloud out. I’m assuming that money is no object?” It was the first time Harriet had mentioned their monetary situation. So far there had been no explanation from either of them as to how two people could arrive on Earth with next to nothing, and yet in eight years’ time accumulate what looked to be an unlimited source of wealth.

“Money is no object,” Kit reinforced.

“Then let’s walk.”

They took off through the city. The train station was to the west, and they tried heading further west at the start, but wasted time when they realised it lead only to the dead-end dockland precinct. The Docklands looked to have been only recently developed, and was littered with clubs and bars, as well as high-rise apartments. At this time of day, however, everything was all locked down and closed off. Turning back, they retraced their steps and set out for the eastern quarter, eyes peeled for hotels that looked inviting.

“This street’s a bust,” Kit decided. “Let’s cut through to the next one,” he indicated a narrow alley between two office buildings. It was still dark – like the rest of the city – and stretched the entire block, through to the next major street.
Elayne nodded, and the two of them followed him in.

They barely made it halfway through before they regretted the decision.

“Ah … lookie what we’ve got here…” a man stepped out from the shadows at the side of the alley. He stood directly in front of them and blocked their path.

There was a knife in his hand.

There was a sound behind them, and Harriet whipped around. Another man had blocked off their retreat, and he held an equally dangerous looking knife in his hands. Moving slowly but firmly, Elayne took two steps backwards, moving to the rear of their trio and pushing Harriet forward between her and Kit.

Both of the men looked dangerous, and this look was only heightened by the sallow features of their faces, and the nervous way their hands shook slightly. Even in the cool weather, they were both only in shirtsleeves, and both of them had dozens, if not hundreds, of needle track marks in their elbows and up and down their forearms.

*Ice addicts…*

“You don’t want to do this,” Kit warned. His voice was dark and ominous.

“I think I do. Empty out your pockets. I want phones and wallets, and maybe a peek at one of the girls,” he licked his lips suggestively, and Harriet blanched.

“You don’t want to do this,” Kit repeated, his voice somehow managing to be even more threatening than before. “Last chance to walk away.”

“Gimme your freaking money, fool!” the thief couldn’t believe they were resisting him. “Or I’ll gut your girlfriend there.”

“No.” Kit’s reply was just a single word, but it carried all the weight of the world.

Kit and the mugger both lunged at the same time. Harriet heard a bootstep behind them, and a glance told her the other man was closing in as well.

The thief tried to stab Kit, but with a quick twist, Kit wrenched the knife free of his hands, in the process breaking the wrist with an audible snap that echoed down the narrow laneway.

“My arm,” the thief screamed in pain, but Kit was far from finished. Punching the thief twice in the nose, Kit disoriented the man before trapping him in a close headlock. In his other hand he still held the confiscated knife, and with a second quick twist, he reversed it in his hand so that he was gripping the blade rather than the hilt.

Before Harriet even had time to wonder what he was up to, Kit whipped his hand up and down again. The blade left his hand, shooting forward. It passed straight through the narrow gap
between Elayne and Harriet – coming so close that Harriet could actually feel the slight gust of wind at its passage – to embed itself in the rear thief’s thigh. The knife sank deep into the upper leg, right where the muscle was at its meatiest … and right where it would cause the most pain.

Unsurprisingly, the second thief fell to the ground, screaming for all he was worth.

“Elayne!” Kit ordered, and the woman stepped back. A heavy-hilted knife appeared in her hand, and she reversed it before driving the pommel roughly down onto the stabbed man’s head. His eyes rolled backwards, and he fell unconscious immediately.

Looking back to Kit, Harriet saw that he also had his knife out, albeit it in a much different manner than Elayne.

If Elayne’s weapon was a ‘knife’, then Kit’s was closer to a short sword. The blade was the length of his forearm, and was currently pressed firmly against the throat of his captured thief.

The alley fell silent.

“Do you know what the punishment is for theft where I come from?” Kit said harshly.

“N … no,” the man’s voice was obviously scared, and the pain of his wrist had been forgotten in light of the present danger.

“You lose a hand,” Kit said, and the man whimpered. “How many people have you trapped like this? Cornering them in a dark alley…”

The thief whimpered again.

“Answer me!” Kit screamed in his ear, pressing the knife closer, hard enough to draw a trickle of blood.

“I don’t know,” the man was sobbing now. “Times are hard, man. You got do what you got do to survive.”

“What are you called?”

“My name’s Mark, man.”

“Mark … what?”

“Mark … sir?” the man was confused.

“What’s your last name, Mark?” Kit demanded, pressing the knife in a little more.


“Mark Fulton. If I ever see you again. I will kill you. Do you believe me?”

“Y… yes.’

“If I ever hear of you committing a crime again, I will hunt you down, and I will kill you, do you believe me?”
“Yes.”
“If you ever see me again, what will I be doing?”
“K… killing me?”
“Exactly. Empty your pockets.”

The man hurriedly fished through his pockets, emptying several wallets and a few mobile phones onto the dirty concrete.

“Is that everything?”
“That’s all man, I swear. Tommy might have a few more, but I swear that’s all I have on me.”
Kit didn’t answer again, but reversed his knife. In a move identical to Elayne’s, he brought the pommel of the hilt heavily down on the back of Fulton’s head, and the thief fell to the ground.
Harriet assumed he was unconscious.

Kit collected the wallets, and Elayne quickly searched the other man – Tommy – for the same reason.

“Let’s go.” Kit gestured for their little group to move out, but Harriet stood, transfixed by the sudden change in him. He had always seemed to be highly capable in whatever he did, and she knew firsthand how competent he was with a bow … but there had been no hesitation when the mugger attacked. Kit had quickly and effectively incapacitated two men, and had done so without even breaking a sweat!

“Where did you learn how to do that?” she breathed, her voice full of awe, her arms mimicking his martial arts and knife throwing.

“I’m a soldier,” he responded. His voice held some harshness to it, but Harriet knew it was just residual emotion from the confrontation, and not directed at her specifically. “Fighting is what we do.”

She continued with a few more complicated, high-speed moves, before slowing, suddenly feeling a little sheepish. “A soldier?” this information was new to her, but she did not get the chance to query it further. The man at Kit’s feet groaned, and Kit hurriedly gestured his companions forward.

“Come on! Move! We need to get out of here,” he glanced nervously up the alley, but it was still clear in either direction. Thankfully the isolation which had made the muggers confident also served to hide the evidence of their fates. That was not to say, though, that someone couldn’t come along at any moment. Kit was right; they needed to get away from here.
Running towards the mouth of the alley, Harriet found herself bringing up the rear. Behind them, the fallen man had gained consciousness, and swore loudly at them. Harriet ignored the barb, but the insult was evidently too much for the inquisitive Cloud, who had remained quiet in the backpack for too long. Poking her head out of a hole in the side of the flap, she snaked her long neck out to take in the view of their surroundings.

The man swore again, this time in shock and surprise, and this time echoed by Kit himself.

“Fangs! That just undid all the work of the last three weeks,” he was visibly angry, but once again it was at the situation, and not at Harriet herself.

“What? But there’s no Nightmen here.”

“They’re everywhere. The first time he talks, the story will spread, and it’s only a matter of hours before one of the Nightmen’s spies reports it in. At the most we have until nightfall, and at the worst … they could be here in minutes.”

Kit’s voice was low, and his tone cold. It was the same tone Harriet’s father used when he spoke about the animals they had to load onto the trucks destined for the slaughterhouse. He took a step back down the alley.

Towards the would-be-thieves.

“No,” Elayne’s voice was soft, but firm. “It’s not worth it, Kit. Not even the Captain would have taken it that far. We’ll find another way. We always do.”

Her words soothed Kit’s anger, and a confused Harriet was left to wonder what they were talking about. W as he just about to…? Her thoughts trailed off, avoiding the obvious conclusion. She looked from Kit to the downed man, and then back to Kit. In his hand he had his knife back out, and she shuddered to think what had almost occurred.

“You’re wrong,” Kit said softly, but he still tucked his knife away in its sheath. “Tor would have done whatever he needed to make sure his band was safe.”

“But that was in another time. And another place.”

Kit made no response.

“Let’s move,” Harriet spoke into the silence and this time she took point, heading towards the streetlights on the main street. The sun was up high enough that the lights were no longer needed, but Harriet guessed that they were on a timer, just like back at home. The other two followed, however in a few quick strides Kit had retaken the lead, and when they exited the alley, he stopped to get his bearings.
A few meters down from the alley entrance was a red post box – identical in every way to all post boxes across Australia. Rifling through the wallets, Kit and Elayne hurriedly pulled out all the banknotes. Opening the post box slot, they slid the now cashless wallets through. It was a smart move, when Harriet thought about it: the wallets each had a driver’s licence with address, so the post office could just send them back to the proper owners. She was surprised, though, that they kept the money, especially after the speech he’d just given the thieves.

“You’re stealing from them?”

“Not quite,” Elayne walked a few more meters down the road to where a homeless man was sleeping under the eaves of a shopfront. Speaking softly, she said a few words to him before tucking the money into his hand. The man made no reply, but just looked at her in shock.

“Think of it as a tax for getting their wallets back.” Kit offered. “It’s absurd: you live in a world where you have amazing medicine and enough food for all, and yet some feel the need to horde it so others have none. In some ways I think that’s even worse than the world we come from. At least there, when someone starved to death, it was because there literally wasn’t enough food. Now,” his eyes narrowed and he scanned the skyline. They were still in the northern section of the city, and he focused his gaze to the south and east. “There!”

Harriet followed the direction of his pointed arm to a tall skyscraper. There were many skyscrapers in the city, but this was easily the highest, even if it was over the other side of the city.

“I know I promised you a few days of relaxation, but the decision has been taken out of my hands. Now we need to work on getting some distance. But first, I need to get my bearings. I hate being in cities and not being able to see the horizon. I should be on dragonback … but failing that I suppose a tower will have to do. Move out.”

There were a couple of faults Harriet could find with his logic, but he hadn’t steered them wrong so far, so she bit her tongue and followed him and Elayne as they dashed off through the city.

“Hang in there, girl,” she whispered quietly to Cloud, not knowing if the dragon’s ears were good enough to be able to hear her through the pack’s thick lining. “We’ll get out of this one, I promise. You’re going to be safe soon, and free to fly.”

I promise…
“Eureka Tower.”

Kit read the name on the entrance to the building aloud. Cocking his head to the side, he frowned at the sign before turning to Harriet. “What is Eureka? I’ve never heard of it before, but since your world had so many blasted languages, that’s not so surprising.”

“It’s English,” Harriet protested. “At least … I think it is. It’s what people are meant to shout when they have discovered something. It’s like ‘Wow!’ or ‘I’ve got it!’ The gold miners used to shout it out when they found a nugget.”

“Why don’t they just shout ‘wow’?” Elayne asked, her face devoid of sarcasm.

“I don’t know, that’s just what they say. Are we going to stand here outside and debate it, or are we going inside?”

Truth be told, though, Harriet almost would have been happy to stay outside. Standing at the base of the skyscraper, it certainly looked more imposing from up close than it had from the other side of the city. The building was surfaced predominantly in glass, and with the rising sun on the far side of it, it looked dark, like a metallic ruler. This look was only enhanced by the white lines that were painted along every floor, like the millimetre and centimetre markings. The top was capped in gold: not real gold obviously, but golden paint.

“It’s open,” Elayne said, and Harriet glanced through the doors. There was a woman sitting behind the counter, and a few people were standing around in the lobby, despite – according to the
opening times painted on the glass door – only having opened a few minutes before the dragonriders arrived.

Kit led the way inside, and he started to walk towards the back, where there was a narrow staircase to take you up to the next level.

“Wait,” Harriet stopped him. “Where are you going?”

“To the top,” Kit said it as if it were obvious.

“You have to pay first,” Harriet pointed to the signs above the counter describing the observation deck.

“What, to climb a building?” Kit was astounded

“Yeah,” Harriet shrugged. “Everything costs money.”

“People are always out to make a profit.” Elayne added.

“But … the building is already here. Why can’t we just go up?”

“That’s not the way the world works,” Harriet informed him. “The money we pay is how they pay off the building. And how the owners will pay for their next one,” she frowned at him, still standing halfway up the staircase. “And either way, we certainly wouldn’t take the stairs. It’s like a hundred floors. They have a lift to use.”

Kit shook his head, but he did come back down to the lobby. Harriet took some money off him, and walked over to the counter. There was a laminated display advertising ‘Skydeck 88’ – the observation area on the 88th floor – as well as ‘The Edge’, which was apparently a ‘thrilling high rise experience that was not for the faint-of-heart’. Stuff it, Harriet decided. In for a copper, in for a crown. The archaic expression was a variant that Kit and Elayne used frequently, and Harriet found herself using it now too.

“Two adults and one student, please. To see the Skydeck 88, and to do ‘The Edge.’”

“Do you have your student card on you?” the cashier didn’t even look up at her as she punched away at the keyboard in front of her.

“Not on me,” Harriet lied, regretting the decision to ever ask for the discounted ticket. Of course she couldn’t show the card. It had her name and address right there on the front, as well as her school and hometown. I’m supposed to be keeping a low profile. Quick, think of an argument, or it will look suspicious. “But I’m only fifteen, look at me.”

The cashier glanced up, but it was only for a second. “Without the card I can only give you a full price admission.”

“What a jib!” Harriet played the indignant teen perfectly.
“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Whatever. Three adults then, and I hope the extra two dollars was worth the complaint form.”

“That’s $55.50. And that’s just the Skydeck. The Edge is an extra $12 per person, and tickets can only be bought from the counter on the 88th floor.”

The fee was exorbitant, and she was once again thankful that Kit was footing the bill. For $55, she would have been happy to use Google Maps to get her out of town … but if Kit wanted a view from the sky, then a view from the sky was what he would get. Especially after he saved us all in that alley.

They collected their printed tickets, and rode the elevator upwards. For the entire minute-long ride, both Kit and Elayne huddled cautiously in opposite corners of the lift. They had their legs spread, and their hands pressed firmly against the walls on either side of them.

“What’s wrong?” Harriet was confused. “I thought you of all people would be fine with heights.’

“It’s not the heights,” Kit’s voice was nervous. “It’s this … box … that we’re in. Hundreds of generations of people have had no way of climbing higher except by using stairs. And if stairs are good enough for them, then they’re good enough for me. I hate these infernal things.” He lashed out at the wall, kicking at it ineffectually. He didn’t even leave a scuff on the metal plating and indeed the only damage he did was to his foot, which he rubbed vigorously.

When the doors pinged open on the 88th floor, Elayne and Kit wasted no time getting out. They found themselves in a wide area, with floor to ceiling windows all around. Smiling in wonder, Harriet stepped up to the closest one and absorbed the view.

They were looking west, back towards the city, and back in the direction they had spent the last month coming from. The sun was still rising behind them in the east, so all of the city’s smaller skyscrapers were tinged with shades of oranges and reds. The view was quite striking, and Harriet now understood how they could get away with charging $18.50 for the privilege.

“The other side looks even better,” Elayne observed, and the three of them followed the curve of the building around to look east. This direction faced the sprawling suburbs, and there were buildings and houses as far as the eye could see. Even the green-tipped mountain range in the far distance was inhabited, with steep buildings littering the sides of it.

“It just keeps going,” Kit breathed. “Back home, we had cities, but nothing like this. Hundreds of thousands of people lived in some of them … but nothing like this. There were walls back home,
and on one side was the city, and on the other was the country. There was a boundary, and a definite change. Here, it just …continues.”

“That it does,” Elayne’s voice was quiet, and Harriet made no comment. A moment later, the contemplation had passed, and Kit was back to his business-like drive.

“We want to be going north,” Kit started to walk off until Elayne grabbed him by the hand.

“Just enjoy the view, Kit,” she said. “Unfocus your eyes, and pretend there’s no glass.” She spread her arms wide. “Pretend that you can feel the wind. You’re on Nighteyes’ back, and you’re on your way home from a successful hunt.”

Harriet was just as enthralled as Kit. Kit’s eyes were closed, lost in the imagination, but Harriet’s eyes were wide open and fixed on his face.

It was in rapture.

That’s it! This is what it must feel like to be able to ride a dragon. For the first time since she had met the two, Harriet felt jealous. They had both been able to share something with their dragon that she never had. Something special, and something that set them apart from every other person on Earth.

Suddenly Harriet had to get away from them. Being close was just too much. Walking quickly, she left them on the east side and moved south, to the side overlooking Port Phillip Bay and its green-blues waters. There were a dozen other tourists around, and even a cashier behind a desk who she supposed sold tickets to “The Edge.” Now that she could see what it was, Harriet decided she didn’t need to experience it after all. It was only a glass platform that extended outwards from the building. Patrons could stand on the frosted glass, and when the signal was given, the opaque glass separating them from an 88 story fall would turn clear.

Totally anticlimactic. Harriet had grown up driving paddock-bashers and riding quad bikes. It would take a lot more than that to impress her.

Kit and Elayne were still at the eastern side, so Harriet stayed south to give them some privacy. She was just watching a just red-and-white cruise ship pull away from the pier when a black shadow flashed across her peripheral vision. She glance across, but it was only a businessman, so she went back to staring at the ship, and the ‘Spirit of Tasmania’ sign plastered across it’s stern.

Wait a second…

A second glance confirmed her worst fear. The man was not a regular businessman. He was a Nightman. There was no way she tell for sure – anybody could wear a black suit and sunglasses – but there was just something about the way he held himself, his poise and confidence, that said: ‘I am a man who could kill you if I chose’.
Shit…

Harriet started to back the other way, but the sight of another man in a suit staring out west stopped her.

They know I’m here.

They likely hadn’t grabbed her yet because they didn’t want to make a scene. Harriet was painfully aware of the dwindling amount of tourists, and she knew it was only a matter of time before the Nightmen felt confident enough to act.

Stupid! I’m such an idiot. I’m sitting here like a stuffed chicken, and all they have to do is draw their guns, and Cloud is theirs.

Harriet used tying her shoe as an excuse to snatch a quick glance behind her. There were three more men spread out on her left, and blocking off her access to the elevators. Surprisingly, one of the men was standing right behind Kit and Elayne, but they hadn’t noticed him, and he showed no interest at all in them.

The Nightmen don’t know about them, she realised. We actually managed to pull it off! This whole time they’ve been on our heels, they thought they were chasing a lone girl and a baby dragon. They’ve had no idea Kit and Elayne have been with me.

A sudden wave of protectiveness washed over her. The two dragon riders had spent the last month sacrificing themselves to help her. It was time to return the favour.

She was still standing near the bored cashier selling tickets to ‘the Edge’. He was busy checking his phone, and didn’t even notice as Harriet slipped past him, and through the door in the wall labelled ‘Staff Only’.

The door led straight into the bottom of a stairwell, and Harriet realised with a start that the 88th floor was not the top one. The building extended another three floors upwards, and she took the stairs running, two at a time despite the heavy pack on her back.

88… 89… 90… 91!

Harriet didn’t stop until she reached the top story, and without slowing her stride she burst through the single lever-operated door.

Unexpectedly, it was sunlight and wind that greeted her, not another glass-enclosed observation area. Harriet found herself on a small balcony looking out east over the city.

She took her bearings.

The Eureka building was not a perfect rectangle. At least one of its sides had the corners cut off, and it was this sight that greeted her. Her balcony was located at the start of the cutaway, and
there was a fifty meter gap across the shaved-off side before another balcony on the opposite wall. The gap was floored with the sheet metal roof of the story below, and the cutaway created a narrow passageway between the balconies.

*Fifty meters…* Harriet gauged the distance across.

Then she looked down over the edge.

*Crap…*

It was a 293 meter drop straight down. She knew the exact figure, because a little bronze plaque bolted to the banister proudly proclaimed it, along with the building’s title as the world’s highest observation platform.

*Not. A. Hope.*

Harriet backed away from the railing and turned to face the door again. A three hundred meter fall was not worth the risk, especially when she would have a lot of time to contemplate her stupidity before she hit the ground. In science they had been learning about terminal velocity and how fast an object fell, and the one figure that she’d managed to take away from it all was that until a body reached terminal velocity, it took a little over 10 seconds for every hundred meters it fell.

And thirty seconds was a long time to look at the pavement rushing towards you.

She would have to retrace her steps, and try her luck on one of the floors between 88 and 91.

*One of them has to have another way back down the building.*

The door was still ajar from when she had exited, and she was three steps down the stairwell before she broke her stride. An echo was coming up from the 88th floor below, and her heart sank as she realised the Nightmen were already on her. There was no time to try one of the other floors now: it was the balcony, or surrender.

Harriet would never surrender.
CHAPTER 14

The banister was solidly built.

It was no challenge at all to climb up and over the side of it. She was careful of the precious cargo on her back, but even so there was a lot of jarring and jostling that Cloud no doubt did not appreciate. Better to be uncomfortable than captured, she reassured herself with the harsh reality.

Thankfully the roof was flat for the most part. There was a slight ridge to her right, and there was of course the massive drop on her left, but it looked to be a straight run across steel to get to the other balcony. The only thing she’d have to be careful off was the last two meters before the drop off, where the polished steel started to angle down on a sharp angle.

Taking a deep breath, Harriet began to walk. She didn’t run – that would be stupid – but she did allow herself to walk faster than she’d ever walked before.

She has halfway across when the door behind her burst open again.

Harriet didn’t waste time looking back. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing the fear on her face. Instead she just hunkered down, and began to jog. She still didn’t dare break into a run – not with such a drop waiting for her if she fell – but she managed to get up to a good clip, and had covered another ten of fifteen meters without incident.

That’s when the first bullet hit.

It embedded itself in the steel off to her right. With such a large distance between her and the impact point, she knew it had to have been a warning shot: there was no way even an amateur could miss by that much from such a small distance. And these men are far from amateurs…
True to form, the second bullet landed a meter closer to her than the first, and the third was even closer again. She forced herself not to take her eyes off the balcony on the other side: now barely twenty meters away. *They’ll have to kill me if they want to stop me,* she gritted her teeth with the thought, realising that option was still very much a possibility today.

The fourth shot struck the ground between her legs, and that was her undoing.

The sound was what scared her the most, but it was the sudden ricochet between her legs that caused the involuntary hop away. Before she knew what she was doing, Harriet had left the relatively safe flat area, and was perilously close to the drop off. She’d gone too far, though, landing on the sloped area, and as she scrambled to regain her balance, the world went into slow motion.

Her left foot lost traction first, and she thought she might have been able to recover if it wasn’t for the fifth bullet that caused her to hunch her shoulders. The split-second delay in dealing with her footing was enough to send the right foot out as well, and Harriet hit the steel hard. Her left shoulder took the brunt of the shock, and it was only when Cloud gave a cry of indignation that she realised the bag must have also taken a beating on the way down.

Harriet couldn’t deal with Cloud yet, though, she was too busy trying to save herself.

She felt herself slipping down towards the drop off, but try as she might, there was no purchase in the smooth steel for her scrambling hands to hold onto. She felt her feet go over the edge first, and before she could even swear, her waist and chest joined them.

Her fingers managed to grab onto the very lip of the roof, and if she’d only had her own weight to worry about, she might have been able to hold on for long enough. But she also had a backpack, and Cloud had been growing a lot lately.

Harriet let go.

She screamed as the building rushed by her, and the sound was enough to bring Cloud out of hiding. Ripping open a hole in the top flap with her teeth, Cloud poked a snaking head out and gave her own cry.

“Sorry girl,” Harriet apologised, but the words were lost to the wind. The ground continued to rush upwards as the glass stories whizzed past.

But that wasn’t enough for Cloud.

The material of the camping backpack was no match for the claws of an angry dragon, and within seconds Cloud was free and flying. She circled Harriet a few times, looking at her worryingly, squawking as if to ask why Harriet wasn’t flapping her own wings.

They were halfway down the building now, and she had fifteen seconds left to live. *If that.*
Cloud flapped away, disappearing from sight. Harriet knew in her heart right then that the end had finally come. Even her dragon had abandoned her, and death was only thirty floors away.

A sharp pain in her shoulder caused her head to whip around.

Cloud had flown above and behind her, and had grabbed onto Harriet with her talons. One claw had secured itself to the backpack strap, but the right one had missed slightly, and instead dug into Harriet’s shoulder. It hurt like hell, but it was better than the alternative.

“Go!” Harriet screamed encouragement as Cloud began to flap, but she was just not strong enough. The dragon’s wings had grown a lot, but nowhere near enough to be able to carry a human yet. The dragon flapped harder than Harriet had ever seen her go, but still they plummeted downwards.

To her credit, Cloud never gave up. Harriet was worried that all the dragon was doing was dooming herself too, but then she caught a glimpse of their reflection in the tinted windows as they fell.

They were actually slowing down.

Miraculously, while Cloud was not big enough to carry her, she was big enough to slow the fall. Not entirely. But enough to make a difference.

The last ten meters still passed worryingly fast.

Harriet's toes did not touch down lightly: she’d fallen too far, too fast for that. But she was able to roll and let that take enough of the momentum so that her legs didn’t break. When she finally stopped moving, she was flat on her back, looking straight up at the 293m tall building she’d fallen off of.

Holy crap!

I’m alive…
“What the…”

The softly-spoken words from the side of the street were enough to bring Harriet’s senses crashing back, and she cursed when she looked over to see a homeless man staring at her with wide eyes.

Well … actually … the homeless man was staring at Cloud with wide eyes.

After her strenuous effort, Cloud had collapsed on top of Harriet, and was breathing heavily. Her neck and head lolled on Harriet’s chest, and Harriet had to gently shift her off before she could climb to her feet.

Thankfully, they had fallen on the east side of the building: the one facing away from the city, and the one that didn’t front straight onto the boulevard. They were in a side street and – except for the homeless man – they looked to have fallen unseen. Looking back up, Harriet had to amend that. *The Nightmen saw us, obviously, and they know Cloud is real and alive.* She shifted her gaze: the street was empty, but there were two other smaller skyscrapers that looked down onto them. *And if anyone was looking out their window while eating their breakfast, they may have gotten a much bigger surprise than whatever toy was hidden inside their Froot-Loops box…*

“You didn’t see anything,” Harriet brought her attention back to the ground, dealing with the most pressing problem. Walking towards him, she dug a wad of money out of her pocket. It was Kit’s change from the Skydeck tickets earlier, and flattening it out, she counted $45. *Not enough for a bribe, and certainly not enough to buy a vow of silence, but it should at least get me a blanket.*
“Here,” Harriet thrust the money into his hand. “You didn’t see anything, and thank you for the blanket.” There was a pile of them beside him, and she grabbed the cleanest looking one. It was a cheap affair: the type you’d buy from The Reject Shop for less than a bag of lollies, but it would do nicely for what she intended.

“You didn’t see anything,” Harriet warned, backing away from him. “The people who might ask you about this are also the people who will kill you about this.”

Cloud hadn’t moved from where she’d left her, and with gentle movements, Harriet scooped her dragon up into her arms.

“Hey girl,” she cooed softly. “You’re my hero, you know that? You just saved my life. I would have been a girl-sized pancake if it wasn’t for you. Yes I would.” Doing one strap at a time, Harriet shrugged off the ruined camping backpack. “You’ll never have to go inside that thing again. Not ever. I promise. They’ve already seen you now anyway. They know how beautiful you are.” Harriet was rambling, using her tone more than her words to thank the dragon. “So beautiful.”

Taking Cloud’s weight on her hip, Harriet freed one of her hands so as to be able to spread the blanket wide on the ground. Placing Cloud carefully in the middle, she swaddled the dragon up much like she’d seen parents swaddle a baby in the movies. A baby the size of a miniature pony, and with scales and claws sharp enough to rip through steel.

When the only thing left unwrapped was her neck and head, Harriet picked her up, cradling Cloud’s body against her own, much like a mother would cradle a nursing baby. And, just like a nursing baby, Cloud promptly curled her head and neck up on top of Harriet’s chest, and went straight back to sleep.

“Good girl,” Harriet soothed, lifting a corner of the blanket up and draping it over her neck and shoulder. This way, the dragon was obscured from view, but there was nothing tight wrapped around her head. Even the swaddling was loose enough that if Cloud chose, she could shake herself free.

“Harriet?”

“You’re still alive!” Kit couldn’t conceal his surprise.

Swaddling Cloud must have taken her longer than she’d thought, for enough time had passed for Elayne and Kit to make it back to ground level.

“Are you okay?” Elayne wasn’t even out of breath, despite coming in at a sprint. “We heard the shots and saw you fall past the windows. We feared the worst!”

Harriet smiled at her, still cuddling Cloud close.
“Cloud saved me,” Harriet smiled down at the dragon thought the blanket. The two couldn’t see each other, but Harriet was filled with such a sense of satisfaction and happiness that she knew it couldn’t all belong to her. Some of it was definitely coming through the bond. Harriet hugged the blanket tighter, and as Cloud whimpered slightly in pain, Harriet was reminded that the bond went both ways: Cloud could feel the pain in Harriet’s shoulder as if it was her own. The claw marks weren’t deep, but they were painful.

“You flew!” Kit was even more surprised now.

“Not exactly,” Harriet corrected, nodding down to her shoulder, where her jacket was still ripped, and a few pinpricks of blood had seeped through. It would bruise up a mighty shade in a few hours, but for now it looked deceptively innocuous. “We just … fell slower.”

Kit nodded his understanding without saying a word.

“We need to get out of here,” Elayne said, and for the first time Harriet looked at her properly, noticing the faint streak of blood across her cheek. Her perfectly tanned skin looked otherwise unharmed and unblemished, and Harriet was relieved to deduce that the blood was not hers. Looking down, she noticed that Kit’s knuckles bore similar stains, and she understood now what had happened to the rest of the Nightmen.

_Eight on two, and the two still came ahead._ The pair grew in her estimation, and she no longer had any doubt about Kit’s earlier claim of being a soldier. Only a soldier could have reacted that instinctively in the alley, and only a soldier could take on those sorts of odds and survive. _And they were all armed!_ Harriet remembered. _Each with a handgun, and two medieval soldiers still had the best of them, with nothing more than fists and beltknives!_

“We do really need to leave,” Kit repeated, for Harriet had been so caught up in her thought’s that she forgotten Elayne’s comment. “It’s only a matter of time before more show up. We need to get some distance between us and here. It’s not about stealth right now … it’s about speed.

“Then let’s speed.”

The trio dashed through the city. They continued east, towards suburbia and away from the central area that was growing increasingly busy as more businesses began to open. Only when they were well out of sight of Eureka Tower did they agree to get a different mode of transport.

“Taxi!”

Harriet screamed at the passing cab, but it didn’t stop for them. For the next one, Kit took a more direct approach, and stepped out onto the road, forcing the cab to slam its brakes on or risk hitting him
“You’re crazy!” the Indian driver berated the three of them when they climbed inside.
“Drive!” Kit ordered.
“Where?”
Kit and Elayne both had nothing, so Harriet said the name of the only place in Melbourne she knew.

“Chadstone Shopping Centre.”

It was the largest shopping complex in the southern hemisphere, and she’d done a project on its construction a few years back. It was well to the east of the city, and for the time being, it was as good a destination as any. They just had to get away from the Nightmen.

The taxi took off, and for a long time they drove in silence. They spent some of the journey on a highway, but for the most part it was just normal roads, albeit multi-lane ones. Around them, people moved about their daily lives, completely oblivious to the drama that was unfolding in their midst.

After an hour, Harriet saw something that caused her to actually cry out.

“Stop the taxi!”
“What?” the driver took his foot off the accelerator, but did not stop. They were in the middle of a busy road of course. “What do you want me to do?”

“Pull over and let us out. Just up here on the left is fine.”

Kit and Elayne had no idea what Harriet intended, but they went along with her, paying the driver and climbing out to the curb.

“What now?” Kit asked, speaking only once the taxi was back in traffic and almost out of sight.

“You said we needed distance, and we need to be untraceable, so let’s go to a place where they’re not going to ask a lot of questions.”

“What are you talking about?”

Harriet pointed back down the road, and to the large store they’d driven past with the sign out front proclaiming in faded lettering ‘Buy-A-Bomb’.

“Let’s get a car!”

“I don’t think I have enough on me for a car,” Kit considered. “Cars are expensive aren’t they?”

“Not these ones,” Harriet laughed. “Do you have five hundred bucks on you?”

“Of course.”
“Then we have enough. We don’t need anything special. I assume we’re going to dump it and change vehicles regularly to keep them off our trail?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Then a bomb will do. Let’s go.”

Together they walked back up to the lot. An overweight salesman came out of the small office, still wiping the icing sugar from the sides of his mouth as he offered to run them through the inventory. Harriet didn’t waste time, and once she was confident Kit and Elayne were happy to let her do the negotiating and choosing, she walked straight over to the only car with a good paintjob.

It was blue.

“How much for this one?”

“Ahh, the Magna. That’s a nice car. It has all four tyres with decent tread, all the windows still wind down. It has a cassette deck and power steering. It even—”

“How much?” Harriet interrupted. She didn’t think much of his sales technique: a car possessing all four tyres should not be something that even warrants mentioning.

“$900, and this baby’s all yours.”

“I’ll give you $450,” Harriet started off low. She’d served her time behind the counter of a stall at the farmer’s market. She knew how haggling worked.

“Love, maybe you better let the adults talk,” the fat man smiled condescending at her while turning to face Kit. Kit shook his head, giving the salesperson the same stare he’d given the thief a few hours ago.

“I’ll give you $420,” Harriet revised her offer downwards, and she tried to steel her voice the way Kit had done earlier.

“I’m sorry, but that’s simply too low. Maybe if you wanted to look over—”

“Does it have a full tank?”

“No, we sell them as is.”

“I’ll give you five hundred for it and a full tank. I know you have a bowser out back.” All car dealerships did. “And I know you’ll make almost as much on the fuel as you will on the car.”

“Maybe I could do it for $600,” the man tried to negotiate some more.

“I’m leaving this lot in 60 seconds,” Harriet said simply. “Am I driving out of here, or walking?” she held her hand out to Kit, who passed her five new hundred-dollar bills. The overweight man’s eyes gleamed at the sight of the green.
“Five hundred sounds like a deal,” the man held out his hand, but Harriet didn’t hand the money over.

“Fill it up.”

“Of course, just as soon as we go fill out some paperwork.”

“I told you,” Harriet reminded. “I’m leaving here in 50 seconds. Fill it up. Deal with whatever paperwork you have to deal with later on.”

“But, we have to change over the registration to your name.”

“Deal with it later. Make up a name. Forty-five seconds. Are you filling it up, or are we walking?” Harriet knew that was she was essentially offering him was the ability to report the car stolen, but the three of them were never going to give him their real names and details.

The man did the calculations. If he reported it stolen and claimed on insurance, then he would get the money Harriet was offering plus the insurance payout. It was a no-brainer.

He filled the car.

Harriet handed over the money once everything was ready, and the three of them climbed in. Elayne took the backseat with Cloud bundled beside her, Harriet rode shotgun, and Kit was behind the wheel.

“This one will only last us the day,” Harriet warned. “But with no paper trail, it should get us well clear of Melbourne.

“Good, we need to clear the city, and then find somewhere to hole up for a couple of weeks.”

“What about Sydney?”

“I refuse to lead them there. We have to make sure they’re off our trail before we return there. Sydney cannot be compromised. We’ll ditch this car tonight and set it on fire, and we’ll buy a new one tomorrow. And a third and fourth if we have to.”

“It’s your money,” Harriet said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Kit put the car into drive and slowly eased his foot down on the accelerator. The car lurched forward a few paces, and he eased off again. Moving even slower, he lowered it again. His hands were gripped tightly on either side of the wheel, and he was leaning forward so far the top of his hair was actually brushing against the top of the windshield.

“Wait!” Harriet stopped him before he’d managed to clear the lot. “You do know how to drive, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Kit defended. “I’ve driven four times now.”

“Four times?”
“That’s right.”
“Get out.”
“What?”
“Get out of the car. I’ll drive.”
“But I thought you had to be older to have a license.
“You do, but we’re on the run in a car about to be reported as stolen. A license is the least of our worries, and I’m not trusting my life – or Cloud’s! – to a driver whose only been behind the wheel four times.”

Kit shrugged, and he and Harriet swapped seats.

The car was an automatic, so it was even easier that the manual utes they used on the farm. Adjusting her rear-vision mirror so that she could had a constant view of Cloud, Harriet smiled and pulled out onto the road.
PART THREE
Harriet indicated.

Driving around what felt like the millionth corner, Harried yet again followed Kit’s directions. And gasped.

The Sydney Harbour Bridge appeared before her in all its glory. Even at a distance she could make out the two flags flapping away on the top, and she could have even sworn she saw a group of people in blue jumpsuits climbing up the side of it.

_The photos don’t do it justice_, she decided. She wasn’t usually one to get suckered into admiring things, especially not inanimate things like bridges, but the fact she’d seen this particular bridge thousands of times on TV made it a special case. The Harbour Bridge – along with the Opera House and Uluru – were the iconic Australian images that the rest of the world associated with their country, and to be able to see it in person …

Well, perhaps this adventure has its ups as well as downs…

“Hell of a view, isn’t it?” Kit smiled across at her.

“Is it ever! What’s that place there?”

She parked the car at the end of the road, which was also the end of a spit of land. While they were to the west of the bridge, there was a small island straight in front of them; it was only about one hundred meters long, and it was only fifty metres offshore.

“That’s Goat Island. The site of the single largest goat massacre in the country’s history. Some say that at night, you can still hear the pained bleating of goats echoing across the harbour.”
“Really?”

Kit shrugged. “Probably. Who knows?” he smiled cheekily. “Over to our right we have Mort Bay, and beyond that there’s Darling Harbour. To our extreme left we have Snails Bay, and if we look over to the other side of the water, we have a nice view of Berry’s Bay and Lavender Bay.”

“Which one is which?”

“That’s Lavender Bay on the right. The one with all the boats moored offshore.”

Harriet nodded. The bay he pointed to was filled with small yachts and sailboats, all with their pennants waving lazily in the slight breeze.

“And of course,” Kit continued. “That’s the Harbour Bridge straight ahead, but I guess you already knew that one.”

“Yup,” Harriet leaned back in the driver’s chair, admiring the view. Except for a few trips to the beach when her brother was still around, she’d rarely been to the coast. Not only was this place ‘the coast’, but it was Sydney: the same coast she’d seen in dozens of movies and television shows.

“What’s that area over there?” Harriet asked, pointing to the land on the other side of the water, between Barry’s Bay and Lavender Bay. There were a lot of nice looking houses over there, and one solitary white skyscraper that must have been an apartment building: no one would waste such a prime position on anything as mundane as offices.

“That … that’s home.” There was an unmistakable note of longing in his voice. “Come on, let’s go.”

“How do we get there?”

“Seriously?” Kit raised his eyebrows, and Harriet blushed as she realised her error. *Obviously we’ll have to drive across the bridge.*

Kit gave her the directions she needed to get to the bridge, but Harriet found the drive itself entirely anticlimactic. The bridge might have been really beautiful to look at from afar, but when you were actually on it, it was just another six-lane road. She couldn’t even get a good view of the Opera House, because she was too busy making sure no other cars drifted into her lane.

It didn’t help that she was driving a van wide enough to transport a small army. She hated the clunky vehicle, but it had been necessary to transport Cloud.

Not that the dragon was there right now.

The three of them had holed up in a dingy motel on the outskirts of Bairnsdale – a little nothing of a town in east Victoria. For three weeks they’d bided their time, barely showing their faces around town and praying they’d managed to lose the Nightmen. It took the full three weeks for Kit
to be satisfied the Nightmen had lost their trail again, but when it came time to leave, they’d found themselves with a unique problem.

The extra three weeks of growth had taken Cloud to the size of a large horse, and there was now no way she could fit into a regular car. But, because she had been cooped up inside for so long, her muscles didn’t have the strength or the stamina to fly up alongside Kit and Elayne’s dragons. It was only on the last day, as they approached Sydney itself, that they’d ordered Cloud into the air, and if all was going well, she would be circling the sky far above them, being guided ‘home’ by the two older dragons.

On the other side of the bridge, Kit directed her to a side street off to the left, and after driving past a circus-slash-amusement-park, they followed the curve of the bay around to the point. Harriet kept expecting Kit to direct her off into another backstreet, but he didn’t, and they keep driving until they had reached the carpark at the end of the point.

“Park here,” Kit decided, pointing to a spot next to the twin boat ramps. “I’ll come back tonight and move it somewhere else to dump it.” Just like their first car, they had purchased the van without using their names, so nothing could be traced back to them.

“Where is your actual house,” Harriet didn’t bother locking the van, but instead just got out and slung her pack on her back.

“There,” Kit pointed back towards the solitary white skyscraper.

“Seriously?” Harriet was impressed: she’d been expecting a little rental place, not a high-rise apartment. “Which storey is your place on?”

“The top one.”

“You have the penthouse?” Harriet’s eyebrows rose.

“Actually,” Kit said it without a trace of superiority, “We’ve got the top three floors.”

Harriet shook her head incredulously, and followed them inside without further comment. It was a short elevator ride up, and they got off on floor 15. Harriet knew from the buttons on the lift that this was the first of Kit’s and Elayne’s floors, and the third from the top.

She didn’t know what she was expecting when the door opened, but it certainly wasn’t … this!

The entire floor was only divided by a single wall. Straight from the lift, the apartment opened up with a large kitchen area, a living room, and an open space that was empty of furniture, but had thick padding on the ground. Three of the walls had floor-to-ceiling windows, letting in a lot of light, and a view that she’d thought only CEOs and supermodels could have.
The Sydney Harbour Bridge was directly ahead of them, perfectly framed by the Opera House behind it. The water was a dazzling shade of blue, and there were dozens of yachts and small jet boats lazily moving around the bay. *This place must have cost a fortune!*

“Okay,” Harriet spoke for the first time since the car. “I can’t take this anymore. I have to ask… how the hell can you guys afford this? This place must have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Probably into the millions. And that’s just for one floor! You own three! I thought you arrived on Earth eight years ago with nothing?”

“We did,” Elayne said. “Well… almost nothing. We’d just finished fighting in the war, and after the dragons had won it for Brock, the king was very generous with his rewards. Each of the dragonriders in our band left the capital that day with bulging saddlebags full of gold and precious stones. It was our bonus for our war effort, and it was the money we were going to use to reclaim our place in the Dragonlands.”

“Once we arrived,” Kit took over the narrative smoothly. “After a few initial confusing exchanges at the start where we tried to pay with our own currency, we learned we would have to get the gold exchanged for cash.” He smiled ruefully. “Turns out gold is a little more valuable here, and we were offered a good exchange rate. A *very* good exchange rate. Between the gold, and the gems…which again are a little better than what is usually found here…we had enough money to fund our search for you.”

“Exactly how much money did you end up with?” Harriet asked in awe.

Kit shrugged, looking over to Elayne, who took back the narrative. “Kit was never good with numbers, and I was only just starting to learn when the accident happened, so we had to hire a moneyman—an accountant—to take care of it for us. But we had somewhere around thirty million dollars. Give or take.”

“What?” Harriet was staggered. All this time, she’d been in the company of millionaires. *And they stumbled onto the fortune as well. How lucky can two people be?*

Kit just shrugged. “It means nothing to us. What’s the point of a nice house if our dragons can’t enjoy it too? What’s the point of being able to afford a luxury car if neither of us can drive? We have food each day, and we don’t have to sleep under a bridge. Maybe it’s because we’re from a different world, but those things—small as they seem—are all we really need.”

Harriet left the judgemental comment alone, and simply said. “Give me the tour.”

Elayne smiled. “Well this is the living room obviously. The residential area is on the other side of the dividing wall. We always intended on finding the third egg—and a third rider—so there is
already a room set out and waiting for you. And if we go upstairs…” Harriet followed Elayne and Kit up the flight of stairs to the next level. The pair had obviously done a lot of work to the upper floors, because the roof of the middle floor and the floor of the top level had been taken out, leaving them with a two story high room with no divisions and access to the building’s roof. “We come to the dragon’s area. The dragons can decide where they want to be – inside or outside – but once they decide, that’s it for the day.”

“We open the hatch from 1:00 to 4:00am, but other than that it remains closed. The dragons are either in or out during the day. Those are the only times we can count on the city being asleep, and even then we can’t do it on clear night or when the moon is full for fear of someone looking up.”

Harriet nodded her understanding. Tonight, those flaps would open, and Cloud could be able to come inside. Then, we’ll be able to spend our first night in months sleeping without worrying about who’s chasing us. She hadn’t realised how great a toll the Nightmen’s hunt had taken on her until the stress was relieved. She now fully understood – and appreciated – how cautious Kit had been in making sure they’d lost their tail before they came back here.

This was sanctuary.
This was home.

“What’s that?” Harriet pointed towards the wall behind them. While three of the walls were made up of floor-to-ceiling windows – with the heavy curtains currently tied open – the fourth one must have been the load-bearing wall, and was made entirely of stone. Rather than being blank, there was dozens, if not hundreds, of medieval weapons there. Harriet counted no less than ten different bows, and she didn’t even bother to try counting the assorted knives, swords, and spears.

“That’s the weapon’s rack,” Kit said the answer like it was obvious. “We’re soldiers, Harriet, first and foremost. Anything else – including riding dragons – is second to that.”

“But … there just seems to be so many…”

“And you’ll learn to use them.”

“What?”

“All of them. We’ll start today. In an hour, even. After you’ve had a chance to have some food and a shower, I’ll start teaching you how to use a sword.”

“Why the rush?”

“Exercise is good for the soul. And the sword takes years to master, so the sooner we start, the better chance we have of keeping you alive. Besides, fighting takes up all your concentration, and I reckon you could do with a distraction.”
“What do you mean?”
“What are you thinking about right now?”

Cloud, obviously, and if she is safe, and if the other dragons are being nice to her, and if… Harriet realised from the expression on Kit’s face that he already knew the answer, and when she looked abashed, he only raised an eyebrow and grinned.

“Like I said, it will be a good distraction for you.”

“And what’s in there?” Harriet pointed to the only other item on the floor: a large container that came almost as high as her shoulder, and that was big enough to house a small car.

“That’s where we keep the saddles.”

Harriet looked confused for a second, and Kit extrapolated. “For the dragons. But we’ll worry about that later. First, I’m hungry, and I’ve missed my kitchen.”

Kit turned out to be a surprisingly good cook, and after they had all feasted on a roasted capsicum and rare beef salad, Harriet ducked off for a hot shower. She knew she would just get sweaty again with training, but the thought of the steaming water was just too tempting. When she emerged, she found a pair of lycra pants and a workout top laid out alongside her bed, and knew that Elayne must have raided her own closet to provide them.

Getting dressed, Harriet had no other option but to put her walking shoes back on. Probably not the best thing for training, but they’ll have to do.

With a final look in the mirror to make sure her hair was still tied back, Harriet drifted upstairs in search of Kit.
“Let’s start then.”

Kit walked over to the weapons wall and selected two swords. There were many different types of swords, but the two he selected were the same. Each was about one meter from tip to pommel, and the blade was curved slightly backwards, so that the tip was offset by a hands-width.

“These are sabres,” Kit said, passing one over to her. He didn’t insult her by telling her to be careful with it. “It’s the most common type of sword for those who fight from horseback. You won’t actually be doing much fighting from horses, but the same deal applies to dragonback.”

“And will I be doing much fighting from Cloud’s back?”

“Not a hope! But it’s still a good sword to learn on, especially for small people like us.” He gestured to Elayne and himself. Despite the fact he was a man, and older, Kit was still a couple of inches shorter than Elayne; the same height as Harriet herself.

“There are two guard positions. The lower guard looks like this…” Kit held the sword in front of him. His hand was at waist height, and the sword pointed directly upwards and outwards. “Or there’s the high guard, like this…” Kit reversed the sword. It was now held at head-height, and the blade pointed down and out towards his imaginary-opponent’s toes. “The guard positions and basic parries will be the first thing you learn.”

“Why have two guard positions,” Harriet asked. In the movies she saw, the characters always started off with their swords in the one place and after they swung, they returned to that place.
“Because the guard has to change depending on what you want to do. A high guard is good for quick defensive movements and parries, while a low guard is good for lunges attacks and thrusts.”

“But then, wouldn’t you always just use a low guard? Isn’t the point of fighting to kill your opponent?”

“No!” Kit corrected her. “The point of fighting is to stay alive. Sometimes that means killing your opponent, but hopefully that means just showing them that you’re no easy prey. Now, we’ll start with the low guard, but first…” he took the sword back from her, and placed them both back on the rack. Selecting two different swords, he handed one over.

“What was the point in that?” Harriet was puzzled. The sword he had given her seemed identical in all respects to the one he had just taken off her.

“That’s a practice blade,” Kit explained. “Have a look at it. It has the same weight and shape, but there is no cutting edge.”

Harriet thumbed the edge of the blade, but her hand came away unscathed.

“Take the low guard,” Kit instructed, demonstrating it for her. When Kit held his sword, he stood side-on to her, with his free hand held out behind him for balance. She asked him about it, and he explained that the side-on posture allowed for quick movements, while leaving as small a target for the enemy as possible. Moving carefully, Harriet copied his position, with her sword in her right hand and her hand at the level of her waist.

“Angle it out a bit more.”

She made the necessary adjustments, and only when he’d completed a full circle of her to check her posture from every angle did he nod his satisfaction.

“Good, now I’ll demonstrate a few of the most basic strikes. All you’ll be doing today is practicing blocking.”

“Why only blocking?”

“Because that’s the most important part,” Kit grinned. “You can survive a sword fight if you don’t know how to attack … but I can guarantee you if you enter a sword fight not knowing how to block, you will get stabbed.”

Harriet nodded, conceding the point. Kit moved to stand opposite her, and with the tip of his sword pointing straight outwards, spun slowly around in a complete circle.

“Take notice of where the tip of my sword is,” Kit said, still slowly spinning. “This is my kill zone. If you are standing anywhere within this circle, then I can hit you with my sword. So what do you think the aim of a sword fight should be?”
“Don’t go inside the circle?”

“Correct. You’ll have to eventually, when you want to attack yourself, but then it will be on your terms. Just like you don’t want to be inside my circle, you don’t want me to be inside your circle either, not unless it’s on your terms.”

“Okay…” Harriet found the whole conversation a little weird, but she went with it. “So how do I block?”

“It’s all about sweeping motions. The sabre is predominantly a cutting tool, so both blocks and attacks are long sideways movements. I’ll give you a slow overhead, but don’t you react.”

Kit adopted a low guard, and then moving very slowly, he stepped forward, raising his arm up and outwards, and bringing the sword down onto the top of her head. He stopped it before it touched her, but if it had have been a real sword swung in anger, her skull would have been separated in half.

“Do that to me, and watch how I react.”

Harriet copied the move, making sure to stand side on, with her free hand out behind her, just like he’d done. This time, when Harriet sword started to descend towards his head, Kit slowly swept his own blade from its central position off to the side. Her sword glanced harmlessly through the air beside him.

“Now your turn,” Kit slowly swung at her, and she swept her hand to the side. “No. Don’t just move your wrist. The wrist is weak. Keep it locked, and move the whole arm. And be careful which part of your sword you use to block. You want to use the flat of the blade, or even the back of it. Never the cutting edge. You’ll just chip away at it until it looks serrated and useless. I know it feels weird, but get into the habit of twisting your sword now to block, and you’ll thank me in the long run.”

Harriet tried it again, and this time Kit was satisfied.

“The other way to block an overhead blow is to simply stop it, like this…” he held his blade horizontal above his head. When Harriet’s blade slowly descended towards him, it tapped lightly against his blade, stopping an arms-length above his head. “But why do you think that should be your second option only?”

“Because if your opponent is stronger than you, their sword will just keep going down,” Harriet saw to the heart of the problem immediately, and Kit smiled.

“Good. Now look at this one…”
Over the next hour, Kit slowly ran her through the other main types of blocks, each to be used against their respective strike counterparts. Even though the instruction was not explicit, Harriet was also starting to get an idea of what the main strikes themselves were.

There was the obvious overhand blow, and the sideways slash. The chest thrust was a game-ender, but that one was only for when you were supremely confident. Finally, there was the parry-counter attack. This involved waiting for your opponent to attack, and then using your blocking movement – your parry – as the starting point of your attack. For example, when Kit tried an overhead, Harriet could swat his blade away to the side, and then follow it up with a slash to his inner forearm, a cut to his thigh, or even an attempt at his chest.

As the second hour ended and the third began, Harriet’s confidence grew, and there started to be less hesitation in her movements. Kit was pleased at first, but then he began to criticise her for getting sloppy.

“Just take it slow,” he cautioned. “It’s not about how fast you can do it … it’s about doing it right. If you do it correctly a thousand times – even slowly – then your muscles learn the movements, and the speed becomes irrelevant. You need to create muscle memory. In a fight, that’s what makes the difference between victory and defeat. Muscles acting before the brain even has a chance to process the information.”

“I get it,” Harriet replied, slightly annoyed. *I’m not a child. Does he think I don’t understand?*  
“I don’t think you do,” Kit read her thoughts. “But you will.” He lowered his sword and turned around to shout downstairs. “Elayne, up here please.”

There was a grumble of annoyance from below, but Elayne did pad upstairs after a few minutes. She was barefoot, and if it wasn’t for the blue jacket still wrapped around her body, Harriet would have thought she almost looked relaxed. “What is it?”

“Grab a blade,” Kit handed off the practice blade to her. “A sparring match. To demonstrate for Harriet what a proper sword fight looks like.”

Elayne was obviously not impressed with having her evening interrupted for such a cause, but nevertheless she did return the practice sword to its bracket, and pull down two new ones. Harriet noted the careful way she handled them, and realised that even though the match was a practice, both of them would using real weapons.

Kit noticed her surprise.

“Once you get good enough to be trusted with one, you’ll never use a practice blade again. Using a real blade – even just for sparring – teaches you respect for the weapon, and for yourself.
People can get sloppy with practice swords because there’s always that safety net. Dragonriders don’t get the privilege of a safety net.”

Elayne passed one of the swords over to Kit, and the two of them squared off. They stood a few meters away from each other, each side-on and each with their free hands held behind themselves for balance.

“Clear skies,” Kit recited.
“Sharp swords,” Elayne responded.
And then they began to dance.

That was the only way Harriet could describe it. They looked like two tango dancers moving backwards and forwards. Their moves were almost mirrored: as one would lunge forward a pace, the other would retreat, only to have their roles swapped over a second later.

The swords were a blur in the air, and Harriet now understood what Kit had meant. The two of them were fighting much faster than her mind could keep up with, and there was no way they could be consciously planning every single move. A few of their attacks, yes, but the vast majority would have just been reactionary, moves made purely on instinct and intuition.

And maybe a little bit of luck, she decided, eyes widening as Elayne’s blade whistled through the air above Kit’s head, only missing him by a few fingers, and still sending off a few severed hairs into the air. Harriet face paled, and she called herself twelve different types of stupid for ever thinking she was getting good with the sword: this was a skill that took years to master, not a couple of hours over the course of a late evening.

Kit recovered from Elayne’s latest thrust quickly, and was back on the attack immediately, driving her back several paces with a renewed combination of thrusts and slashes.

The advantage was short-lived, and Elayne soon recovered her composure. After several long minutes, Harriet found herself growing cold. When she had been fighting she’d been able to keep up a sweat and stay warm, but now that she’d stopped it had cooled on her body, and she was beginning to shiver. As much as she hated to take her eyes off the fight even for a second, with the roof flaps open and the night air swirling around, she needed her jacket. Hurriedly pulling it on, she directed her attention back to the two, and hoped she hadn’t missed anything.

The fight must have been going on now for almost fifteen minutes, and the pair were still going at it, but both were drenched in sweat and panting hard. Their moves began to slow, but their concentration never wavered.
Kit feinted left, but Elayne was expecting it. In a circular swish of her hand, she used her sword to wrench his own from his hand. Defenceless, Kit had no recourse for the booted heel that landed in the middle of his chest, or the sword tip that was pressed up against his throat.

“Yield,” Kit held up both his hands, but his eyes were smiling despite the loss. Elayne was ginning, and Harriet couldn’t think of a time when she’d seen a more impressive display. Having grown up in a predominantly male household, Harriet had never really had a female role model, but she now knew exactly what type of woman she wanted to be when she grew up.

The type that knows how to take care of herself.
And the type that knows how to kick ass!

“Some people never get the knack for the sword,” Kit said quietly. “Some people are born skilled. And then there are those…” his eyes were looking firmly at Elayne now. “Then there are those who train day after day, year after year, until there is not a single person on this planet who could best them.”

Harriet opened her mouth to reply, but the two of them had already stopped paying attention to her. Their eyes were now fixed vacantly on the roof above them. They were not looking through the open flaps, but at a single point towards the edge of the building. Harriet followed their gaze, but could see nothing to warrant the smiles on their faces.

Seeing her confusion, it was Kit that finally filled her in.

“The dragons are here.”
CHAPTER 18

The first dragon arrived with a woosh of air.

Elayne gasped as she saw Kit’s black. Except for Cloud, this was the first time she’d had a close look at a dragon, and while it was slightly smaller than Cloud was, Harriet could tell immediately that the black was an adult. It moved like a king, with every muscle in its body under control, whereas Cloud still tended to act gangly and awkward, like a ten-year-old after a growth spurt.

The dragon’s scales were a deep black, and reminded Harriet of some obsidian she’d seen once, but it had a shine to it, as if the obsidian were wet. Its eyes were a bright yellow – very different to Cloud’s blue and black ones – and Harriet remembered that the blacks were most useful as scouts. The yellow eyes must help him see in the dark…

The black bowed its head, touching foreheads with Kit in a silent exchange of love and respect. When it swung its gaze to Harriet, it was so majestic she actually felt the urge to bow. The dragon’s eyes lingered on Harriet for a moment before drifting over to Elayne. He gave each of the women a slight dip of the head in what was a very human-like way, but it was clear to all present that he only had eyes for Kit.

Kit guided his dragon to the side of the room, allowing Elayne’s to land. Once she did, Harriet could understand why the blue dragon had waited: up close, she was huge. A few minutes ago the floor had been basically empty, but now it had the equivalent of a semi-trailer parked inside of it.

The blue had looked big through the clouds on that first day, but up close, it was positively fearsome. Just like Kit’s dragon, Elayne’s only had eyes for her, and it didn’t even acknowledge Kit or
Harriet as it enveloped Elayne in its long neck, giving her the dragon equivalent of a hug. With Elayne still wearing her dragon-scale jacket, it was hard to tell where she ended and her dragon began.

In all the confusion of the two dragon’s arrival, Harriet could have been forgiven for not noticing Cloud. Luckily, as the little blue descended through the night sky, their bond grew stronger and Harriet was flooded with a mixed bag of emotions. There were hints of excitement mingled in with nerves and tiredness, but the overwhelming feeling was one of relief and love.

“Hey there girl,” Harriet spoke softly while she stroked Cloud’s neck. Her dragon was now taller than she was, and would make a giraffe feel insecure. Since Cloud was no longer able to take her usual perch on the back of Harriet’s neck and shoulders, Cloud contented herself with giving them a nuzzle, and wrapping one of her wings protectively around them both.

“I know. I missed you too.”

The twenty hours they’d been separated for wasn’t much in the grand scheme, but it was the longest the two of them had been apart since the hatching. No doubt now that Cloud was getting bigger they would be separated more and more, but until she grew strong enough for the bond to work over distance, Harriet didn’t know if she’d ever feel truly comfortable with it, or if she’d ever stop worrying.

“Are you ready?”

Kit’s question was enough to draw Harriet from the enveloping cocoon. When she was able to poke her head out, he was standing there waiting, a brown leather saddle slung over one shoulder.

“For what?” she asked, suspicious.

“To ride!”

“What, now?”

He shrugged. “No time like the present. Cloud’s finally big enough, and Nighteyes’ saddle should fit her perfectly. There’s no point getting Cloud a saddle made up until she stops growing, so for now you can use mine.”

“But Cloud’s exhausted! She’s been up in the air the whole day, and she’s still growing. And I’m exhausted too! I drove all morning, and I’ve been fighting all afternoon!” Harriet hated herself for the whine that came into her voice, but facts were facts. Not that Kit cared.

“Then it’s the perfect time. Cloud will only build up stamina when she starts to push herself, and we’ve already spoken today about how you could use some toughening up. You’re a dragonrider now. You need to be faster, stronger, and smarter than those on the ground, and you’ll only get that
way through hard work and practice. Now, help me with this. It would be an insult to your dragon if anyone but you saddled her for the first time.”

The barb struck home, and Harriet took the leather saddle off him without another complaint. Cloud knelt down accommodatingly, and under Kit’s careful instruction, Harriet strapped it on. It was not dissimilar to a horse’s saddle, except the back and front were much higher, coming up to her belly-button. There were also a lot more straps, but Harriet rightly figured that these were for tying herself on: a horse didn’t need them, of course, because there were not too many horses that could do a barrel-roll while in midair.

The saddle sat high on the dragon’s back, just above her front legs, so that Harriet’s legs would be on either side of the base of Cloud’s neck, while her hips would be sitting on Cloud’s shoulders.

“Elayne will help you with the take off, and I’ll meet you up there,” Kit gave her a final pat on the shoulder before springing up onto the foreleg of his black, and from there to his back.

“Wait! If I’ve got your saddle, how will you fly?”

Kit smiled at her concern. “The saddles are only strictly necessary when you're learning and when you're in battle. Other than that, once you're well-bonded with your dragon, you’ll be able to work around each other pretty well.”

With that, his black pumped its wings, and took off with a sweep of air that would have sent Harriet to the floor if it wasn’t for Cloud acting as a buffer.

Harriet watched them disappear into the night. True to form, after a few seconds, the black dragon was completely invisible. She guessed that Elayne’s darker blue would be similarly camouflaged, but she worried about Cloud. With such light colouring, she might just reflect the light from the moon or the buildings, and provide an easy target for people on the ground. When she lowered her head and opened her mouth to mention this, her jaws snapped shut again as she realised Cloud, Elayne, and Elayne’s blue were all staring at her.

“Your turn,” the other woman grinned, although Harriet didn’t feel like returning it. With Elayne’s assistance – and with an obliging Cloud getting down as low as she could on her knees – Harriet awkwardly clambered up into the saddle. It felt strange: much more restrictive than the horse’s seat she was used to, and the leather went too far down, running along the entire length of her leg rather than stopping at her thigh.

Beginning at the bottom of her left foot, Elayne began to buckle her in. There were twelve belts on each side, and Elayne worked her way up, doing each of them in sequence and checking them to make sure they were tight, but not tight enough to cut off circulation. The two highest of the belts
were around Harriet’s upper thigh, and by the time both of them were tightened, Harriet felt more like a chained and bound criminal than an adventurous dragonrider.

“Is everything nice and tight?” Elayne asked needlessly: having strapped Harriet in herself, she knew everything was ready.

“Yes,” Harriet replied nervously, and Cloud stood up to her full height. The movement was so unexpected that Harriet would have fallen off if not for the straps. If I can barely stay on when she’d standing on the ground, how the hell am I going to ride her in midair?

“And Cloud, are you ready?”

The dragon didn’t have a bond with Elayne, but Harriet was able to feel the surge of consent, and Cloud dipped her head to the older dragonrider.

“Then off you go,” Elayne slapped Cloud’s flank lightly, and stepped back to a safe distance.

Cloud waddled a few steps so she was standing directly under the open flaps. Spreading her wings, she crouched back on her hind legs, coiling her muscles and getting ready to spring. Cloud started to take off, but her legs had not even managed to fully unfurl before Harriet screamed an order, both out loud and through the bond.

“Stop!”

Cloud immediately killed the power from her spring. Twisting her wings, she emptied them of air and cut her momentum. The two of them had got no higher than half a meter off the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Elayne was at her side in an instant.

“Nothing,” Harriet said, trying to compose herself. With deft fingers, she quickly tugged on each of the saddle straps. “Just wanted to double-check the ties.”

“They’re all secure,” Elayne reassured her, but nonetheless she went over them all a third time, making sure there was no give, and that each of them married up to the correct coupling. “All secure, time to fly.”

Elayne stepped back again, and Cloud again coiled herself downwards, preparing her body for the monumental effort it would take to spring up high enough to clear the flaps. This time, Cloud’s feet didn’t even clear the ground before Harriet backed out again.

“No! Stop!”

Cloud swivelled her neck around to look at her curiously, not knowing what the problem was, but Elayne knew without it needing to be put into words.

“Feeling a bit nervous?” her voice was full of understanding.
“I can’t do this. I’m freaking fifteen! I don’t have a parachute or anything, and I’m so hopeless that I’m bound to fall off. This whole idea is crazy. Besides, Cloud is way too young anyways, and I only learnt how to ride a horse a few weeks ago, so I’m not ready for a dragon, and what if a strap comes undone? My muscles are so tired from training that I don’t think I’d even be able to hold on. Plus, it’s probably better that we stay inside, this place is really safe at the moment, but if one of the Nightmen saw us then…”

“Harriet … Harriet!” Elayne stopped her rambling. “Relax, and take a few deep breaths,” she waited obligingly while Harriet did so. “You’re going to be just fine. Don’t even think about your age: I was much younger than you when I first started, and Kit would have only been six or seven! No more than a boy! The straps are fine: they’ve weathered a thousand flights, and they’ll weather a thousand more. We are very strict about their maintenance. Yes, we know you’re tired, but trust me, when you get up there, you’ll find yourself suddenly very, very, alert.” Elayne smiled again. “And finally, falling off should be the last thing on your mind.”

“But what if it happens?”

“But won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Think about it Harriet. Is there anything in this world you wouldn’t do to protect Cloud?”

“No, of course not.”

“What about keeping her safe? Would you ever do anything to put her in danger?”

“No! Never!”

“Then why do you think she would feel any different?” Elayne waited for the shock to register on Harriet’s face before continuing. “She feels the same way about you as you do about her. She’s not going to do anything that puts you in harm’s way. Just trust your dragon, and trust in yourself. Together, there’s not a whole heap you can’t do.” Her smile turned bittersweet, and her voice took on a strange tone. “Trust me; there’s a reason why dragons won the war.” She gave Harriet a pat on the shoulder. “I have every faith in you. Clear skies, Harriet.”

Harriet’s doubts were squashed somewhat, but nothing could erase them altogether. It was with great trepidation that she clenched her jaws together, preventing herself from calling out the order to halt. Her hands grasped the horn of her saddle so hard her knuckles went white, and when Cloud finally sprang into the air, her stomach stayed where it was, lurching to the bottom of her body.
Cloud flapped hard to get the initial altitude. Usually she would be able to take a more angled approach, but because she had to clear the flaps, she needed to get very high, very fast. Once they were clear of the building, they continued to rise, angling off slightly to the east.

And then a strange thing happened.

As the lights of Sydney faded away below her, so did her anxiety.

This was awesome.
Harriet flew.

There was a gentle breeze in the night, but it was not enough to penetrate her thick jacket, and she was comfortably warm. Even with the darkness, she was high enough to see the curve of the earth on the horizon, and below her, Sydney looked like a million sparkling fireflies. She’d already lost her bearings, but she thought she could tell where the Central Business District was, just by the offices that were illuminated despite the late hour.

Harriet thought of how many millions of people lived in Sydney and the surrounds, and she worried for a moment that someone – anyone – would look up and see them. *All it would take was just one…* But then she remembered what Kit had told her all the way back when they first met: the dragons scales actively avoided radar detection, and as for being seen by the naked eye, humans were creatures of logic, and would only see what they expected to see. If they did somehow see something large flying around at night, they’d probably just assume it was a bird, or an Air Force plane doing stealth manoeuvres. It sounded implausible, but then … Harriet *was* riding a dragon. The realms of plausibility had been stretched a long time ago.

“Harriet!”

Kit and his black materialised out of nowhere, like a hawk swooping unexpectedly on a mouse. Luckily they had no nefarious intentions, because Harriet would have had no warning. One second they were invisible, and the next they were hovering in front of Cloud.
Nighteyes flew with none of the hesitation that Cloud had, and even though they were of a similar size, she seemed like a lumbering elephant next to his sleek movements. Harriet felt a moment of envy, and a sense of rivalry flooded though the bond, indicating that Cloud felt the same way.

“Don’t worry girl,” Harriet said quietly, trusting the bond more than the words to convey her meaning. “We’re only just beginning. Give it a year and we’ll put them all to shame.”

Harriet marvelled at her newfound sense of confidence, especially after her earlier fear and reluctance. She couldn’t pinpoint where the new emotions were coming from: herself, or projected from Cloud now that they were up in her natural environment.

“Follow me,” Kit shouted the order, and Nighteyes turned east in a sweeping corkscrew spiral that took him ever downwards. Cloud was already facing that direction, so she didn’t need any of the fancy manoeuvres to follow, but she did flap hard to stay abreast.

Kit’s dragon only took one wingbeat for every three that Cloud needed, and even then the younger dragon was struggling to keep up. Harriet sensed that Kit was testing them both, and she mentally urged Cloud onwards. Together, they followed Nighteyes down to the water, flying so low that the tips of their wings actually touched the sea on the downbeats. Neck and neck, they flew under the Harbour Bridge, but Harriet was taken by surprise when Kit angled sharply upwards on the other side; flying vertically up and back to curve around in a massive loop that took him to the top of it. Leaning down into the saddle, Harriet adjusted her weight, and Cloud followed the loop without being ordered.

Riding a horse had taken her days to learn and weeks to get comfortable with. She had no such problem with Cloud. The dragon floated on the air, and as such had none of the jerky up and down movement a horse had. The straps kept Harriet attached to the saddle, and so as long as she was able to anticipate a turn, she was always ready for them. The real challenge, she realised, would be learning to ride without the straps, as Kit was now doing. They’d told her that the saddles were only used when a rider was just learning, and when they were going into battle, and presumably these were the times when riders were at their most distracted, and where their concentration was needed for other things.

One year, Harriet vowed. In one year’s time, we’ll be just as good as they are, and we won’t need the straps at all.

The two dragons hovered between the flags on top of the bridge for a long minute, but then they were off again. Moving like fighter jets, they angled their bodies as they weaved through the sails of the Opera House and back out to sea. Kit took them in a long arc that eventually curved south.
above the ocean, before coming back into a long bay, with soft sand glinting in the muted moonlight. The beach looked familiar, but Harriet didn’t know why, since she’d never been to Sydney before.

Kit’s dragon landed lightly on the beach, and with a heavy thump, Cloud dropped down beside him. Cloud came down much harder and faster than Nighteyes had, and Harriet was thankful for the leather straps around her legs: if it wasn’t for them, she would have sailed clear over Cloud’s head. As it was, she was pitched violently forward in the saddle, and a flood of apologetic emotion conveyed itself through the bond. Cloud swivelled her head back to check on her, but Harriet waved that she was alright. *I guess we both have a lot to learn about flying with each other.*

Kit leapt lightly from Nighteyes’ back, but it took Harriet much longer, since she had to deal with two dozen buckles.

“How’s it going?” Kit smiled at her. “Undo your saddle. It’s the big buckle underneath her forelegs. We’ll let the dragons play in the water, but if the saddle gets salt water over it, it’s a pain to clean.”

As soon as the saddle cleared her back, Cloud galloped down into the water to splash around with Nighteyes. Harriet and Kit sat down on the sand to watch them, each leaning against the side of the leather saddle.

“We just have to make them stay on the lower part of the beach. At the moment the tide is coming in, and in an hour their tracks and claw-marks will be completely erased. It would look too suspicious if an early morning jogger suddenly stumbled onto evidence of dragons.

“Is that likely?” Harriet asked. “Is this a popular beach?”

“This is Bondi,” Kit glanced across at her, and suddenly it clicked. *No wonder this beach looked so familiar.* “It’s the most popular beach in the city. Just about the only time it isn’t packed with people is at 3:00 am in the morning, luckily for us.” His smile turned to a frown. “I’ve never understood your culture’s fascination with the water. Everyone in Australia knows how to swim, and you people seem to revel in going to the beach to tan your skin as often as possible. Where I come from, not many have the luxury of taking a day away from their responsibilities, and certainly not for something as frivolous as getting a tan.”

Harriet shrugged. “Perks of industrialisation, I guess.”

Kit grunted, and the two of them fell silent again, watching their dragons play.

“When you and Elayne started to fight, you each said something to each other,” Harriet asked her next question tentatively, not knowing if she was intruding on something personal. “Then Elayne said the same thing to me just before I took off. Clear skies…?”
“Clear skies. Sharp swords.” Kit repeated the whole thing. “It’s kind of like the dragonrider version of good luck. There was a time when they were the only two things we needed. A sharp blade at our belt, and a clear sky ahead, and a dragon and its rider had the world at their feet.” He laughed. “Literally! It’s also used for goodbyes, kind of like saying: I wish you nothing but the best, wherever you find yourself.”

Harriet nodded, filing the information away and falling silent again.

For another half-hour they lay there watching their dragons. With the clock ticking over to almost 4:00 in the morning, Harriet was surprised she wasn’t falling asleep: she had been awake for almost 24 hours, after all. But the flight, and the cool night air, had banished all thought of sleep from her mind, and she felt as if she had just woken up from the most refreshing rest in months.

All things must end, however, and eventually Kit gave the order.

“Call your dragon.”

Harriet opened her mouth, but he immediately stopped her.

“No, through the bond.”

“How?” Except for when they were flying – where it seemed they shared a single mind – Harriet and Cloud had so far only exchanged emotions and the occasional vague idea. Certainly nothing as specific as an order.

“Think of a memory or situation that conveys the emotion you need to express. For this situation, think of a time when you had to be somewhere in a hurry. Remember that time, and try to immerse yourself in the memory. Once you have it, just dwell on the sense of urgency as much as you can. Cloud should feel that, and understand that it’s time to move on.”

“Seems a bit … manipulative doesn’t it.”

Kit laughed. “Trust someone from the 21st Century to think that. A few years ago Elayne shared a bit too much with one of the people who was helping us to hide the dragons, and they said something similar. And they were a vegan. A vegan! Of all things! Can you believe people have the luxury of having so much food that they can choose to just not eat most of it?” He shook his head and turned serious again. “It’s only manipulative if you misuse it, making her feel something that isn’t true. It would be manipulative, for example, if you made her think you were hurt and distressed if you were perfectly fine,” Kit gave her a pointed look. “Although … why any rider would do that to their dragon is beyond me.” Harriet shook her head, and he sighed. “Look, just do it for now, and then you and Cloud can work out your own system. Most riders spend years developing their bond with their
dragon, so the sooner you start, the better, and the only way to do it is to practise. So long as the emotion gets conveyed, the way you do it is really irrelevant.”

“That’s it?” Harriet moved on to her next complaint. “An emotion? That’s as specific as it gets?” She remembered their flight through the forest that first day, and how Kit was able to access specific knowledge about enemy placement and numbers from Nighteyes high above.

“That’s it. As the months and years progress you and Cloud will get better and more concise, developing your own systems and patterns for sharing specific information, but essentially it’s all just senses and emotions.”

Harriet chose her memory: her brother’s graduation, when she and her father had been running late. They’d had to stay back on the farm when a cow went into labour, and even with a rushed birth, they still only made it to the ceremony a scant few minutes before he walked across the stage. He was the first person in their entire family to ever get into university – much less graduate! – and Harriet and her father had been so stressed about missing it. Yes … that’s definitely a time of great urgency.

She concentrated on the image, and evidently it was powerful enough, for she had to wait less than a minute for Cloud to come lumbering up the sand to peer at her inquisitively. She didn’t seem emotionally manipulated. Just … curious. Nighteyes followed on her heels, and Kit was kind enough to give her the warning.

“Shield you face,” he already had his head ducked down into the chest of his jacket, and Harriet knew better by now than to hesitate. Unzipping her jacket, she managed to cover her face only moments before the two of them were buffeted by a wall of sand.

“Clear,” Kit said, and when Harriet peeked out, he was brushing himself off. Looking down towards the water, she realised that to dry themselves, the dragons had simply shaken themselves out like dogs. Unlike a dog, though, their wings acted like the sails on a tall ship, and half the beech had flown outwards with the force of their downstroke.

“Saddle up,” Kit pulled her to her feet. This time she managed to get Cloud ready on her own, only needing assistance once with which loop connected to which buckle. When she got into the saddle and began buckling herself in, Kit reached out a hand to stop her.

“Wait,” he undid the two buckles she had already fastened around her thighs, and she felt a moment of panic. “You always start from the ankles up, but this time, I only want you to do them up as far as your knees. Your lower leg straps will still keep you on the dragon, but having your thighs
loose will allow you to start to get a feel for how Cloud moves. Just like riding a horse, you need to
develop intuition for what is about to happen next, and react accordingly.”

Harriet was sceptical, but she nodded and only buckled the lower half of her legs.

Cloud dipped down low, and this time, Harriet was prepared both for the jostling movements,
and for the whirlwind of sand that arose. Cloud flapped hard, and gained altitude rapidly.

With only half the buckles still secured, Harriet felt a lot less safe. There was nothing keeping
her hips in the seat of the saddle, and she often found herself rising up almost to a standing position
whenever Cloud dipped slightly.

Kit didn’t take them straight back to the apartment, but led them on a lengthy side trip inland.
The city fell behind them, and was replaced by suburbia, until even that was replaced by countryside
and farmland. At one point, Nighteyes swooped down on a flock of sheep, but he contented himself
with just snapping the air close to one, sending it bleating back to its herd.

“Show off,” Harriet muttered, knowing that the move was done solely for her and Cloud’s
benefit. One day Cloud would eclipse all of them, and be able to breathe fire, but Nighteyes evidently
wanted it clear from the start who was the better flyer and hunter, even if it was only a friendly rivalry.

When it came time to turn back around, Kit didn’t waste the opportunity to show off again.
Dipping his right wing, Nighteyes folded his body in on itself and performed a sharp u-turn. Harriet
only had a second to marvel at how Kit was able to hang on before a yelp of surprise escaped her.
Without being asked or ordered, Cloud had decided to copy the movement.

She was nowhere near as well practiced as Nighteyes, and when she folded her wing, her whole
body followed it. Harriet screamed as the dragon turned upside down, and the ten seconds it took
Cloud to right herself were easily the scariest seconds Harriet had ever experienced. *Even worse than
falling off the Skydeck.*

“Please,” Harriet begged. “Let’s not do that again. Not until we’re both a little better and both
know what we’re doing.”

Cloud beat fast to catch up to Nighteyes, and contrition flooded the bond. For a second, Harriet wondered if she should have been congratulating Cloud rather than telling her off, but tonight she was too tired to think it through.

It was coming up on 4:30 by the time the bridge came into view, and thankfully Daylight
Savings Time was still in effect, for while the city was in the process of waking up, the skies were still
black. The two dragons took the entrance to the building with a freefall, flying high up above the
clouds, and then dropping straight down like a helicopter in a tailspin.
Cloud’s second landing was much gentler than the first, and Harriet barely even lost her balance as Cloud’s claws dug into the hard carpet, forelegs bending wildly to absorb the shock of the impact. With fewer buckles to undo, Harriet was out of the saddle quickly, and even though Elayne was already waiting for her, Harriet made sure she spoke to Cloud first.

“You were so wonderful,” she crooned, cradling Cloud’s head against her chest and stroking her muzzle affectionately. “You are the strongest most agile dragon in the world, and I am the luckiest person to have ever met you.” As well as the words, Harriet flooded her bond with positive emotions, and Cloud’s eyes crinkled at the edges in silent happiness. It was only after a long minute that Harriet gave her dragon a final kiss between the eyes, and turned to speak with Elayne.

“How was it?” the other woman asked.

“Incredible!”

“I knew you’d like it. And Kit says you’re a natural. In no time you and Cloud will be flying loops around us. Just you wait and see.

Harriet smiled, and Elayne looked down to something in her hands. Following her gaze, Harriet noticed for the first time the blue dragonscale jacket. Elayne still had her own on, but the one in her hands was the exact same cut and colour, and could have only come from her blue.

“I … want you to have this.” Elayne thrust the jacket towards her: quickly, as if she was ripping off a band-aid. “You’re one of us now, a dragonrider in every sense …and you should be uniformed as such. Cloud won’t grow old enough to start moulting for at least a year … so here. This one’s for you.”

Wordlessly, Harriet stripped off her old jacket and slid into the dragonscale one. It had been carefully tailored to fit Elayne, so it was a little tight in the waist for Harriet, and a little loose in the chest, but other than that, it was a perfect fit.

“I… I…” Harriet was lost for words. Leaping forward, she threw her hands around the older dragonrider’s shoulders, burying her head in her neck.

“Thank you…” she mumbled, and Elayne returned the hug.

Harriet didn’t say anything else. No other words were needed. The hug conveyed everything, and whatever it missed was surely conveyed by the silent tears that tracked their way down the younger rider’s cheeks.
The next two months were a blur.

Harriet’s entire lifestyle changed, not the least part of which was her sleeping patterns. It was now normal for her to sleep from dawn through to midday, so as to be able to spend her nights with Cloud.

Just like the other two dragons Cloud stayed in the apartment occasionally, but for the most part she was content to fly free in the distance, hunting with her own kind.

While Cloud was away, Kit and Elayne drilled Harriet endlessly. It was not only sword fighting they insisted she learn: her archery lessons were kept up, they taught her how to fight with a knife, and throughout everything they taught her how to punch and kick while fighting unarmed.

Harriet had never been a heavy girl, but over those two months, any bit of excess weight fell off her, and her body became as toned as Elayne’s. It certainly wasn’t hurting her that after she woke up every morning, she would run a lap around the bay with Elayne.

While her initial realisation on that first night – that sword fighting was a skill that took years to learn – proved to be entirely accurate, she did find herself steadily improving, and what’s more, she found herself to be really enjoying it.

Kit had been right: the practice was good for both her mind and her body. The challenge was what had initially attracted her, but planning a new offensive strategy or perfecting a defence soon became an addiction, and one she was more than happy to devote several hours a day to.

And at night, of course, they rode dragons.
Cloud was still growing at a rapid rate, and while she was almost double the size of Nighteyes now – with a body the size of a mini-bus! – she still had a long way to go before she caught up to Elayne’s blue. The problem with the rapid growth, though, was that she constantly struggled to build up her stamina. Just when she would get used to flying distances at her current size, she would get a growth spurt and her endurance would be all the way back at square one.

Most nights, they only went out for an hour or two. Two hours was still more than enough for the both of them to be happy. But still, Harriet longed for the opportunity to fly free in the sunshine, and to let Cloud have a chance to take to the skies without worrying what other people might see.

The initial focus of their flying lessons – besides building up Cloud’s strength and stamina, of course – was their form. Like running, it turned out there was a correct form for flying, and it took a lot of work to perfect. Just like Harriet’s tutelage with the blade, Cloud was tireless in her endeavour to learn from the other two dragons, and before long the two of them had moved from simple flying practice to formation work.

Kit and Elayne both told her endless stories about how they used to fly with their entire band. The ‘Lancers’, as they’d been known, had consisted of nine dragonriders and their dragons. They’d utilised a variety of formations for different purposes, and now that there were three dragons on Earth, Kit was insistent they begin to learn and practice some of them.

Each formation had a different purpose, and even though there weren’t any armies for them to go up against, it still felt good to be learning something. The most often used one was a simple V, like a flock of geese. The V formation was their primary means of travel, and allowed Kit to lead them while Elayne and Harriet protected the flanks. Kit described instances of the V being used to break through enemy ranks, with each successive dragon breaking the hole wider and wider.

Some of the other formations included the staggered step, where the dragons would fly wingtip to wingtip, but with several dozen meters in height difference. This allowed them to have a wide view of the sky, with the highest person in the formation responsible for watching above, the lowest person for watching below, and the rider in the middle – Elayne, usually – responsibly for everything in between. A similar one was the ‘column’, where there was still the disparity in altitude, but rather than riding wingtip-to-wingtip, they rode one on top of the other. Kid said this one was a trade off: if offered more protection from forces shooting from the ground, but at the expense of visibility of the rest of your band. Plus, it was a greater risk to the lowermost rider, because their dragon would be the only target on offer, and so the only one the enemy would aim at.
Harriet tried to take their training seriously, but it was hard sometimes. Kit was drilling her to make her a soldier after himself, but the world had moved on. Unless they enlisted and were shipped off to the Middle East, there were not too many armies they’d be up against, and certainly not any that could field dragonriders of their own, which was one of the main enemies they trained to fight.

It had boggled her mind that most of Kit and Elayne’s wars had consisted of different warlords and the dragonriders they’d hired going up against each other. It seemed criminal that dragons should be forced to fight for human greed, and it seemed even more incomprehensible that the riders would have actually agreed to it.

The way Kit told it, though, they hadn’t had a choice. Food was scarce, and dragons ate a lot. In order to pay for it, they’d had to earn money, and the only practical use dragons had – besides beasts of burden, which even then they were ill suited for – was as fighters. In a land where mercenary companies were the norm, and might made right, the dragons had found their niche and worked hard for every bite they could get.

Listening to him describe it, Harriet had shuddered. Thank the gods we’re past that stage, she thought. Then, thinking of some of the wartorn places on Earth, she was forced to re-evaluate. Just because Australia has been experiencing relative peace and prosperity, doesn’t mean the rest of the planet has. Maybe our two worlds aren’t so different after all.

In only one area was Harriet’s training incomplete. Throughout the day she learned to fight, and through the night she learned to fly. The obvious endpoint of all of this was learning to fight while flying, but Kit had deferred the matter every time she brought it up. In Harriet’s mind, it only made sense to combine it all together, for if she ever fought for real, it would likely be from Cloud’s back. If the Nightmen came after her now, with Cloud being able to fly properly they would need helicopters or planes, so an aerial battle was the most likely outcome. But … Kit was insistent, saying that there was no point rushing ahead of themselves, and that it was best to master them individually first before mixing them up. Still Harriet had argued, but when Elayne weighed in on the matter, taking Kit’s side, Harriet was forced to hold her tongue and be patient.

It wasn’t until after the second month of training had finished, when Kit had just witnessed Cloud and Harriet execute a perfect session of formation flying without once breaking ranks, that he decided they were ready to begin the following day.

Kit delivered the news as they were finishing off dinner. As usual, they were eating the meal well after midnight, preparing themselves for the night of riding ahead.
After two months of waiting in anticipation, Harriet had no need to ask what he was referring to when he simply said, “You’re ready”. Her excitement must have carried through the bond, because Cloud eagerly snaked a head down the stairwell to check up on her.

Harriet gave a yelp of delight, and ran upstairs to saddle her dragon.

By the time they were ready, Kit was waiting for them high up above the clouds. This high up, the moon was extra bright, and the pair had more than enough light to see by. As usual Nighteyes was saddleless, and Kit was holding on by nothing more than the strength of his muscles.

“Hover there,” he shouted the order to Cloud, and the dragon obeyed without having to confirm it with Harriet. By now she’d learnt that there was a definite hierarchy, and that whatever order Kit gave would just be repeated by Harriet a moment later.

Nighteyes winged in close to them, and when the smaller dragon was hovering slightly above them, Kit threw a leg of the black’s back and jumped off.

Harriet’s eyes widened, but she had no time for worry. A moment later, his booted feet landed softly on Cloud’s back, and in a few quick strides he had slid down to sit behind Harriet’s borrowed saddle.

“What the hell are you doing?” Harriet was flabbergasted. She’d witnessed Kit riding for the last two months without harness or straps, but leaping from the back of one dragon to another seemed to be tempting fate just a little too much.

“Best way to show you what you need to know is from up close,” Kit explained, talking into her ear. While they spoke, Nighteyes disappeared into the night.

“Wouldn’t this have been safer to demonstrate on the ground?” Harriet asked, worried for the man, and also worried for Cloud, who was definitely struggling to hover midair with so much weight on her back.

“Safer?” Kit threw back his head and laughed. “I’m teaching you how to ride a dragon into battle. If you wanted safe, you’ve chosen the wrong skill to learn.”

Harriet wasn’t appeased, but she could see he had a point.

“The most vulnerable part of a dragon is the back of its neck,” he gestured needlessly with his hands at the two meter wide expanse between the base of Cloud’s skull and the horn of Harriet’s saddle. “It’s the only place besides the wings that aren’t heavily scaled, and it’s the only place where an arrow can do some serious damage. So your job as a rider is to protect it. Your dragon will concentrate on what’s ahead of you, and you’ll both obviously know what’s below. But it’s your job to check the skies above and behind. Look out for enemies trying to sneak up on you.”
“And what if they are?”

“Deal with them.” Kit patted the quiver strapped to the saddle in front of her knee, and Harriet took his meaning. “Nothing in battle is more important than keeping your dragon safe. You do whatever is needed to ensure Cloud stays alive, and trust that she’ll be doing the same thing for you.”

Harriet had no doubt about that. Cloud and she loved each other, and neither would let the other come to harm.

“Until Cloud gets old enough to flame, I wouldn’t recommend willingly going into battle, and even then, I’d make sure you believed in the cause to your very bones before you arm up.” Kit’s voice lost its usual lightheartedness. “Battles are not fun. I know the movies and the television make them seem like some glorious adventure … but they’re not. People get hurt, and they die, and they’re usually the ones who deserve it the least.”

Harriet got the feeling he was talking from bitter experience, and she let the matter rest. After a long pause, Kit continued as before.

“The next big weak spot on any dragon is their wings. Like the back of the neck, they’re not scaled, and an arrow will go straight through that membrane.”

Harriet eyed Cloud’s wings nervously. She’d never really thought about it before, but now that she was looking straight at them, the membranes that made up her wings did seem to be very translucent. Like a skin of leather stretched across a frame.

“If she gets shot in the wing, it’ll hurt a little,” Kit explained. “Just like stepping on a piece of broken glass would hurt you. But if she gets enough tears in the membrane, it will bring her down. Think of it like the sails on a ship: too many rents and the wind will pass right through.”

“So how do you stop that from happening,” Harriet asked worriedly.

“You get the hell out of there,” Kit smiled, and pulled a leather belt from inside his jacket. Scooting closer, he fitted his body against the back of Harriet’s saddle, so that his chest was snug against her back, and his legs hooked around in front of Cloud’s wings. Looping the belt around them both, he cinched it tight.

“What are you doing?” Harriet asked.

“Evasive flying is best learnt with a guide. We don’t have a saddle big enough for two, and I’m not bonded to Cloud, so I can’t anticipate her moves like I can with Nighteyes. Hence the belt. Now, Nighteyes is going to come at us from different angles, and Cloud has to get herself out of immediate danger. Get her flying whenever your both ready, and I’ll warn you the first few times Nighteyes approaches.”
Cloud carried the two of them across Sydney and out over the water. Only when land was completely out of sight did they begin.

“Left shoulder high,” Kit warned, and Harriet whipped her head around to look. Sure enough, Nighteyes was clumsily coming towards them, flapping slowly to make himself obvious.

“Dive,” Harriet instructed, and Cloud plummeted towards the sea.

“No good,” Kit had wrapped an arm around her to keep from being thrown. “All you’ve done is lowered the fight. An attacking dragon can just follow you down, and if you get too low, then you run the risk of exposing yourself to attackers from the ground.”

“So how do you escape?”

“By twisting the body. If an attacker comes at you from above, then their two best targets are the back of the neck, and the wings. Have your dragon twist her body, so the wings are no longer broadside, and at the same time, you’ll be removing the neck from danger.”

The three of them increased their altitude once more, and when he felt she was ready, Kit tried the exercise again.

“Left shoulder high.”

Harriet imagined her father opening a bottle of wine with the old corkscrew her mother had loved. He had a way of doing it that had fascinated her. Rather than spinning the screw, he would spin the bottle, and pop the cork out that way. Harriet pictured it now, focusing on the tight spiral of the screw and the spinning motion.

Without being spoken to, Cloud wrapped her wings around her body. Like a helicopter whose rotors had stalled, she plummeted, but this time, rather than go with the fall, she twisted her body and snapped her wings open again.

In the space of a few seconds, she’d put a hundred meters between them and Nighteyes, and her wings were now angled downward. Not only were they not presenting a target for the enemy, but the back of her neck was well out of harm’s way.

“Good,” Kit offered the carrot before he showed the lash. “But not good enough, Not for a battle. You need to be faster on the reaction, and Cloud needs to be able to do that while losing only half the altitude. Like I said, if you get too low, then you leave yourself open to whatever threats are waiting on the ground. One arrow … or one bullet … is all it takes to down you.”

For the rest of the night, they drilled. When Cloud became too tired to support both of their weight, Kit returned to Nighteyes. His departure was no more ceremonious than his arrival. Unclipping a leather bag from the side of her saddle, he slung it over his shoulder before unclipping
the belt that bound them. Without comment, Kit stepped off the blue’s back and plummeted down
to the ground, only to appear a moment later beside them, astride Nighteyes and with his bag open in
his lap.

Before he’d left, he’d explained the next activity would be an extension of the first. Nighteyes
would still be ‘attacking’ them, but this time Harriet wouldn’t have Kit to call out warnings, and this
time Kit would be throwing projectiles at her. The bag was full of little linen wraps, stuffed full of
brightly coloured powdered chalk, and would act as substitute arrows or bullets. To demonstrate their
effectiveness – and perhaps his own accuracy – Kit threw the first one at Harriet, catching her in the
shoulder.

The bundle burst easily, and a chalk stain was left on her jacket the size of her palm. Swearing
at her treasured jacket getting dirty – even with something that would just brush off – Harriet mentally
ordered Cloud forward, and the chase began.

Kit did not hold back, and over the next two hours, both Harriet and Cloud received their fair
share of shots. Harriet was glad he didn’t go easy on them: an enemy surely wouldn’t, and at least this
way the two of them understood exactly just how much they would need to practice. If I ever hope to
survive, then I need to be much better than I am. The thought was punctuated by yet another hit with a ball
they hadn’t avoided in time: this one aimed squarely at the back of her head.

She didn’t know what eventually caused Kit to end the session. Maybe he was out of ‘bullets’,
or maybe he was worried about the sun rising soon. Or maybe he just decided to take pity on us. Whatever
the reason, she would have been hard pressed to figure out who was more relieved: her or Cloud.
Wearily, they followed Kit back to the apartment, and it was only once they’d landed and were bathed
in the soft fluorescent lights that they truly saw how badly they’d fared.

They each been hit at least a dozen times, and as well as the shots that landed on Cloud’s wings
and neck, there were more that had missed and hit her back and tail.

Nighteyes’ wingtips barely cleared the flaps, and his claws didn’t even touch the ground as he
dropped Kit off. Leaping down to the carpet, Kit tuned and gave his dragon a final pat of thanks
before it flew away into the night, presumably to hunt and then join Elayne’s blue in whatever retreat
they’d chosen.

Cloud and Harriet had no such luck.

There was a bag of sand waiting for them, as well as a pair of work gloves, meaning Elayne
had already anticipated their need, and had left them out before she went to bed.
The sand was for Cloud. Back in the Dragonlands, the dragons had relished being able to lounge around on a beach, scraping their scales clean and polishing them to a high shine by wriggling around in the hot sand. Failing being able to do that, it fell to the riders to complete the job for them. And that involved hours upon hours of carefully sprinkling handfuls of sand over their scales, and rubbing it in with their fingers.

Harriet sighed. She was too tired to do this, but the hope in Cloud’s eyes made her feel guilty about even thinking of shirking her duty.

“You did well tonight,” there was respect in Kit’s voice. “But you’ll need to do better next time. Take care of your dragon.” He looked out the window, at the horizon which was beginning to turn grey. “She’ll have to stay inside for the day: by the time you’ve finished she’ll have missed the opportunity to leave.”

Flicking the switch mounted on the wall, Kit closed the flaps in the ceiling. He didn’t even look back as he walked downstairs, stripping off his jacket as he left.

Harriet looked Cloud over and sighed.

The dragon had grown bigger, yes, but that meant that when she got dirty, there was much more of her to clean. It also didn’t help that Cloud loved the sanding process so much that she’d squirm and wriggle, prolonging the process for her own enjoyment.

Allowing herself one more sigh, Harriet pulled her work gloves on before dipping a hand into the bag of sand.
CHAPTER 21

Sanding Cloud’s scales took much longer than she’d anticipated, and after that Harriet still had to clean and oil the saddle. It wasn’t until the dawn sunlight was streaming through the bay windows that she was finally allowed to fall exhaustedly into her bed.

When she woke up sometime around noon, a half-hour long shower was needed just to clear the fog from her brain, and when she sat down to have some cereal, she could have hugged Elayne when the older woman brought her a large cup of coffee. Despite working on a rough-and-tumble farm, Harriet had never developed a taste for the drink before she’d started riding … but then again, she’d never had such an absurd sleeping pattern before either.

As Harriet ate, Elayne read a book silently on the couch, while next to her Kit absentmindedly flicked through a slew of TV channels. Despite owning a huge flat-screen, Harriet had only seen Kit and Elayne actually watch TV a scant dozen times in the two months she’d been there, and the fact that they’d chosen to today was enough for her to glance over in interest. The channels whizzed by at a lightning rate, and when Harriet saw something that caught her attention, it took her brain several seconds to catch up with her eyes.

“Wait,” Harriet dropped her spoon into the bowl. “Go back to the last one.”

Kit glanced across at her, but he did flick back a channel, leaving it on the news.

“Turn it up.”

Again, Kit obliged, and Harriet caught the story.
“… predict that over the course of the next twenty-four hours, the fires will spread to cover over fifty percent of the region. West of the Grampians, thirty homes have been lost so far in the Brimpean and Wartook communities, and this number is expected to rise. With the prevailing winds, it is only a matter of time before the remainder of the Grampians are engulfed, and residents of Halls Gap are strongly recommended to evacuate. For those worried about loved ones in the region, the government hotline can be reached on 1800 824 462.”

The shocking words were punctuated by graphic images of homes reduced to smouldering ruins, and a helicopter shot of a forest on fire. The story cut back to the newswoman, who shuffled her papers and continued.

“These recent fires – only a small fraction from what has become Victoria’s worst ever bushfire season – have sparked new debate about the privatisation of Victorian’s bushfire aviation services, and the decision not to bring the so-called ‘Elvis’ super-tanker back from deployment in America. Here’s what Liam Corsair, member of the Australian Labour Party and MP for Ripon, has to say about it.”

The image cut to a man in dirtied work clothes. There were several microphones and recorders being thrust towards him, and it was obvious he had been interrupted while working on a firebreak.

“It’s an absolute disgrace. The moment the government realised Elvis wasn’t available this season, alternatives should have been found. We’ve had six consecutive days of 40-plus heat, and as far as I’m concerned, these bushfires were not a matter of ‘if’, but ‘when’. Premier Tell assured us that the six water-helicopters would be enough to cover the entire state this season, but that is laughable. Even with six of them spread out, the orange-and-blacks only have a capacity of 3,100 litres. Nowhere near the 9,500L capacity Elvis has. It was a gross oversight, and one that is costing the homes and livelihoods of hundreds of families. Once again, I urge people in the Eastern Grampians region to evacuate. 41,000 hectares of forest are already on fire. Your homes might be lost, but they can be rebuilt. Your family can’t. I fear though, that for many in the southern and western regions, the decision has already been taken out of their hands. Our thoughts and prayers are with them, and I hope that the casualty rates do not rise as high as the lost property rates. One woman has already lost her life, and I pray that no more are claimed by this completely-expected disaster.”

The clip ended there, and after the newswoman promised that Channel Seven would be keeping updates of the fire going thought the evening – and repeating the number of the hotline – they moved onto the next story, a feel-good piece about a rescue dog that none of the dragonriders were particularly interested in. Without being asked, Kit shut off the television.
“We have to do something,” Harriet spoke into the silence.

“What?” Elayne was surprised.

“What do you expect us to do?” Kit was equally sceptical.

“Are you kidding?” the answer was obvious to Harriet. “There are people there trapped by the fires and cut off from escape, and they don’t have the helicopters needed to evacuate them, or to stop the blaze from spreading.”

“And…”

“And we have three huge flying dragons who could get them out, and who – by the way – have scales so thick that they don’t have to fear the flames. Two of them are even firebreathers! Well … one and a half…”

“Not a chance!” Kit was shocked, and looking at Harriet strangely. “You’re talking about exposing us to the world. The Nightmen are already after us, but at least they try to keep themselves secret too. You want us to make ourselves public? We’d be locked up in a laboratory before the week was out, and they’d be cutting bits and pieces off of our dragons to study their genetics.”

Harriet opened her mouth … and shut it again.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’ve seen what your world is capable of. You know that I’m correct.”

Harriet knew no such thing, and she wasn’t willing to admit defeat just yet. “What if –”

“Enough!” Kit shouted. “We’re done! I’m sorry about what’s happening. I am, truly. And if this was Brock or the Dragonlands, we’d be the first ones there to help. But it’s not. And I’m sorry, but I value Nighteyes over any number of humans. Ten times out of ten, I’ll choose his safety. And as the news itself said, these fires weren’t exactly a surprise. They happen every year. If the government was underprepared, then it’s sad, but it’s not our fault.”

Harriet knew then that Kit would never change his mind. He’d been on the run for too long to ever willing risk exposure. She tried a different approach, and appealed to Elayne.

She needn’t have bothered.

Elayne’s response was no different to Kit’s. In all things relating to dragons, she deferred to him. Torven might have been the captain of their old band, but Kit was definitely the captain of their one here on Earth. This time though, she didn’t even get a chance to voice her opinion. She’d only said five words before Kit cut her off.

“No.” Kit shut Harriet down again straight away. “It’s too great a risk, and I’m not going to repeat myself. Now leave us.” He dismissed her like he’d never done before. “Go upstairs, and clean
the saddle. You didn’t get all the water and chalk dust off it last night, and I don’t want my saddle to rust because of your negligence.”

“Kit…”

“Go!”

Harriet stormed off, but her mind was a whirl of emotion.

Her thoughts swirled from one idea to the next, but they kept coming back to the memory of Doreen; the old woman who had given her a lift when she was on the run in the Grampians, and who had even put her up for the night and fed her. Doreen had no one in the world to help her: her husband had died years ago, and her son and grandchildren lived on the other side of the country. She was kind enough to help out a girl who could offer nothing in return, and now Doreen would probably die, all because there was no one willing to risk themselves.

There were real people in danger – one woman had already died – and Harriet had the means at her disposal to help them. Being a dragonrider was all well and good, but what was the point of it if she constantly had to live in fear. She could never begrudge Cloud for entering her life, but her father hadn’t raised a coward, and he certainly hadn’t raised someone who could sit back on the sidelines while others were in trouble.

*If a person has the ability to help, then they also have the responsibility to help.*

As soon as she realised that, the next step was simple.

She knew exactly what she had to do.

Harriet was smart.

She didn’t run away that night: that would have been the obvious move.

Instead, she waited until the following day, and walked right out from under their noses. Cloud had ‘chosen’ to spend the day outside with the other dragons, and Harriet simply went out for a walk and a shop like she usually did.

“Off to Coles,” she called out, opening the top drawer of the kitchen counter and taking some money. Kit and Elayne had no fear of being stolen from, so they had no security or precautions around
their cash. The top drawer was filled with tens of thousands of dollars, all in crisp bundled notes. They trusted Harriet to take what she needed and return the rest, just like they themselves did.

Harriet felt slightly guilty about stealing from them. It didn’t matter that the amount she was taking was negligible in the grand scheme of their wealth; one dollar or one million: theft was theft, and a betrayal of trust.

But, desperate times…

She tried to justify it in her head: it’s not like she was going out and buying an Xbox. The money would be used for supplies for her and Cloud – exactly what it was intended for.

Still, it felt wrong.

Neither Kit nor Elayne bat an eyelid when she made the announcement, and it was almost laughably easy to slip a stack of hundreds into her pocket rather than just the usual one she took. In a way the fact that neither of them suspected her made it even worse.

As promised, she did stop by the shops, but it wasn’t for dinner supplies. At the supermarket she purchased some jerky and some muesli bars: enough to tide her over for a couple of days if she lowered her standards and rationed them carefully. Next she stopped by the camping store, where she purchased a new backpack and a compass. After carefully considering her options, she also added a new compact sleeping bag and a picnic blanket.

She’d done her research carefully: it was 882km to Halls Gap, as the crow flew, and as long as she kept them on a bearing of 240° west-southwest, then she’d make it there safely. She’d need more than just a compass, though, so her final stop was to Bunnings, where she picked up some waterproof garbage bags, a small hatchet, and two 30m ropes.

Finally, when her bag was full, and she couldn’t think of anything else she needed, she caught the bus west to Bondi beach.

It was the first time she’d visited the area during the day, and her initial impression was one of complete and utter hatred. At night, when it was just her and her dragon, the beach was a place of serenity and laughter. Now it was just a bustling madhouse, with thousands of people crowding its shore and lifeguards spaced out every fifty meters or so. Thankfully she did not have to try and navigate the beach itself, but instead set a course for the southern side, and the high cliffs located there.

The cliffs were not easy to climb, but she’d anticipated as much. After all: this wasn’t her first trip here. Last time though, she’d had Cloud to help her, and she much preferred it that way.
When she finally crested the top, it took her a little while to find the package she’d dropped off the night before, but it was there, completely untouched and none the worse for wear for the rough treatment. Ripping open the extra-thick plastic bag around it, Harriet withdrew her sword, complete with sturdy belt and leather sheath.

It had been a hard decision – and an even harder task to drop it off here without Kit noticing – but she’d decided that if she was going to risk exposure, then when the Nightmen found her, she didn’t want to face them empty handed. She wasn’t a fool: she knew they had guns and the best strategy was to just not be near them, but … it was called ‘worst-case-scenario’ for a reason.

After satisfying herself that the sheath and belt were in good order, she drew the blade and gave it a few practice swings. Knowing she couldn’t walk around Sydney with it, she used the picnic rug to wrap it up again, and tied it onto the side of her pack. It made the bundle awkward, but at least it wouldn’t get her arrested.

It was much easier getting back down the cliffs, and in no time at all she’d returned to the bus depot and had boarded a northbound coach. In all honesty, she would have been just as happy going south, but the northbound one was the first to arrive. Staring vacantly from the window, she travelled across the Harbour Bridge for only the second time in her life, and watched anti-climactically as the city fell away, and they progressed through the northern suburbs, and beyond towards the next town.

Town after town passed them, and as the bus headed further north, the towns grew more and more infrequent. Harriet waited over an hour before she made her move. The driver looked at her strangely when she asked to get let off, staring at the empty paddocks and seaside cliffs in confusion, but he did stop the bus all the same.

She knew that Cloud had been following her. Riding her every day had increased the strength of their bond, and with Cloud’s increased size, the distance over which they could mentally communicate was also much greater than ever before. All morning, Harriet had been able to sense her dragon high above her: so far up in the sky that even on the cloudless day, none would ever suspect that there was one third of the world’s total dragon population staring down at them.

She’d left the bus by the side of a coastal road: farmlands dominated the area inland, and high coastal cliffs fell away on the other side of the road. Climbing from the top of the cliffs down to the ocean was challenging, especially encumbered as she was by her bulky burden.

She collected several cuts and scrapes along the way – thankfully the worst of them were shielded by her dragonscale jacket, which was every bit as tough as Cloud’s hide – but eventually she
made it down to the narrow strip of sand at the bottom. The water got very deep, very fast in this area, which suited her just fine.

She called Cloud to her, but not like she usually did. Instead of picturing the two of them together, she pictured a movie she’d seen once, where the action hero had leapt off a burning boat, then swum underwater for a long time to avoid his enemy’s bullets. Harriet focused particularly on the underwater swimming part, and once she’d blocked out all other thoughts for a good minute, she opened her eyes again.

And waited.

She wasn’t sure if the flash of light across the horizon was Cloud, but she’d hoped her dragon had got the message. Her curiosity was sated three long minutes later when Cloud’s head curiously poked itself out of the water in front of her.

“Good girl,” Harriet leapt back to her feet, and praised her dragon both through the bond and aloud. Even though their beach had a cliff shielding them – and was well away from the nearest house – the risk of someone seeing Cloud landing was still present. Their journey would be fraught with dangers later on, so she hadn’t wanted to tempt fate so early by having a normal take off. Hence the underwater approach. No one would be able to see her out at sea, and the dragon’s lunges were naturally bigger, meaning she could hold her breath for longer. *Plus, those wings are the best flippers a fish could ask for!*

Harriet glanced up at the cliff tops one last time before deciding the coast was clear. Leading Cloud with her hand, Harriet guided her up the beach and back against the cliff. If anyone was looking down from directly above, they might be able to see a bit of her back and tail, but otherwise a casual glimpse would reveal nothing suss.

As well as her sword, the other bit of key equipment that she’d needed was her saddle. Unfortunately though, there was just no way she could have snuck that one out.

Hence the ropes.

Four months ago, Harriet would have had no idea what knots to use, but then, four months ago she’d hadn’t had two very knowledgeable – and very demanding – teachers working with her both day and night. With practiced fingers, she used the two ropes to fashion a makeshift saddle, looping them under Cloud’s legs and chest, and creating an area at the base of her neck where Harriet could tie herself on. It wouldn’t be comfortable – or even particularly pleasant – but it would hopefully be enough to stop her from falling to her death.
Just like she’d done with the buckles on the night of the first flight, Harriet went over the knots on the rope saddle over and over, and she didn’t fully alleviate her angst until the fifth check. Then, just because she wanted to delay the inevitable for a little longer, she conducted a sixth work-over.

Finally, it was time to make her move.

“Cloud,” Harriet said, and the dragon stopped sniffing at the ropes for a second. “Look at me!” She waited until Cloud’s blue eyes were fixed on her own before she continued. “This is very important, so you need to make sure you understand.” She had long since lost any reservation about speaking to her dragon as if she were another person. Cloud might not have been able to form words of her own, but she understood exactly what Harriet was saying. “We’re going to go out the same way you came in, but my lungs aren’t as big as yours. That means you need to move as fast as you can, and when I start tapping you on the neck, you need to get us to the surface quickly. And don’t just bob in the water, as soon as you get your bearings, take off and get us high enough to not be seen. Do you understand?”

Cloud didn’t make a move, but the bond was flooded with warmth, so Harriet took it as a good sign. Making her final preparations, she pulled the roll of garbage bags from her back. Wrapping up her sword, money, compass, and sleeping bag in double layers of plastic, she tied them all back together. The waterproofing made the bag even more awkward, but she’d rather an hour of awkwardness than the hassle cleaning the rust off her sword would cause.

Thinking about what was to come, Harriet opened another waterproof bag. She stripped off her jacket, shirt, and singlet, and added them to her bundle, then strapped it to her back, shivering as the cold wind hit her bare skin.

Climbing up onto Cloud’s back, she slid her knees under the nylon straps, and wrapped her hands and wrists a few times though the makeshift handholds.

You can do this…

Taking a deep breath, Harriet slapped Cloud lightly on the shoulder, and their journey began.
PART FOUR
Harriet held on.

If she’d ever thought their flight to the Grampians would be easy or pleasant, that thought was dispelled in those first thirty seconds.

Cloud swam fast, but she swam deep, which meant not only was Harriet freezing cold, but she was in pitch darkness, and was completely disoriented by the time she tapped frantically on the back of Cloud’s neck.

They broke through the surface again, and the sunlight was as big an assault as the wind.

The shivering started immediately, and by the time they were high enough to not be seen from the ground, it had turned to bone-rattling shakes, with her teeth clattering so loudly she wondered if Cloud could hear them.

Cloud stopped in the air, hovering so Harriet could take care of herself. Even like this, the wind still buffeted her damp skin, raising goosebumps. With numb fingers, she tried to work the knots on the backpack, but her body couldn’t handle the fine movements, and she was forced to use her little knife to cut them open.

The singlet, shirt, and dragonscale jacket were gloriously warm when she pulled them on, but as the wind continued to buffet her soaked jeans, she’d knew she’d made a mistake not taking those off as well. Making do with what she had, Harriet wrapped the picnic blanket around her like a cocoon. It wasn’t ideal, but the waterproofed underside of the blanked did act as an effective windbreak.

Alright girl, let’s get going. But we’re not off to an auspicious start, are we?
If Harriet’s journey had already been rough, then Cloud’s nightmare was only just beginning. It was 882km to Halls Gap, and Harriet glanced down at her watch before she began to do some calculations.

It was 4:20pm now. The sun was scheduled to set at 8:30pm, and would rise again tomorrow at 7:00. She wanted to be in the Grampians by dawn, to help people out before the emergency service helicopters got there. She knew she was running the risk of exposure as it was, but she didn’t feel the need to push her luck.

That gave her just under 15 hours.

_Eight-eighty-two by fifteen. That makes … fifty-nine kilometres per hour._ She did the division in her head. _But that’s no good. There’s no way Cloud can fly for that long._ It wasn’t the speed Harriet was worried about, but the duration. Cloud’s longest flight so far has only been four hours. _And even if she could make the distance in one hit, there’s no point arriving in the morning too tired to help._

Harriet worked out a new schedule. They’d have to do a long flight initially, because there was no way they could land until the sun went down. That meant a solid five hours of flying to start. Then she’d give Cloud an hour’s break. Then two hours of flying, starting at 10:00. Another hour’s break at 12:00. Three more hours flying at 1:00. And at 4:00 she’d give Cloud a massive three hour break, resting until the sun rose. They could do a final hour of flying in the dawn light. It would get her there a little later than she’d planned, but late was better than never, and she was loathe to push Cloud too much.

_And that gives us … eleven hours of flying. Eight-eighty-two by eleven is … eighty kilometres per hour._

It was a brisk pace, but she knew Cloud was capable of it. The top speeds they’d reached while flying with Kit had been up in the 170-190kph range, and while they’d only been able to keep those up for a matter of seconds while coming out of a dive, eighty kilometres should be a manageable speed.

_Hopefully…_

Cloud handled the first leg admirably. There was not a hint of tiredness through the bond, and when they stopped, Harriet could sense how eager Cloud was to just keep going. The biggest issue that faced in that first stretch was Harriet’s picnic blanket wrapping, and how cumbersome it was proving during flight. When they stopped, Harriet spread it out on the damp grass, and wrapped her body instead in her new sleeping bag. Anything to try and get some warmth back into her.
Sensing her plight, Cloud wrapped her own body around Harriet’s, covering them up with her wings. Harriet could have cried with gratitude, but instead she buried her body in deeper, snuggling up under one of Cloud’s forelegs, and taking comfort in the slow rise and fall of the dragon’s chest.

The second leg went better.

This time, Harriet planned ahead, and before they took off, she made a cocoon out of her sleeping bag, coving the top half of her body, and wrapping it up and over her head. It left her legs exposed, and the bag flapped horribly in the wind, but by the time they landed at midnight, Harriet was starting to feel human again.

Their second hour-long break saw them back in their curled-up positions, but Harriet had a much different experience than before. Cloud was getting tired, so she didn’t wriggle around as much. Plus, that last windy leg had served a purpose: her jeans were now dry, and between them and her dragonscale jacket, Harriet no longer felt cold.

When her watch ticked over to 1:00am, neither of them wanted to get up, especially since they were looking down the barrel of a three hour flight.

Cloud’s take off was sloppy, and it was a sign of Harriet’s own exhaustion that she actually flooded the bond with disapproval, shaming her dragon right when she should have been encouraging her the most.

I’m sorry girl, Harriet apologised, but the damage had already been done. Even though Cloud sent back forgiveness, Harriet sensed that there was still some residual anger, and vowed that when this was all over, she’d give her dragon the best sanding of her life.

That leg was the hardest. The moon provided barely enough light to make out the numbers on the compass, and Harriet spent half the time squinting down at it so she could direct Cloud back on course. As they kept their 240° west-southwest bearing, they passed over small towns and settlements, their twinkling lights a slap in the face to Harriet. Most people were rugged up indoors, fast asleep; not bone-tired and out in the freezing wind on top of a giant reptile.

They didn’t make it to 4:00. At 3:30 Harriet called a halt. She had no idea if they’d been keeping up their 80kph goal for that last leg, but it had felt like they’d slowed down, and there seemed little point in continuing at a snail’s pace. They’d just have to make it up after sunrise.

For now, they both needed sleep.

Cloud’s touchdown in a random paddock was not gentle, but this time Harriet knew better than to send her anything but positive reinforcement. The two of them didn’t walk or try to find a
comfy spot, but instead just laid down right where they were. Harriet rested her head on Cloud’s foreleg, and she was asleep almost immediately.

When 7:00am rolled by and the sun started to peek above the horizon, Harriet was still dead to the world. Luckily Cloud wasn’t, or they might have been caught out there by some unlucky farmer checking on his livestock.

The first thing Harriet knew was the whole world vibrating. It started off gently at first, but increased in strength until it felt like her body was lying on top of an idling bus.

Her eyes snapped open.

The vibrations were coming from where her body was pressed against Cloud’s. With a start she realised her dragon was humming.

“What’s that?” she asked, sitting up. As soon as Cloud knew she was awake, the humming stopped, and her long neck snaked around so the two could look each other in the face. Amusement and love flooded the bond, and Harriet knew she’d been forgiven for her earlier criticism.

“Was that my alarm clock? We’ll have to patent that! We’ll make a fortune,” Harriet smiled as she stood and stretched her legs. She ate a couple of muesli bars, and cut open a bag of raw steaks for Cloud. She would have loved to have stayed there resting for longer, but after they’d both finished their breakfast, she forced herself up and into the rope saddle.

Almost as soon as they’d taken off, Harriet realised she wouldn’t need her compass anymore. The Grampians were visible, even from a hundred kilometres out.

It was pretty hard to miss the black smoke clouds that stretched across the entire horizon.
The world was on fire.

Harriet and Cloud passed over Halls Gap without breaking pace. The town was on the eastern outskirts of the Grampians, and at the moment was in no danger. The same couldn’t be said about the forest beyond. They flew over a huge lake and dam in the south before turning west.

Towards the fire.

Even though they were safe in the air, Harriet worried about how Cloud might fare over the coming hours. They were both already tired and exhausted, and while Harriet might be feeling a renewed sense of energy, she wasn’t the one who had just flapped her wings for almost nine hundred kilometres.

The fire spread across the whole horizon, and as Harriet flew towards it, her gaze was caught by something moving on the ground. Leaning over Cloud’s neck, she squinted her eyes, making out the forms of two cars speeding along a dirt road, making a break for the highway and freedom.

“Good luck to you,” Harriet wished them well. A few minutes later, though, she was stopped again.

The dirt road was blocked.

The fire had snaked forward, and a finger of it had jumped the road to the forest beyond. The road itself was covered with small branches and leaves: not big enough to prove a serious threat to life, but certainly enough of a blaze to prevent the two cars from being able to pass through.
“They have no idea what’s ahead…” Harriet whispered the realisation aloud. *We have to get that road cleared. If they can get to the highway, then it’s a straight run to safety.*

They started their search, flying over the nearby houses and cafes, searching for anything that would give them inspiration. They kept coming up empty, and Harriet was beginning to seriously worry about the fate of the people in those cars. She’d almost given up looking when she finally saw the answer.

One of the houses below them had a children’s pool in the front yard. It was the size of a half-height Jacuzzi, and the few leaves floating on the surface told her it was almost full.

“There,” Harriet pictured the pool in her mind’s eye, and then imagined picking it up like a glass of water. Getting the message, Cloud swooped down on it, and grabbed it with all four claws. She tried to take off again, but was stopped short: the pool was anchored to the ground by thick cords, to stop it blowing over in high winds.

Drawing her sword, Harriet leant down over Cloud’s neck and sliced the ropes on either side. Shifting her weight to the back, she leant over further to get the third and final rope, and Cloud could finally try to fly.

The best way Harriet could think to describe it was like a car that had suddenly been hooked up to a heavy campervan. It still went forwards and backwards, and if you had enough room then you could turn left and right too, but every movement was sluggish, and it took you five times as long to adjust anything or get anywhere.

With great difficulty, the two of them managed to get the pool back to the blocked off road. From her height, Harriet could see the cars still speeding towards them; still completely oblivious to the danger ahead.

“Lower,” she shouted, and Cloud killed off some of her hard-won altitude. Carefully, Harriet guided Cloud until she was directly over the target area.

“Front claws,” she screamed, and Cloud let go. The pool tilted wildly, and the water rushed out.

Splashing down onto the dirt road, it doused the flames entirely; turning the area into a muddy puddle, and preventing any more flames from flaring up.

“Rear claws,” Harriet waited until they were over the forest again before she let Cloud drop the pool. It would be just their luck to clear the road of flames, only to block it up again with a huge plastic pool.
They stayed around long enough to watch the two cars pass safely through the muddy area and swing wide onto the highway. They were flooring it in the direction of Halls Gap when Harriet finally nudged her dragon with her knees, and the two of them turned back to the front lines.

There were too many fallen trees acting as roadblocks, and too many blazes that had blocked sections off. There was no way Harriet could deal with them all individually, so instead she decided to focus on those that needed help the most. Winging it into the area directly in front of the spreading bushfires, she located a row of houses where people would be at risk. The first two she looked at were completely locked and boarded up, so she skipped them without pausing. She was just about to skip the third house too when the turning on of a light alerted her to someone still inside.

Projecting a mental instruction to Cloud, the two of them landed on the front lawn, and Harriet slid down from her perch. Incongruously, despite the urgency of the situation and the danger they were all in, Harriet rang the doorbell and waited for an answer.

After a minute, she decided she must have imagined the light. Not wanting to waste more time, she climbed back onto Cloud.

They were just about to take off when the door opened, and the owners spilled out.

It was a young couple.

“Who are you?” the man instinctively moved to put himself in front of his wife.

“Harriet,” she introduced, throwing the man with her unexpectedly normal answer.

“What do you want?”

“You need to leave. This is your last chance before the fire hits.”

“We chose to stay,” the man informed her. “We had the hoses ready, and were going to defend our property … but they never said the fire would be this big. We thought it would just be a grassfire, not the entire national park!”

“Then they lied. The fire is almost on you. If you stay here, you will die. I guarantee it. You need to leave.”

“What … on that?” he looked up at Cloud in trepidation.

“She’s my friend. I swear, she means you no danger.”

“Can you get us out of here?” the man’s voice only shook slightly.

“I can,” Harriet lowered a hand.

“Then that’s all I need to know.”
A true gentleman, he braved climbing onto the dragon first, making sure it was safe before his wife got on. Harriet pulled him up behind her, but the wife was small enough that she could sit in front without blocking off Harriet’s view.

Like a pillion motorbike passenger, the man wrapped his arms around Harriet, and while Harriet kept one hand firmly clenched to her rope saddle, she did steady the woman with an arm around the waist too.

“Up,” Harriet ordered needless, and Cloud took to the air.

Harriet pictured the dam wall they’d flown past just south of Halls Gap. The water stretched out on either side of it, and with no trees in the immediate area, the dam was the safest place she could think of.

It was a short flight. Cloud’s exhaustion seemed to have faded with the night, and the two of them were running off adrenaline and a shared sense of desperation. Landing lightly, Harriet helped the two of them down and shooed them well clear of Cloud’s wings.

“Please,” the woman pleaded up to her. “Our neighbours … they were planning on staying too.”

“Stay here,” Harriet ordered, and in the time it took her to grasp onto the rope saddle again, Cloud was airborne and speeding back to the row of houses.

The fire was even closer now, and Harriet knew they had only a few precious minutes. The house looked deserted, but she landed anyway. As she slid down and ran towards the front door, she was stopped by a strange sound: standing out in stark contrast to the booming crackle of the fire around her.

A crying baby.

There were two huge wooden doors set into the side of the house. They were on a steep angle, and obviously led down to a wine cellar or storage area in a basement. Harriet followed the sound there.

She tried the handles on one of the two huge doors, but they were locked. Pressing an ear to the wood, she confirmed that was the source of the sound before she tried to make her presence known.

“Hello?” she knocked. No response. Pounding away with her fists, she screamed until her throat hurt, but there was still no answer.

Swearing, she drew the sword from her belt, using the heavy steel knuckle-guard to pound some more.
Still no response.

The fire crackled louder, and Harriet suddenly had the horrible thought that the people inside might not even be able to hear her. *I can barely hear anything over the fire, so how could they? Especially with a screaming baby distracting them.*

Sliding the point of the sword through the narrow gap between the two doors, Harriet jimmied it upwards.

The sword met no resistance for the first three-quarters of the way, but when it was an arm’s-length from the top, it bumped up against the wooden cross-bar that acted as a lock. Pressing the blade of her sword against it, Harriet kept the blunt side facing down, and put her other arm cross-ways on the outside of the door.

With her arm as a fulcrum, Harriet wrenched the blunt-side of her sword down on her arm. There was a strong resistance, but then the wooden crosspiece popped free. Harriet heard it clatter to the ground, and she pushed the doors open.

Huddled in the darkness were three people. The mother looked at her with wide-eyed fear, an expression that was matched by the five or six year old daughter clutching her hand. The baby in her other arm, perhaps mirroring the rest of its family, began to wail even louder.

“You can’t stay here,” Harriet warned. “The fire will pass over here any minute, and your house doesn’t stand a chance.”

The woman’s eyes were locked on the sword Harriet still held. Realising how much she must look like a marauder, Harriet dropped it. Holding her hands open, she tried again, saying the fateful words that she though they only used in movies.

“I mean you no harm. I swear, I only want to get you guys to safety.” Deciding a lie was needed to help the situation, she added. “I’m with a special search-and-rescue unit with the police. It’s our job to come out here and clear the area.”

The woman stared at her mutely, unmoving. Harriet pressed the issue, wishing that she could have run into a family as proactive as that first man had been.

“Come with me,” Harriet grabbed the mother’s arm and pulled her gently. Walking together, the four of them climbed out of the basement. The mother followed meekly, but when she suddenly stopped and tried to scramble away, Harriet knew that Cloud had been spotted.

“Relax,” she gave empty platitudes, trusting her iron grip to keep the woman in place. “Cloud won’t hurt you. She’s here to get us away.”
On cue, Cloud lowered her head to the height of the little girl’s, staring into her face with her pale blue eyes and cocking her head in a way reminiscent of a puppy.

Using the new position to her advantage, Harriet let go of the woman and swung a leg over Cloud’s neck, settling into her makeshift saddle.

“Pass me the little girl,” Harriet held out a hand. The mother didn’t move, but the little girl did walk over on her own. She weighted nothing, and Harriet easily lifted her up and onto Cloud’s back, tucking her right in behind Harriet.

“Now the baby.”

Already having one of her children on board must have decided the matter, for the mother passed the baby over without question. Fearing for its safety, Harriet unzipped her dragonscale jacket and slid the baby inside, cuddling it to her chest and zipping the jacket back up. It would be safe from flames and embers in there, and the materiel breathed well enough to prevent it from suffocating.

The woman was last, and when Harriet pulled her up, she put her behind the little girl, bringing up the rear and being responsible for making sure her daughter didn’t fall off.

As Cloud leapt into the air, Harriet swore. She’d realised too late that her sword was still lying in the dirt near the basement door.

Looking down as it disappeared from view, she knew there’d never be time to go back for it.

_That sword was from Brock. Kit’s gonna kill me/_

Shoving such concerns to the back of her mind, she wrapped one arm protectively around the baby while they flew. As Cloud winged it, Harriet couldn’t help but smile at the little girl’s cry of delight. The mother might be scared out of her wits, and Harriet and Cloud might be exhausted and worried … but it was good at least someone was enjoying herself.

The first couple were still waiting on the stone wall when she touched down. Thankfully the man remembered his manners, and he helped out as she slid her new passengers down. Only when the baby had been safely handed over did she warn them all to step back.

With a flap of wings, the pair went back for their next load.
By the time Harriet dropped off the second load of survivors and returned to their neighbour’s house, the fire had already consumed the whole area.

Sending up a prayer that the third house had been empty, Harriet winged Cloud back to the areas not yet engulfed, searching for someone she could help escape.

She found her next challenge in the form of three houses. They were separated by a hundred metres each, and all three of them were at the end of a shared long gravel road, that branched out like a tree with three trunks.

About three kilometres from the highway – almost halfway between the main road and the three houses – a fallen trunk had completely blocked of the narrow road, meaning that no cars would be able to escape. Deciding it was worth investigating, Harriet winged Cloud over to the houses themselves.

The first two were deserted, and it wasn’t until she reached the third that she understood why. All three families must have decided to stay and defend themselves, and it was only now that the inferno was knocking on their doors that they decided to try evacuate. They’d joined forces, and when Cloud landed in their front yard, they were hurriedly piling themselves and their most treasured belongings into the back of a four-wheel-drive.

“It’s no use,” Harriet swung a leg over Cloud’s neck and slid sown to the ground. After her encounters with the last two groups of people, she’d decided that the conversation might be better had from the ground, rather than staring down at them from the back of a creature straight out of
legend. “The road is blocked by a fallen tree. You'll never get the car past it, and the flames are too close to stop and try chainsaw it away.”

At the sound of her voice, one of the men leaning into the boot stood and turned. His eyes focused on her for a second before drifting upwards. His mouth gaped for another long second, but then he screamed loudly, and in a distinctly un-manly fashion.

The cry drew the other people running, and as another man and three women exited the house, Harriet’s heart sank.

There were too many to save.

There was no way Cloud could carry six people. Harriet and some kids, maybe … but not six adults.

But she could handle five.

Harriet made the hard choice, and the reassurance flowing through the bond let her know Cloud agreed with her … even if it was reluctantly.

“We need to leave,” Harriet repeated. “The fire is only two hundred meters away, and in another minute this will all be gone.”

“Who the hell are you?” One of the men had moved to stand between Harriet and what was presumably his wife. “And what the hell is that?”

“She,” Harriet stressed the pronoun, “is my best friend. And she’s the one who’s going to get you out of here. The road ahead is blocked by a fallen tree, and there’s no time to cut it away,” she pointed at the car. “That’s going to do nothing except provide an oven for the fire to cook you in.”

The man blanched, and Harriet knew she could win him over with practicality.

“The dragon might look like it’ll kill you … but the fire certainly will, and I’d take a ‘maybe’ over a ‘definitely’ any day of the week. Are you coming?”

One of the men was still hesitant, but the other four nodded, and Harriet acted swiftly.

“Quickly!” Harriet used Cloud’s knee as a platform to spring onto her back. “Grab my hand!”

The youngest woman was the bravest, and the first to reach out a hand. Using the muscles in her back and thigh, Harriet pulled her up onto Cloud, and guided her to a seat at the base of the neck.

“Next!”

One of the men reached out a hand, but Harriet slapped it away. “Not you. The women!”

In short order, she had all three women seated at the base of Cloud’s neck. It would have been uncomfortable even without the ropes Harriet used to lash them firmly in place, but it was either that or let them stay here and burn.
Harriet leapt lightly down to the ground, ordering Cloud to take off.

“Wait! What about you?” One of the women was almost hysterical with grief.

“Cloud will look after you. Just hold on.”

The last part of Harriet’s words might have been lost, such was the speed of Cloud’s ascent.

“I haven’t forgotten about you,” Harriet turned on the two remaining men. “Go like this,” she held both of her hands across her chest, palms flat on the opposite shoulder, just like the dead people in old-timey photos. The men obeyed her.

“Now stand right here,” She pulled them along, away from the house. One of them she left in the middle of the lawn, and the other one she left two meters to the left.

“Don’t move. Stay exactly where you are.”

“And then what?” there was fear in the man’s voice.

Harriet smiled weakly.

“Try not to scream.”

Like an eagle swooping on a field mouse, Cloud came around for a pass at them. Opening her front claws, she snatched up the two men, and without so much as a backwards glance at Harriet, gained altitude and flew off in the direction of the reservoir.

Harriet was left there.

Alone.

Less than a hundred metres from a raging fire.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Harriet looked around the area for inspiration. The car was considered and dismissed just as quickly. If it wasn’t going to work for the homeowners, then it certainly wasn’t going to work for her. There was no way she could drive over a tree trunk that big.

But maybe I can go around it…

There was a dirtbike leaning up against the side of the garage, and Harriet ran to it. A quick tap on the fuel tank was all she needed to make sure it was ready.

Thankfully, like most country dirtbikes, it had a kick-start, and in one fluid movement Harriet had the engine running and the bike moving.

She took off with a spray of gravel, and that set the tone for the rest of her ride.

The fire had already been close when Cloud had taken off. By the time Harriet did, it was in the trees on either side of the property, meaning that as she floored it down the gravel driveway, the world around her burned.
Embers floated through the air, and the popping sounds of sap igniting were like gunshots exploding all around her.

Burning twigs and leaves floated down from the canopy above, and some of them even landed on her jacket and hair, but she dared not take a hand off the handlebars even for a second. The dragonscale jacket would protect her body, and a shake of the head dislodged the leaves, even if they did leave behind the acrid smell of burnt hair.

The ground beneath her sped along. From the air, the driveway hadn’t looked this long, but then again, things always looked different from close up. Shifting up into the fourth and final gear, Harriet milked the bike for everything it was worth, revving the little engine until it redlined.

Along she sped.

There were gradual bends in the road, but none were severe enough to warrant slowing down or changing gear, and after two very short kilometres, she knew she’d be approaching the fallen trunk across the road.

*What do I do?*

So far she’d been delaying trying to think of how to deal with the obstacle. In an uncharacteristic lack of planning, she’d only worried so far about getting the hell away from the marching wall of flames. But now the question was about to confront her head on, and sure enough, after the next bend, she could see the evergreen roadblock.

Only this time, the tree was on fire.

The flames had swept through the forest faster than her little bike, and the fallen tree now crackled and hissed with flames higher than she was.

*Teeth and tails,* she swore, trying to think of something to do but coming up completely short. A shadow appeared above her, and Harriet whooped with joy. Cloud had deposited her passengers, and had returned for her rider.

The cry fell from her lips as she realised Cloud couldn’t do anything for her: the trees were too narrow for her to be able to pick up Harriet easily, even if they hadn’t been on fire.

With that realisation, the burning roadblock ahead of her suddenly took on a much more sinister meaning.

Harriet glanced worriedly behind her, but the wall of flames and oppressive heat ruled out any options of turning back or slowing down. Forcing her hand to stay steady on the throttle, she wracked her brain as she wondered what the hell she was going to do.
Demonstrating that dragons were far from mindless mounts, Cloud flew ahead. Landing roughly, Cloud sank her front claws into the burning tree trunk, and started pulling against it.

It budged a few feet, and as the dragon kept pulling, it continued to slowly move, but there was no way it would move far enough in time: The branch was simply too big, and Harriet was coming in too fast.

She was going to crash.

Another blue shadow passed above her, and this one was so familiar and unexpected that Harriet almost dropped the bike. As it was, her sudden loss of concentration was enough to send the back wheel skidding, kicking up a plume of dirt and gravel before she was able to right herself. A second – much tamer – glance upwards revealed Kit to be up there as well, with Nighteyes’ familiar wing shape blotting out its small section of the sun.

Streaking ahead, Elayne’s blue crashed to the ground beside Cloud. The road was nowhere near wide enough to take the both of them side-by-side, and both dragons ended up with a flank pressed up against the burning trees around them. They were careful to keep their wings straight up in the air behind them, safely away from the lower flames, and Harriet prayed their scales were strong enough to take such a prolonged assault.

All thoughts of how or why Elayne had found them fled from her mind as she watched the darker blue set to work. It took the same approach as Cloud, digging it’s forelegs into the trunk, and using the strength of its hind legs to pull it, however, the much larger dragon met with more success than Cloud could have ever managed.

In three huge jerks, the burning trunk was pulled to the side of the road, and the two dragons lumbered far enough apart to allow Harriet a narrow path between them on the far side.

Grinning at her change in fortunes, Harriet sped onwards.
Harriet blew past the dragons.

There was no time for her to stop, and even if she’d wanted to, there was no safe place for her to switch over to Cloud’s back. The trees on either side of the narrow road were still aflame, and just because the dragons had scales to protect them, didn’t mean it was safe for her. No, the dirtbike would have to stay around a little longer.

A quick glimpse of Elayne’s shocked face was all Harriet was able to see as she passed the darker blue.

Despite her inability to slow down for the burning roadblock, Harriet had still slipped the bike from fourth back to third. Now with a clear run ahead of her, she clicked it back up a gear, and twisted the throttle violently. The front wheel lifted up slightly as she accelerated away, and by the time it touched back down again, the roadblock wasn’t even visible in her side mirrors.

The gravel road continued for another few kilometres, and while the forest around her was still burning, it didn’t have even half of the intensity of the blaze back closer to the three houses.

Another bend in the road, and in the distance she could see the clear crosscut of the major highway. The gravel road extended on the other side of the highway, however over there didn’t look to be the roaring flame that was on Harriet’s side.

An image floated down the bond from Cloud above. It was a serene and peaceful feeling, and one that Harriet automatically associated with a deserted beach.
Deserted beach… Deserted beach… Beach? No, we’re in a forest. Deserted… Deserted… Deserted! Empty!
No one there! Safe!

Smiling at being able to interpret Cloud’s message, Harriet didn’t slow down as she approached the highway. The trees blocked her vision down the road, but she blew across it blind, trusting Cloud’s message that there were no cars to hit her.

The wheels flew across the concrete, going blessedly silent for a few minutes before returning to the crunch of the gravel on the other side.

Harriet continued down the new road, but she did ease off the throttle a little. There had been some embers and floating ash being carried from the burning side of the highway to the safe side, and it was only a matter of time before the fire jumped the road, but for the moment all was good, and she was able to look for a place to remount Cloud.

She found the answer in a small clearing at the side of the road. A few stone circles and a table told her this was a camp ground, and it was more than wide enough for Cloud to land.

Harriet slowed the bike, leaping off it and throwing it down before it had even come to a complete stop. With no wasted movements, she ran towards Cloud. Her dragon lowered herself, and taking a leap, Harriet grabbed onto the rope saddle.

Only to fall crashing back to the ground.

Rubbing her backside, Harriet was now low enough to see that the ropes had burnt away underneath Cloud’s chest. Evidently, while Cloud had been dragging the roadblock away, the flames that hadn’t affected her scales had taken their toll on the improvised harness.

Shit.

There was no way Harriet could salvage it, and she couldn’t fly without it.

“What’s wrong?”

Harriet glanced behind her. Kit and Nighteyes had flown low to ask her about the delay in getting airborne.

“My saddle burnt away,” Harriet cried helplessly.

Kit saw to the heart of the issue straight away, and knew immediately what had to be done. With his characteristic silence, Nighteyes landed on the grass a few dozen meters away, and Kit slid down from his saddle. He immediately began to undo the saddle straps, and seeing what he intended, Harriet ran to help.

That was when the first bullet hit.
It ricocheted off Nighteyes’ scales a meter to the right of Harriet’s head. She ducked instinctively, and a blur of black suit in her periphery was all that she saw before a second bullet followed it. This one landed much closer, and this time, when it ricocheted off the hardened scales, it didn’t fly harmless down to the dirt.

It flew straight into Harriet.

The angles could have only aligned for a split-second, but the one-in-a-million shot bounced off Nighteyes, missed her own dragonscale jacket, and punched through her skin just in from her left shoulder.

Harriet screamed in pain and surprise, and Cloud echoed her outrage, charging at the closest shooter.

The bullet didn’t seem to have lodged itself in too deeply – losing much of its momentum in the rebound – and after the initial shock wore off, Harriet found the pain to be quite bearable. She appeared to still have an almost full range of movement, but before she could test this, two hands snaked around her from behind. She recognised the black dragonscale covering Kit’s arms as he bodily picked her up and threw her towards Nighteyes saddle. Pushing her up into it with no thought of social pleasantries, he manhandled her towards the saddle.

“UP!” he screamed, slapping his dragon’s shoulder and stepping clear.

Harriet was whizzed off the ground before she could even gain a proper position on the saddle. Grabbing onto the pommel, she hurriedly righted herself before turning her attention back to the ground. The unfastened belts along the sides of the saddle whipped her as the fluttered in the wind, but even their painful snaps were not enough to keep her eyes from her dragon.

As soon as he had thrown her into the saddle, Kit had run for Elayne’s blue. Elayne had never climbed down from her back, so there was no delay in her being able to reach down and pull Kit up to sit behind her. With a gust of air that sent two of the shooters sprawling to the ground, the blue took off, rapidly gaining altitude as bullets continued to ping off her underbelly.

The shooters focused their attention on the two dragons in the air, but rather than giving Cloud the opportunity to escape, that only gave her the opportunity to close the distance.

Roaring, she charged at the men in suits, grabbing one around the chest with her jaws. Flicking her head back, she flung him off into the tree canopy before charging another Nightman. Every time she roared, black smoke would trail out of her mouth and nostrils, and Harriet got the distinct impression that she was only a few weeks away from being able to breathe fire.

“Cloud! Get out of there!”
Harriet knew her dragon could hear her cries; the bond told her as much. The bond also spoke to how frightened and angry Cloud was. Frightened because Harriet had been shot, and angry that her entire short life had been spent running away from these people, when she hadn’t even done anything against them.

“Don’t think about it,” Harriet tried to convey it through the bond as well as her screams, but her thoughts were so muddled she couldn’t focus on one image long enough.

Harriet watched helplessly as her dragon rampaged thought the Nightmen. She bit down on them and stomped around them, sending them scattering, and sending more than a few down to the ground. The ones who went down didn’t get back up again, and some of them didn’t even move. Harriet steeled her heart against those people: they were the ones who’d chosen this fight, not her.

“Cloud,” she tried again, nudging Nighteyes with her knees to try and make the dark dragon swing back around. It was no use, though: with no bond to its current rider, Nighteyes was obviously taking his orders from Kit, and they continued to get higher and higher into the air, escaping the bullets.

Harriet didn’t care about escaping though: not if it meant leaving Cloud behind.

*She can’t think clearly. She’d too emotional, and she doesn’t know anything beyond getting immediate revenge. If she stays there any longer, they’ll kill her.*

Harriet thought hard, but the realisation was as sudden as it was simple.

*Cloud needs motivation to leave.*

Harriet stood.

It wasn’t easy, and it certainly wasn’t without fear, but standing up was nothing compared to what she was about to do. Closing her eyes, she pictured a small pebble being thrown from the top of a cliff top. It was a high cliff – higher than the Grand Canyon – and it sailed through the air, falling and falling to its inevitable doom.

Opening her eyes, Harriet prayed that the message had worked.

Then she jumped.
Harriet fell.

Thankfully, as she’d predicted – as she’d hoped! – when Cloud realised what Harriet was up too, her head whipped around to look at her rider. She took off from the ground without even taking another step: the huge swathe of her wings knocked down three more of the Nightmen, but by now that was beyond the dragon’s scope of interest.

With frenzied flaps, she rose up to meet Harriet. Surprisingly though, she kept gaining altitude until she passed her rider.

Harriet felt a moment of panic, but she needn’t have worried: Cloud was just lining up her swoop.

Angling her body just right, the dragon fell into a dive. Headfirst she plummeted towards the ground, killing her speed off just enough to match her falling rider’s. With wings outstretched, she fell alongside Harriet, allowing the rider to reach out and grab her neck.

Harriet used her newfound handholds to steady herself, hooking her legs under Cloud’s wings and hugging the dragon’s neck. Only when she was fully braced did Cloud angle her wings, levelling them out and flapping once more to keep them aloft.

Glancing downwards, Harriet lurched when she realised how close they’d come: Cloud’s belly could have barely been more than three meters off the ground.

Her fall had placed them back in the same clearing as the Nightmen, but this time, Cloud showed no interest in landing to fight.
Beating her wings furiously, Cloud cleared a path through the men as she gained altitude again. While she was still low, she roared and snapped at any who got in her way, and again, when she opened her mouth, trails of smoke could be seen escaping from the corners of her jaw. *A taste of things to come.*

They cleared the canopy at the edge of the clearing, and from there it was easier to climb back on level with Nighteyes, who by this stage had its rightful rider strapped in the saddle.

Being airborne, though, didn’t mean they’d escaped.

There was still the matter of the two helicopters that were closing in fast.

“Form up!” Kit shouted the order, holding his arms above his head in a V as he and Nighteyes swung to the east.

Without needing further instruction, Harriet and Cloud winged it to take their position on his rear left flank, while Elayne and her massive blue took their position on his right, completing the V.

In this manner, the three dragonriders began to make their escape. Northeast was the obvious choice. Away from the fires and over what remained of the national park. South led only to the coast and witnesses, and west led only to the smoke covered haze.

The helicopters accelerated. Harriet could tell, because the constant whirring suddenly rose to a drowning roar, and the distance between them and the dragons closed dramatically.

From their sides, doors opened and men strapped to harnesses leaned out. Gunshots echoed through the air, and ricochets began to ping off of the dragon’s scales.

Kit didn’t hesitate, but took their formation into a dive. The helicopters followed, but the pilots obviously hadn’t trained together like the riders had.

Dive to barrel roll. Loop to turn. Swooping acceleration to sudden ascension. The moves rolled together seamlessly, and the band of dragons moved as one.

The helicopters didn’t have a hope of keeping on their tails.

But then, they didn’t have to. Not with the guns.

Very quickly, the Nightmen realised they could achieve the same end result by simply sitting back a few dozen meters, and pummelling them with bursts of automatic gunfire. Rather than evasive manoeuvres, it was now all the dragons could do to keep their own hardened scales between the choppers and their riders.

Harriet swore.
This was *not* going to plan.

At a top speed, a full-grown dragon should be able to clear 200kph.

But Cloud was not full grown.
And she’d already been tired to begin with.

Harriet knew that, yet again, the two other riders were being forced to temper themselves for her benefit, and she inwardly chastised herself. She was just about to suggest that she could provide a distraction while the other two fled when Kit gave another formation order.

Training and instinct took over from doubt and worry, and Harriet clenched harder with her knees. Even without a saddle, she had no fear: Cloud would never let her fall.

Cloud sped up, taking the lead. At the same time, Kit and Nighteyes corkscrewed down through the air, stopping only once they were below and to the left of Cloud. Elayne’s blue had the easiest job: all she had to do was maintain her current speed and rise up into the air.

By the time the manoeuvre was done, the trio had moved from a V formation to a staggered step, with Harriet in the centre, Kit below her to the left, and Elayne above her to the right.

The helicopters were obviously thrown by the change, and the speed with which it was enacted. They faltered for a while, weaving through the air and killing off speed before resuming the chase. To try and combat the new formation, they broke ranks, and this was their undoing.

Previously, the biggest thing keeping the dragons away from them – aside from the machine guns – was the whirring rotors. The dragons couldn’t attack one chopper for fear of getting sliced up by the second.

But now that problem was gone.

One helicopter rose up on Elayne’s tail, while the other – sensing that Kit was the bigger threat, dropped down to his level.

Elayne didn’t need an order to tell her what to do next. Her blue flared its wings, killing off speed and flipping its body in midair. The helicopter swerved upwards to avoid it, and as it passed over her upturned belly, the blue reached out and grabbed the struts with all four claws.

The side doors of the chopper opened, and men with guns leaned out to try and shoot down at her. Elayne’s blue never gave them the chance.

Snaking her head up, she peered into the cockpit before angling her jaws upwards. Breathing deeply, she let loose with a huge spurt of fire.

The metal of the rotor blades began to heat up, reaching such a high temperature that they glowed bright red, then white. The flames never stopped, and the blades warped, losing their rigidity and collapsing in on themselves.
The helicopter immediately began to fall. Its rear rotors were still whirring, and this sent it into an uncontrollable spin. The blue detached herself, lashing out with her tail, and giving the Nightmen one final whack for good measure.

Kit took a more direct approach. When Nighteyes grabbed onto the helicopter’s struts, he lashed out with its tail, swiping the massive limb through the fuselage connecting the body to the rear rotor. The rotor fell to the ground, still spinning, and when Nighteyes let go of the helicopter, he did so with such violence that it was spun aggressively off balance.

It was still trying to right itself when it crashed.

With the airspace around them clear of threats, the three dragons formed up again in a V, with Kit on point.

They flew across Halls Gap, and were eighty kilometres north before Harriet acted. She winged Cloud to a halt, and after a few seconds, Kit and Elayne belated swung back to check on her.

“This is useless!” Harriet screamed. The three dragons moved to hover next to each other, allowing their riders to conference.

“What?”

“This is ridiculous,” Harriet reiterated. “What the hell are we doing? Where are we flying to?”

“Away from here!” Kit was angry. Whether it was at her, or the situation, she couldn’t tell. But she knew this whole mess was her fault, and she had to own that.

“To Sydney,” her voice changed. “What’s the point? They’ll find us there anyway. It’s just a matter of time.”

“We’ve made it eight years so far,” Kit countered. “And we can make it another eight. If we’re careful.”

“And what sort of life is that? Tell me, in Brock did you have to sulk around in the shadows, only being able to fly for a couple of hours each night, and constantly having to look over your shoulder, wondering when they were going to come for you? Yes? No? I didn’t think so. Wouldn’t you rather be free? Wouldn’t you rather be able to help people?” she pointed back towards the fire. “I did good back there. I saved people lives. Cloud and I did that. We made a difference. What’s so wrong with wanting to keep doing that?”

“What do you want from us?” Elayne spread her arms wide, joining in the discussion. “This isn’t Brock. We’re not free. Of course we’d rather be helping people! Do you think we’re heartless? But we can’t! The Nightmen will get us. You’re right. This world isn’t like Brock. It’s worse. Much, much worse!”
“But what if it doesn’t have to be?!”
A suspicious look came over Kit’s face.
“What do you mean?”
“What if it doesn’t have to be? Maybe we’ve been taking the wrong approach. Maybe by trying to stay secret, we’ve been playing right into the Nightmen’s hands. Maybe the trick is to do the exact opposite. If they want to lock us away so the world will never find us, how about we make it so the world can’t possibly miss us?”
“What do you mean?”
“We’ve been worried that the Nightmen are some sort of government of private business security force. Right? So why don’t we go straight to the top. Make ourselves heard by the highest authority there is, and make sure we do it in such as way that there’s no chance it could ever get swept under the rug?”
“What are you talking about?”
“Do you trust me?”
“Of course!”
“Then come on, Follow me,” she nudged Cloud with her legs, and they took off.
“Where are you going?” Elayne screamed, reining her blue across to follow.
“Back to Sydney … but not to the apartment!”

Federal Agent James Lacchiana was bored.

He knew he shouldn’t feel ungrateful, not really. It was a well paid job, and except for the constant training sessions every week, he didn’t really have to do any work.

The view from Kirribilli House was also something that he never got sick of. How could you? Especially when he was at his favourite outside post, just like today.

The immaculately sculptured lawns swept out ahead of him, ending in a short cliff down to the ocean. To his right, the Sydney Harbour Bridge stretched away towards the CBD, and across the water directly in front of him, the whitewashed sails of the Opera House curved gently in the sun.
Not a bad life, he decided, shifting his feet slightly and re-evaluating. Not bored … just peaceful. Better than being stuck behind some desk for forty years, that’s for sure. His wife had bought him new shoes a few days ago, and he hadn’t yet worn them in properly. The blisters were hurting, and he made a mental note to put some wet scrunched up newspaper in them that night. That was how he usually softened the leather, but for some reason he had been distracted this week.

Three shadows circled on the ground in front of him. Smiling, he looked up to the sky, expecting to see birds. He wasn’t disappointed.

The three of them glided in a perfect circle, but they were too far up for him to make out any more than a small silhouette.

“What a perfect day,” he said the words aloud, taking in the sunshine and the serenity. There were a few yachts out on the water, and he didn’t think work could get much better. Still smiling, his eyes drifted back up to the birds. Strangely, when he looked at them now, they were bigger than before. Blinking, he shut his eyes for a long moment, and sure enough, when he opened them again, they were even bigger still.

Much bigger than any bird had a right to be.

What the…?

He drew his pistol in one fluid movement;

“Commander Gattuso,” he tapped the microphone button on the side of his throat, and his radio crackled to life. “I have three unidentified aircraft closing in.”

“What?”

“Three aircraft, sir.”

“Where?”

“Directly above the back lawn. They … they’re getting very low.”

Lacchiana aimed his gun at the biggest of the aircraft, but did not yet pull the trigger. It probably wouldn’t do much anyway. If they can get this far without the Air Force picking them up, then they’re obviously running some super-advanced technology…

The three planes drifted lower, and Lacchiana was now able to make out their shapes. They were modelled after a bird, with long sleek lines and massive wings. The strange part, though, was that he could have sworn that every few seconds, one of the planes would actually flap their wings.

“Sir,” he contacted the Commander again. “Orders?”

There was no response from the Commander. By this stage, several other agents had come to take their place by Lacchiana: directly in between the house and the lawn.
“What in God’s name is that?” one of the other agents breathed.

“Stand firm,” Lacchiana said, feeling none of the confidence he was trying to project to the men.

Just then, a smaller figure on the back of the smallest creature leaned out. Christ! I think there are people riding those things! The figure pulled back and arm, and threw something downwards.

Lacchiana – just like the rest of the agents – dropped down to a knee, bracing themselves for the explosion they expected to come.

But there was no explosion.

Instead – of all things – a sword lanced down from above. It stuck point-first into the soft grass with enough force to set the hilt swinging wildly back and forth.

That wasn’t what caught his eye, though.

Tied to the hilt with two expert knots, a small white square of cloth fluttered in the gentle breeze. It didn’t look to be designed as a flag, but instead had the curves and lines of a singlet.

Lacchiana could barely believe what he was seeing, but there it was: a truce-flag anchored to the ground not ten metres away from him.

“Sir,” Lacchiana tried the Commander again. “I think you really want to get out here. They … they’ve thrown down a truce-flag.”

The creatures flew lower, and from the looks of it, they intended to land.

“Hold your fire,” Lacchiana ordered.

“But…” one of the agents countered.

“Hold your fire,” Lacchiana repeated, this time with iron in his voice. He might report to the Commander, but these men reported to him. He was in charge of this situation, and he would be damned before he fired on someone offering a truce.

The three beasts landed lightly on the lawn, and from close-up, Lacchiana could see they were more reptile than bird: scaled like an alligator, but coloured in different shades of blue and black.

From the backs of their necks, three people slid a leg over and dropped nimbly to the ground. Hands outstretched, they walked towards Lacchiana and his men.

The agents shifting nervously, but true to orders, not a single one of them had a finger on the trigger.

There was one man and two women, each with leather jackets of the same patterning of the creatures they’d arrived on. The man took the lead, standing in between the women and the loaded firearms, but when they got close enough to talk, Lacchiana held up a hand, stopping them.
The youngest rider – and she was young, he could see now, barely old enough to vote – poked her head around the shoulder of the man in black.

“Hello,” there was a timid note to her voice, despite her method of arrival. “We’re here to see the Prime Minister, please.”

Lacchiana blanched at the unexpected politeness of the girl. He said the first thing that came to his mind.

“Do you have an appointment?”
EPILOGUE

Harriet laughed.

The wind whipped through her hair, and the sunlight was bright enough to make her squint a little. Huddling down onto Cloud's neck, the two of them went into a spiral dive, killing off most of their altitude so they were flying just above the canopy.

Below them, pasture and farmland whizzed by, interspersed with huge sections of forest, and with herds of sheep and cows going about their daily feedings. There was often the occasional farmer in their fields, and as Harriet and Cloud flew overhead, they would always look up and raise a hand in greeting. Without fail, Harriet would raise an arm in return, but just in case they couldn’t see her gesture, Cloud would always give out a little roar of greeting.

Even a year after that fateful bushfire, flying in the daylight still hadn’t lost its appeal.

The forest below her was still predominantly blackened stumps, but there was enough green showing that she knew it would recover in time. It was the way of Australia after all. A fire sweeps though and destroys the old, allowing for the new growth to move in and thrive.

Despite all the time she’d spent here, Harriet was still constantly surprised by the area. There was always something new to see, and just when she thought she and Cloud had completely explored one area, a new ravine or cave would reveal itself. No matter how long she spent in the Grampians, she didn’t think she’d ever get bored.

The Grampians National Park – as well as the several dozen surrounding suburbs and towns – now formed the world’s largest No-Fly-Zone, and the world’s third largest satellite black spot.
It had been part of her negotiations with the Prime Minister. It was always hard negotiating from a position of weakness, but Harriet liked to think she’d done well. Elayne had certainly been happy, and Kit said that the only person who might have been able to do it better was Captain Torven, from their old band.

The deal had been simple: the three dragonriders remain in Australia, citizens of the country and under the legal purview of the Australian government. In exchange, they agreed – in perpetuity – to never offer their services, their knowledge, or their dragon’s future offspring to any foreign country. To sweeten the deal, the government had offered to create a new dragon sanctuary, where they could fly and be free without fear of the outside world finding them. It had caused the Prime Minister’s advisers no shortage of headaches to try and find a place, and eventually the suggestion had come from Harriet: the Grampians.

The National Park was already a mess from the fires, so the government would have to spend money rebuilding it either way. And this way, there were dozens of families who elected to accept the generous re-settlement package, and leave the area.

There were dozens more families that elected to stay, but Harriet had no fear of them exposing her. As well as an almost blanket-ban on taxation throughout the sanctuary, every resident was also paid a large yearly stipend by the government for their silence. There are a lot of children out here who will be driving some very nice cars when their trust accounts become available to them, Harriet thought with a wry smile.

Even without those incentives, though, Harriet would have felt confident: after all, she had been the one risking her life the day of the fire to save people, and there was just something about a person who rescued babies that inclined people to like them. Far from being an outcast, Harriet and Cloud were a popular part of the community, and indeed a ride on Cloud had been given out as a prize at more than one school spelling bee.

The final part of her negotiations with the government was that all key ministers – both in the elected party and in the shadow opposition – were to be fully informed of the situation. Their silence in the matter was now a prerequisite for keeping their job, and Harriet trusted that with so many people in power in the know, it would be hard for the Prime Minister to ever abuse the situation and use it to the dragons’ detriment.

Harriet knew that the honeymoon period wouldn’t last, and before long the government would start wanting something in exchange for their massive outlays, but she’d resigned herself to that. No one got a free ride. That was the way of life. Even back in Brock, Kit and Elayne had had to serve in the army, and before that Kit had been a mercenary in the Dragonlands.
In the meantime, they had managed to milk the situation for all it was worth. The Prime Minister had been so stunned at the presence of dragons, and at Harriet’s comments about ‘national resource’ and ‘world pioneer’ that he had signed every form she’d requested, and funded the building of a whole new compound for them to live in. Kit and Elayne had very carefully kept the presence of their apartment – as well as their own considerable fortune – a tight-lipped secret. That was one bit of information that was definitely better held in reserve.

The best bit about it all – the absolute best! – was that now her dad could share it all with her. It had been no hassle at all for him to up and move: the government had offered him a generous payout for his farm in Mount Gambier, and they’d even purchased a farm three times the size of it for him in Halls Gap. In a pleasant change from the usual practice, the government were very being generous with their money.

All Harriet could hope was that whatever the government wanted in return – when they finally figured out what it was – wasn’t anything too crazy. But either way, that’s a worry for another day.

Today was a day for celebration.

One year exactly of living free.

Spreading her arms wide, Harriet let the wind tease at her hair again.

She knew that Kit and her father were planning a party for them all for the evening. They believed – rightly so – that a whole year of freedom from the Nightmen was a milestone worth recognising. And Harriet agreed, but if she didn’t hurry up, then she’d be late and miss the whole thing.

Leaning off to the side, Harriet directed her dragon in a long curve that faced them back to the south, and in the direction of the new Dragon Hall: the shared residence where the three riders now lived.

The change in direction also brought a change in the wind. To protect her from the cold, Harriet zipped up her new leather jacket. It was the first jacket she’d made, and Elayne had guided her through the process after Cloud’s first moulting. Every time he saw it on her, her dad laughed, saying that he’d never seen her treasure anything else in the world – other than Cloud, of course – more than it.

Cloud’s my dragon, and I’m her rider. Now anyone can tell that just by looking at us.

As well as her new jacket, she also wore a dragonscale leather belt. Her sword hung proudly from it, and she wore it still, even though she hadn’t seen a Nightman for over a year.
It had taken her and Cloud three days of sifting through ash and rubble to find it, but once Kit had told her that forest fires didn’t burn hot enough to melt steel, she’d swore to recover the priceless Brock blade.

Other than her dragon, there was not a cloud in the sky, and she couldn’t have asked for better weather to mark their anniversary. Cloud roared her satisfaction, and her rider couldn’t help but join in.

Harriet laughed.
No, I would not want to live in a world without dragons, as I would not want to live in a world without magic, for that is a world without mystery.

(R.A Salvatore 1989)

“If there were no dragons of flesh and blood and fire, whence would come the idea for these stone carvings?”

(Robin Hobb, 2000)

The townspeople took the prince for dead
When he never returned with the dragon’s head
When with her, he stayed
She thought he’d be too afraid
But he loved her too much instead.

(J.C. Scott, 2012)

Maps used to say: “Here Be Dragons.”
Now they don’t.
But that doesn’t mean the dragons aren’t there.

(William Kent, 2017)
HERE BE DRAGONS:
IDEOLOGY AND SOCIALISATION IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

For as long as humans have passed stories from one generation to the next, dragons have been present. From the un-datable BCE Rainbow Serpent of Indigenous Australia and Piasa Bird of Native America; to the 8th Century Anglo-Saxon sagas depicting Beowulf’s battles against Grendal and the dragon; to the 9th Century Kongamato dragon of the Nguni peoples of Southern Africa; to the volcano-inhabiting Ihuavulu of 10th Century Patagonia; to the 11th Century Cappadocian tales of Saint George and his dragon-slaying prowess, dragons appear to be humankind’s universal myth (Bierlein, 1994; Bruchac, 1992; Rosenberg, 1997). This tradition has more than continued into modern times, with popular modern literature rife with dragons: from the treasure-hoarding Smaug of The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1937); to the broom-chasing Hungarian Horntails of Harry Potter (Rowling, 1997); to the unrelenting ‘Mother-of-Dragons’ Khaleesi in A Game of Thrones (Martin, 1996), dragons rear their snarling heads time and time again.

Dragons, however, are not necessarily just a literary indulgence. They are also well suited to act as narratological vehicles for ideological messages conveyed by authors. Regardless of the text, it is impossible for ideological messages not to be present; messages which can act as a challenge to social mores and hierarchies, a reinforcement, or anything in between. The messages themselves do not have to be overt, meaning overtly didactic and preaching ‘progressive’ or ‘enlightened’ views, but can be passive, or even hidden within the very language of the text itself (Hollindale, 1988). Indeed, it has been suggested that every text involves implicit ideologies, usually in the form of assumed social structures and ideas of thought, and that these implicit ideologies are often the most powerful, as they are taken for granted as fact, and ideological positions are invested with overt legitimacy simply because they exist (Stephens, 1992).

Dragons act as a pervasive presence in literature of all kinds; however, their appearance in Young Adult literature is of particular interest due to the socialising role young adult (YA) literature exerts on
the youth of any given society (Stephens, 1992) and the way it conveys social mores and attitudes, either implicitly or explicitly (Holindale, 1988). Within YA literature, while there are dozens, if not hundreds, of possible ideologies that could be conveyed and examined, three large ideological strands of ideology stand out as salient due to the powerful impact they can have on an individual, and as such on a greater society: gender; class; and speciesism. It is these three ideological strands which have been chosen for closer examination in the present thesis.

Gender ideologies are an important area to examine, as they can influence a reader’s socialisation, affecting the way in which an individual constructs his/her world view, learning how to become human and to behave in ways that are acceptable to others (Gill, 1999). As such, gender ideologies can play a large role in transmitting social mores and values. Dragons and dragon-like characters in young adult literature can play an important role in exploring notions of gender within literature, and by extension within society itself. They can act as either a reinforcement of valued social mores, a subversion of perceptually-undesirably mores, or any combination thereof. To this end, dragons can act in three ways in YA literature while enabling explorations of gender ideologies. Firstly, dragons can act as an equalising force within a text, allowing men and women to be placed on an even playing field, as their access to dragons limits their reliance on their own physical attributes, of the dragon acts as the physical strength instead. Instead, it is commonly seen that when dragons are present, their human companions rely on their intellect, rather than their physical strength/prowess. Secondly, dragons can function as representations of gender, either directly (in their literal genders) or in a more metaphorical sense, whereby the dragon takes on the attributes or characteristics of a stereotypical gender, and then reinforces or subverts them in some way. Thirdly, dragons can act as a catalyst – an otherworldly impetus for social or ideological change, which may stem from the dragon, but which has wider implications. By referring to dragons as an agent of change, I am referring to their role in enabling widespread social change that otherwise would not have been possible, or at the least would have been much more difficult and improbable. The change is typically spearheaded by a human character within the narrative; however the dragons act as a tool to allow change to happen, thereby bypassing any gender inequalities standing in the way.

Class ideologies and the inherent social structures and hierarchies within any given society can largely impact the development of, opportunities offered to, and even thought process of, individuals. This
effect can be negatively compounded if there are evident inequalities within the society which unfairly favour or hinder individuals or groups. Social inequality refers to differences between groups of people that derive from normative hierarchies. At its most basic, social inequality refers to the hierarchical distribution of social, political, economic, and cultural resources. The flow-on effects of these inequalities are far reaching, potentially affecting all aspects of an individual’s life. In an ideal society, notions of merit should exist (Marmot, 2004), and an individual should understand that through skill, hard work and perseverance they can succeed, and that the balance of power is not isolated to a small, select group of individuals (Marmot, 2004). For the purposes of this discussion, ‘class’ refers to the standing an individual occupies within a given society, in terms of monetary wealth, political influence, and access to services. Division into different class standings is typically dependent on three factors: level of education, occupation, and income (Marmot, 2004). By extension, then, representations of class inequality – just like representations of gender inequality – in YA literature are in fact representations of power, including both the inherent power-structures of a society, and the ways in which it is distributed and abused (Trites, 2014). Dragons function as a vehicle for class ideologies much like they do for gender. They allow an author to utilise them as a narratological device that can convey ideologies without being overtly didactic. Dragons can be treated as a subjugated species in a way that perhaps could not be accomplished with a real-world racial example, due to the progress society is making towards inclusivity and equality in representations. Dragons can also be utilised as a ‘resource’ that can only be accessed by a select few. In this sense, dragons can act as a substitute for money, education, or privilege that may divide classes in the real world.

Finally, speciesism, or the notion that individuals should have differing rights and values based solely on their species, is a concept that has existed in academic discourse for decades, and has recently made a strong appearance in popular literature (Taylor, 2013). It follows on the heels of race and class ideologies, and at its core, speciesism is concerned with the notion of anthropocentrism: the idea that the status of being ‘human’ gives one greater moral rights than non-humans. It is a prejudice against ‘animals’ in favour of our own species, with the central tenet being that other animals are only ever mediated through a human perspective, and that humans judge the importance and interests of other (non-human) animals by their respective importance and interests to humans (Taylor, 2013). This level of importance may be influenced by perceived cuteness or rarity (pandas); notions of love and affection (dog and cats); disposability and usefulness for experimentation (lab rats and mice); or perceived inconsequentiality (termites and other insects). An examination of speciesism in scholarly
writing challenges the core concept that humans enjoy rights to resources simply because they are human and are the dominant force on Earth. Instead, it is proposed that consideration be given to each individual species’ needs and desires (DeGrazia 2002), and only once that has happened should a decision be made regarding endangering resources, habitats, or lives. Dragons function as a useful narrative device to explore ideologies revolving around speciesism for they can be utilised to highlight the inequalities that exist in relations between humans and more conventional animals. Dragons serve a dual function in that they can take the place of – and in doing so symbolise – a subjugated animal species, as well as a dominant species doing the subjugating. In other words, dragons can highlight the inherent assumptions humans hold with regard to certain animal subsets or species, without actually didactically referencing the species itself. This versatility means that implied readers are less likely to feel the same alienation from a text as may happen if a familiar animal (like a puppy or a turtle) is similarly mistreated. Likewise, dragons allow for an exploration of the consequences of mistreatment, as they are creatures that can be attributed with a sentience (and at times even a literal voice) that many animals lack (either in reality or in perception).

It is important to note here at the outset that while the following discussion centres itself firmly on dragons, dragons themselves are by no means unique. In all of the aforementioned ways dragons are used as an ideological vehicle, the dragons themselves could easily be supplanted by any other mythological creature, such as unicorns, wyverns, centaurs, or any number of others. While they could potentially be substituted as an ideological messenger-medium, however, they are certainly not easily substituted as a narratological figure. Dragons – perhaps thanks to their role as universal mythological beings – offer a familiarity to readers that is perhaps not as accessible as other mythological creatures. Dragons also offer a certain versatility, since they are easily represented as: intelligent or simple; mundane or magical; noble or villainous; or even domineering or subservient, as the particular narrative situation demands. This versatility can be achieved without compromising the core notion of what a dragon intrinsically is, because the notion itself is so diverse and malleable. It is because of dragons’ role as universal mythological creatures, combined with their popularity in modern mainstream media, that they have been chosen as the central focus of this thesis. As such, the dragons are irreplaceable as a narrative figure, despite the fact that any mythological creature could be used to convey ideologies.
As well as an examination of the ideologies themselves, incorporating analysis of literary theorists, I will examine the ways dragons are used as ideological vehicles in a selection of YA texts. Primarily, I will be examining my own creative artefact, *Displaced*; however, each exegesis chapter – and each ideology stand – will incorporate supplementary texts. Alison Goodman’s *Eon* (2010) and *Eona* (2012) will be utilized in the examination of gender ideologies in chapter one. The study on class and social inequality in chapter two will incorporate Stephen Deas’ *The Adamantine Palace* (2009) and Rachel Hartman’s *Seraphina* (2012). Finally, Matthew Reilly’s *The Great Zoo Of China* (2014) will supplement the discussion on speciesism and animal rights in chapter three.

*Displaced* follows the journey of 16 year old Australian schoolgirl Harriet. While riding home from school in her country town, Harriet stumbles across an abandoned reptile egg. Being a country girl, she takes it home to care for it. When a dragon hatches, mysterious men in suits show up in town, carrying guns and asking questions. Harriet flees, seeking to hide the dragon forever. When cornered by the Suits, she is saved by the mysterious arrival of two strangers who reveal themselves as dragonriders. Harriet and the Dragonriders Elayne and Kit flee the Suits (now also known as the Nightmen) across half of east Australia, while Harriet learns more about her dragon, and what it means to be a rider. Along their Journey, Kit and Elayne teach Harriet how to fight with a sword, how to shoot a bow, and how to ride both horses and dragons. They arrive at their safe house in Sydney, where they will supposedly ‘hole-up’ and hide indefinitely, but the idea of shutting herself away forever does not sit well with Harriet. Eventually, a bushfire threatening innocent lives forces Harriet’s hand, and she must decide what’s most important to her: staying hidden from the Nightmen or saving people. Harriet, along with her dragon, rescue people trapped by the bushfire, and after a final climactic battle with the Nightmen, Harriet negotiates with the Prime Minister of Australia for a place of sanctuary that is protected by government and law. While the gender ideologies of *Displaced* are not as overt or fundamental to the narrative as they are in *Eon/Eona*, they are still present, as they partially form the core identities of the main characters.

At the heart of this thesis – both the creative artefact and the exegesis – is the concept of fairness, with fairness being impartial and just treatment without favouritism or bias. This is seen throughout all three examinations of the ideological strands, both as they relate to the literature, but also their follow on effects in socialising young adults. While many of the scholars referenced throughout this
thesis are working in non-Australian contexts, the concept is undeniably relevant to Australian culture, with the notion of a ‘fair go’ being so deeply ingrained in the Australian identity that more than one Prime Minister has remarked that everyone deserves a “fair shake of the sauce bottle” (Saunders, 2004, p.2). The idea of fairness is relevant in terms of how each ideological strand is explored: it is highlighted throughout why the ideology is important, the effect that the prevalent ideology has on a culture or society, and the effects of misrepresentation or underrepresentation of potentially-marginalised groups. Specifically, the creative artefact *Displaced* will combine these notions of gender, social class, and speciesism. As mentioned (Saunders, 2004), fairness is a concept deeply ingrained within Australia’s identity, however with the recent global shift towards isolationism and xenophobia – as evidenced by the elections of Australian Senator Pauline Hanson; American President Donald Trump and his 2017 ‘Muslim Ban’; and the somewhat negative attitude towards Syrian refuges in Europe – it is a concept that certainly warrants further exploration.

This creative artefact is not intended to be used as a model for ideologically ‘progressive’ writing, or as a proposed scaffold for how characters should be depicted, or even how the ideological strands should be evident within a narrative. Instead, this novel is simply an exploration of the ideological strands themselves, showing both ends of the ideological spectrum at times, and allowing the reader to draw their own moral conclusions. Regarding gender: the narrative depicts a central, strong female character, but also shows her to have a weaker and slightly petty side, indulging in unnecessary competitiveness with her companions. Regarding speciesism; the dragons and their sentience features heavily in the narrative, but there are also elements of possessiveness and even ‘ownership’ displayed by their human companions. Likewise, all members of the narrative happily hunt and eat meat while advocating animal rights, and even after weeks of horseback riding, Harriet only ever refers to her mount as ‘it’. Finally, regarding class and social structure, the narrative includes characters who are millionaires but are persecuted, characters who are powerful but poor, and characters who, like many Australians, are simply ‘middle class’. Again, this creative artefact is not intended to be a didactic vehicle for enlightened ideals, but merely an exploration of some common thought patterns and practices, and their follow on effects.

The most salient uniting feature between the two works – and what draws the creative artefact and the exegesis together – is their common preoccupation with how the figure of the dragon is utilised in various ways to foreground aspects of human practices and societies. Again, this will be achieved
by an examination of the three identified ideological strands, which in turn will highlight distinct notions fairness.
CHAPTER ONE
Gender and Identity Politics.

Critics agree that it is impossible to underestimate the significant place young adult literature occupies within Western democratic societies, and the impact it can have on teens as part of its role in transmitting society’s culture to the youth (Gill, 1999; Kimsey, 2011). Also important is its impact on a reader’s socialisation development: affecting the way in which an individual constructs his/her world view, learning how to become human and to behave in ways that are acceptable to others and their notions of fairness (Saunders, 2004). No discussion of the way YA literature socialises its readers would be complete without an examination of the way gender and sexuality are expressed and explored. The importance of gender and sexuality ideologies cannot be understated, for it underscores so much of how people define themselves within a society. Of all the ideologies, gender and sexuality have received perhaps the most academic analysis over the last five decades, namely because of their relationship with notions of power (Trites, 2000). Gender and sexuality could be said to lie at the heart of notions of power, for they can influence not only how society perceives an individual, but also how an individual perceives himself/herself. Adolescents must learn to navigate their way through life’s various institutions; and the identity that they possess – either their chosen one or their birth one – can have a serious impact on the ways this negotiation is handled (Trites, 2000).

Dragons and dragon-like characters (hereafter combined into ‘dragons’) in YA literature can play an important role in exploring and subverting notions of gender within literature, and by extension subverting notions of gender within society itself. These roles will be explored in the following chapter; however they can broadly be divided into three categories. Firstly, dragons can act as an equalising force within a text, allowing men and women to be put onto an even playing field, as their access to dragons limits their reliance on physical attributes. In this sense, dragons can allow for characters within the narrative to be viewed and judged based on their own merits, rather than on their gender. Secondly, dragons can also act as representations of gender themselves, either directly
(in their literal genders) or in a more metaphorical sense, whereby the dragon takes on the attributes or characteristics of a stereotypical gender, and then reinforces or subverts them in some way. In this sense, dragons can be used within a narrative to highlight the inaccuracies of certain presuppositions held by a society. Finally, dragons can act as a catalyst – an otherworldly impetus for social or ideological change, which may stem from the dragon, but which has wider implications. For example, the presence or absence of dragons may cause characters within the narrative to act contrary to their usual manner, such as accepting someone’s presence because it is necessary, or because the dragons would cause adverse things to happen if the said person were not present. Considering these three elements of the role of dragons in YA literature, it is important to reiterate for the final time the contention stated in the introduction: while dragons are multifaceted and can be utilised as a versatile literary device, they are not alone in this regard, and indeed many of their uses could be supplanted by other non-human or mythological characters. There is nothing inherently different, for example, between the function served by a dragon, and that of a unicorn, or of a wyvern, etc. Dragons do, however, occupy a role in the common myth shared by many cultures, and so provide a certain applicability without compromising versatility: a feat which perhaps cannot be achieved as easily by other character choices.

In every chapter of this thesis, I will examine my own novel, Displaced, as well as supplementary texts. These texts were all chosen for their status as young adult novels, their inclusion of dragons or dragon-like characters, as well as the potential ideological messages that can be interpreted by a reader from the events within their narratives. The first pair of texts are Alison Goodman’s Eon and its follow-up sequel Eona (2010; 2012). The world of Eona is a fictionalised medieval-Chinese empire, protected by twelve literal celestial dragons (to match the twelve signs of the Chinese Zodiac), responsible for benevolently maintaining harmony in the land by diverting hurricanes, ensuring adequate rainfall, warning of earthquakes etc. The dragons, like most Eastern representations of this figure, are benevolent spirits, and as the zodiac cycle progresses, the dragon matched with the current year’s animal ascends to power, doubling its strength and assuming leadership of the others. The dragons are not able to act alone, however, and rely on a partnership with human ‘Dragoneyes’: individuals able to spiritually connect to the dragon of their birth-year, and able to channel their dragon’s power though their own bodies to accomplish the aforementioned acts of greatness. These Dragoneyes are chosen each year from a selection of twelve-year-olds (born in the year of the dragons’
ascendancy in the previous cycle). The children undergo a twelve-year apprenticeship, preparing them for their one-year leadership in the next cycle, and then their own eleven-year period as teacher to the next apprentice. The titular female character, Eona, has the inherent “ability to commune” (p. 45) with dragons, but is forbidden from ever becoming a Dragoneye because of her gender. As such, she is forced to disguise herself as the male ‘Eon’, and proceed with an apprenticeship nonetheless. For the year of their ascendancy, the individual Dragoneye becomes (after the emperor himself) the most powerful man – politically, socially, and financially – in the empire: a ‘just’ reward for all of the ‘good’ he does for the people. Many of the male characters in the narrative treat the given society as favourable and successful, as it has “worked flawlessly for a dozen centuries” (p. 33), however through the experiences of the Eon, the reader is able to gain insights into the flawed nature of it. These insights derive not only from the dismissive nature in which women are treated, but also by the acceptance which they display: obviously showing generations of ingrained servitude and treatment as second-class citizens, to the point where most resistance and original thought has been literally beaten out of them. Within the narrative’s world, the Divine Right of Kings is still in place and the nepotistically-appointed ministers are more concerned about cementing their own power than acting in the people’s best interests. Over half the population has been forcibly subjugated, and there is virtually no access to social mobility if you are not already one of the privileged male nobility. In the eyes of the dominant male characters, the only salient problem presented with the narrative’s world is the issue of the ‘Mirror Dragon’ – the dragon aligned with the Chinese Zodiac dragon, and purportedly the most powerful of the lot – which disappeared from the world five hundred years earlier, leaving a gap in the cycle, and one year in twelve where the empire is beset by droughts and other natural disasters. The narrative downplays all of this, with the only obvious flaw being presented being that of twelfth dragon that will eventually choose Eona as its Dragoneye. The narrative follows the struggles she faces communing with her dragon, as well as living as a female in a male-dominated world.

Gender politics – along with race and religion – relate to the broader framework of identity politics, as they are predominantly concerned with the social affiliations that members of any society construct to position people in relation to one another. Identity politics play a determining role in how we perceive ourselves politically (Trites 2000). A fundamental notion of gender theory is that ‘gender’ is a social construction, determined by the given society itself. This idea is also explored by Kerry
Mallan, who highlights how problematic a task defining ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ can be, for there is still no consensus on the meanings of these terms, not just within the scholarly field, but within the related societies themselves: “gender [and sexuality] are signifiers whose meanings are not necessarily self-present or ultimately defined … they change according to time and place” (2009, p.12). For the purposes of this work, I draw upon Mallan’s (2009) and Butler’s (1990, p. 22) definitions: that ‘sexuality’ refers to the biological physicality of one’s birth and how infants are identified/labelled as male, female, or indeterminate; while ‘gender’ refers to the orientation that a person most closely identifies with, and is not limited to the male/female dichotomy. Important to note is the lack of connection between ‘gender’ and ‘sexual orientation’ in this theory. The two aspects of who you identify as and who you are sexually attracted to are unrelated.

To return to Trites’ initial description of gender as a ‘social construction’, it could then be said that “gender is not something one is but something one does, a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (Mallan, 2009, 14). This is not to suggest that people can ‘choose’ their gender – any more than they can ‘choose’ their sexual orientation – but instead implies that while sexuality is usually straightforward (presence or absence of a vagina, penis, etc.), gender is perceived through a series of social stereotypes: stereotypes which may be different not only from culture to culture, but also within the different sections of a single culture. Anyone who diverges, then, from these often-heteronormative stereotypes would potentially be considered ‘abnormal’: an anomaly and an outlier.

In an analysis of gender as a social construction, Robyn Wiegman argues that gender politics are all too often an “epistemology of the visual” (1995, p. 8), whereby society defines gender in terms of physical appearance, or according to the possession or absence of a culturally-specific set of gender stereotypes. False stereotypes can typecast not only individuals, but also entire subgroups, resulting in situations like that presented in the world of Eon, where women are relegated to menial and subservient roles, because they are perceived to lack the required physical and mental strength for wielding power. Not only is this a skewed version of reality, but if unchallenged by the characters within the narrative, can result in stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and under-representation of female characters, which in turn can “contribute negatively to children’s development, limit their career aspirations, frame their attitudes about their future roles as parents and even influence their personality characteristics” (Hamilton, et al, 2006, p. 757). The importance of avoiding such an outcome is clear: any society’s first goal is self-preservation, and this is achieved through healthy and productive members, unencumbered by emotional limitations.
*Eon* and *Eona* both present narratives where this notion of the epistemology of the visual is highly applicable. While there are clear ethical problems with the depicted social hierarchy – namely that all positions of power are exclusively male, and there is an extreme dearth of opportunities for upward social mobility for females – the problematic stance *Eon*’s world takes with regard to women is best exemplified by the titular slave character herself. Eona’s owner has fallen on hard times, and has thrown the entirety of his dwindling fortune into one last gambit: getting Eona selected as a Dragoneye. He believes she is capable, because she can sense not only one dragon, but all eleven, a feat unheard of for generations. Due to the first-person narrative, and the lack of gender pronouns, the true sex of the main character is not revealed until several chapters into the narrative, when ‘Eon’ is told by her slave-master to drink a tonic that will suppress her menstrual cycle in order for her to avoid attracting suspicion while at the Dragoneye choosing ceremony. Until this point, the narrative refuses to disclose the gender of Eona, with a total lack of gender pronouns or references to gender-stereotypical physiology or attitudes. ‘Eon’ is a salient example of Wiegman’s (1995, p. 8) “epistemology of the visual”: in order for her persona to be accepted by most, all that is required is for her to bind her breasts flat, and adopt a deeper voice. Because she *appears* to be male, the characters around her accept her as such. Eona’s character could then, in a way, provide an invitation to readers to question the logic behind these gender archetypes, as well as the underlying assumptions that lie at their heart. This idea is further enhanced by Eon’s apparent ‘maleness’ for the first several chapters of the narrative. With no underlying reason for a reader to be suspicious, since the rest of the narrative accepts her as male, the reader has no reason to question Eona’s gender, with nothing in her inner-thoughts giving evidence to her womanhood. This perhaps raises the question that there are fewer inherent differences between a male’s thoughts and a female’s thoughts than society would have us believe, furthering the notion that gender is a social construct, not a biological one.

In addition to the aforementioned physical ‘deception’, Eona’s character constantly doubts herself, and early in the narrative she bluntly wonders “why [she] was given such a gift in an ill-fated body” (p. 8). This question is asked prior to the reader finding out her true sex, and instead refers to Eona’s physical disfigurement: a crushed hip and permanent limp resulting from being run over by a cart as a child. Even though Eona’s question refers to an actual physical malady, it still raises the notion of one being ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’ of something (either a privilege or a curse) based solely on their
Physicality. Eona’s ‘unworthiness’ is established from the outset, evidenced by the sneers of the people she interacts with, and the way society shuns her, as if her injury were contagious. The narrative, however, encourages readers to resist this interpretation through its clear depiction of not only Eona’s competence at whatever task is at hand, but also her evident compassion and intelligence. Time and time again, Eona proves herself able to empathise with others, as well as show objective social and academic intelligence. The cumulative effect of Eona’s characterisation is the creation of a protagonist which encourages readers to empathise with, sympathise with, and ‘side’ with, while at the same time encouraging the readers to feel a sense of alienation – or at the very least distrust and unfairness – at the social systems which so obviously disfavour a ‘good’ person. With her gender-subterfuge, Eona’s character both explores and highlights the problematic nature at the heart of Wiegman’s theory about how society defines gender in terms of physical appearance, or according to the possession of absence of a culturally-specific set of gender stereotypes. As a female, Eona’s character is denied any place of power within the empire; what’s more, she was even denied the respect most readers (and certainly most of the implied readers, being a semi-educated English-speaking audience) now accept is due to every human. Once Eona sheds her feminine appearance, she finds little opposition in the way of her upward path to power. Not only that, she actually finds herself unexpectedly advantaged: because her dragon has been absent for five hundred years, there is no older Dragoneye for ‘Eon’ to apprentice herself to. This effectively means she immediately attains her full power, and can look forward to a potentially-unlimited career (or at worst, 24 years) as an influence in the empire, rather than the discrete twelve-year reign of her male counterparts. All of this is because of her skill and the hard work she puts in, but it is only initially possible because she poses as a male. She has always possessed the ability, but the rest of her world is never interested in it for the sole reason of the biology of her birth. Once again, Wiegman’s theory is pertinent to the society depicted within Eon/Eona, in how it “problematises how relying on looks to define identity leads to essentialism – that is, defining people’s ‘essential’ inner traits as being biologically determined” (1995, p. 10).

The creative artefact Displaced also explores Wiegman’s notions of epistemology of the visual, albeit in a different manner slightly to Eon/Eona. Wiegman’s theory refers to society’s preoccupation with judging people based on “physical appearance, or according to the possession or absence of a culturally-specific set of gender stereotypes” (1995, p. 8), and while Eon/Eona focused on the physical appearance, Displaced takes a closer examination on culturally specific gender stereotypes. In the
narrative the Dragonrider Kit is described as a short and unimposing man. It is revealed however that he is a formidable fighter, and has the capacity to cause great harm using an assortment of weapons, or even his bare hands. Likewise, the Dragonrider Elayne’s most prominent descriptor is ‘beautiful’. She is tall, curvy, buxom, and has hair “to die for”. Elayne, however, is just as capable as Kit, if not more so. Both dragonriders adhere to society’s accepted view of gender: Kit obviously being a male and Elayne obviously being female – yet both of them possess characteristics that are at odds with what their culturally-specific (in this case Australia’s culture) gender stereotypes might be. Elayne is a beautiful woman, with a sexualised appearance (as evidenced by Harriet’s envious sigh over Elayne’s “more than ample bust”) yet Elayne is highly intelligent and extremely martially skilled. While dealing with a potential threat, Elayne shows no restraint:

A heavy-hilted knife appeared in Elayne’s hand, and she reversed it before driving the pommel roughly down onto the stabbed-man’s head. His eyes rolled backwards, and he fell unconscious – or worse! – immediately.

*(Displaced, Chapter 12)*

The casualness with which Elayne potentially ends a life – and at the very least, renders a minor threat neutral with sever prejudice – belies her demure countenance. Even the description of her knife as being ‘heavy-hilted’ – and as such unwieldy and needing a strong and skilled arm/grasp – runs counter to what stereotypically might be expected of a ‘lady’ who is so seemingly ‘delicate’. In a similar trend: Kit, while being a man who is a skilled fighter, is short in stature and shows no obvious musculature. His voice is soft, and if anything, he is more sensitive than either of the other two protagonists. In this way, *Displaced* – just like *Eon/Eona* – demonstrates that judging a person by their outer appearance can be problematic at best.

As well as the two dragonriders, Harriet’s character also possesses traits and abilities not normally associated with either her gender or her age, but which are readily accepted by the people around her. In *Eon/Eona*, Eona faces a constant struggle to be regarded as equal, and her gender was seen as a detriment, however in *Displaced*, Harriet is seen as quite capable and independent from the outset. While Eona could be said to be equally competent, the difference in *Displaced* is that Harriet’s skill is readily accepted and acknowledged, with the earliest example being when Harriet approaches her father:

Harriet stopped by the back fields on her way out. Her father was taking care of the sheep.

“Going camping for the weekend.”
“Have you finished all your homework?” He was her father, after all, and he certainly had his priorities straight.

“Yes dad,” she sighed like a typical teenager, lying through her teeth.

“Where are you going?”

“I thought I’d explore the area a bit. Maybe hike around the Crater Lakes.”

“Do you have a first aid kit?”

“Yes,” she answered quickly, almost managing to keep a straight face.

“You don’t. Go get one. And take the spare phone.”

“Yes, dad,” she sighed, walking back to the house.

“And Harriet?” her father called after her when she was almost out of earshot.

“Have a good time!”

(Displaced, Chapter 4)

Harriet is here demonstrating several traits that have historically been associated with the male gender, such as a desire to go out and get dirty while camping, a desire to explore the rugged bush, as well as a level of capability and independence. Harriet’s father is neither shocked nor worried at the fact that his sixteen-year-old daughter intends to go camping alone in the bush. Like many Australian country families, they operate under different expectations and beliefs to city-folk. In the country, children are – or rather, can be – much more independent, and through their various jobs around the farm, can potentially have much more trust placed in them by their parents. It should be noted at this point that while this discussion has established that Harriet is indeed capable, the role of dragons in the narrative – much like their role in Eon/Eona – is that they allow the rest of the world to see it too.

The three dragons in the narrative also subvert notions of epistemology of the visual though the disparity between their genders and their appearance and attributes. Elayne’s character possesses (or rather, is partnered with) a blue dragon, which is a female colour, but which is also arguably the most powerful. The Blues possesses the second-largest physical size (after the Copper dragons – also female), as well as the strongest amour. In addition to their physical might, the blue dragons also have the ability to breathe fire, making them even more dangerous. The male Dragonrider Kit, conversely, is partnered with the black dragon Nighteyes. Despite being a male and older, the black dragon is physically diminutive, barely the size of a large bull. It does, however, have the best night vision, and is the fastest flyer, making it ideally suited for missions involving stealth, rather than strength. Harriet’s
dragon also defines the norm, subverting not only the gender stereotypes the dragons embody, but also the dragon stereotypes held by the riders themselves:

“She’s perfectly formed, and she shows the normal signs of growth. How long did you say she’s been out of the shell for?” Elayne asked.

“Five days.”

Elayne’s eyes widened. “No … that’s not possible. Surely you’re mistaken?”

“No, I know the exact day of her hatching.”

“But … she’s big enough to have been out for a month already. She’s already double her birth size, and she’s larger than any five-day-old has a right to be.”

*(Displaced, Chapter 8)*

Elayne’s comments reveal a particular assumption about dragons: that they have a ‘normal’ and defined growth pattern, and that all dragons – or at least all blue dragons – should follow the ‘predictable norm’. Elayne also uses the word ‘perfectly formed’ suggesting by extrapolation that there is an imperfect formation: a concept that while not necessarily good or bad, does parallel a wider societies ides about ‘perfect/imperfect’ gender body shapes.

Cloud – Harriet’s dragon – is larger, stronger, faster, and more intelligent that what the Dragonriders would customarily accept. In each of these instances, the dragon’s attributes run counter to the stereotypical gender attributes, with the females being larger and tougher and the males being smaller and weaker. It serves to highlight to the reader yet again that gender and personal attributes are not intrinsically linked, and that one’s capability or suitability for a role or task is unrelated to the physicality of their birth.

In a final reiteration of this idea, when Harriet learns of the existence of other dragons, she is quick to question what attributes and abilities her own dragon would have. She is most curious about colour, size, and ability – everything that the representation of the narrative’s dragonrace is using to represent the stereotypical human genders. This conversation could be likened to that of an expectant parent: wanting to know the sex of their child, to know what sort of future they will have. Elayne’s character acts as the reinforcement of the ‘positive’ views: it does not matter what the attributes are, and there is no way to tell in advance what someone will be capable of based simply on their gender (or in this case, their species). The only way to know ones’ abilities is to wait for them to grow up, and actually develop and display them.
The notion that gender is a social construction is something that must be kept in mind while analysing literature, because “in terms of gender and sexuality, there is a tendency for texts to offer subject positions that express the assumptions and ideologies of the dominant cultural groups” (Mallan, 2009, p. 8). This idea ties back to Trites’ suggestion that notions of gender are intrinsically related to notions of power: by reinforcing or challenging the dominant cultural ideology, a text can reinforce or subvert the status quo. It is understandable that societies have a vested interest in perpetuating their current ideologies – notions of what is right and what is wrong – even if the ideologies unjustly discriminate against people with minority sexual-orientation identifications. As child psychologist and moral-development specialist Carol Collins argues:

Creating in young people an awareness of right and wrong – as defined by the society in which they live – and empowering those young people to do what is right is one of the most important things a society can do to protect and preserve itself” (1996, p. 2).

The problems arise, then, when a society’s given definition or standard for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are exclusive – rather than inclusive – of ‘alternative’ gender subsets (the heteronormative male/female dichotomy). Thus, there is great value to be gained from a text depicting people of alternative genres (gender-fluid, multi-gender, transgender, etc) or even people of a single gender, but who possesses the attributes and characteristics of another.

While establishing a character’s gender as multi-faceted may seem trivial, it is a practice that has been demonstrably (Garcia 2014) uncommon in popular Western media, at least with regards to female characters. It has been argued (Bechdel, 2013; Garcia, 2014) that with regards to popular modern Western literature, female characters have a tendency to only be superficially created, if they are present at all; that their only real purpose is to fill a perceived gender imbalance, or to act as a love interest for the male protagonist (Garcia, 2014). To highlight this imbalance, in her 1985 comic strip cartoonist Allison Bechdel created the Bechdel Test, which has since gained significant fame as a method of identifying gender bias in film and literature (2013, p. 4). The test is straightforward: to pass it, a work must have (1) at least two female characters, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something other than men (Bechdel, 2013). The following extract from Displaced shows how little is required to pass the test:

Normally Harriet would have hated having to stay at the airport for nine hours, but three weeks on the road had changed her perspective somewhat.

The airport had a changeroom equipped with hot showers, and after a few
hasty purchases from the gift shop, she was luxuriating under the hot water. It seemed like she was only under there for seconds, but when Elayne finally collected her and passed over a gaudy ‘G’day: Australia #1’ towel, over thirty minutes had passed.

“I don’t think I’d be exaggerating,” Harriet spoke to Elayne as the two of them dried off their hair, “when I say that was unquestionably the best shower of my life.”

“I’m still getting used to them,” Elayne confessed with a smile. “The fact you can just turn a knob and have hot running water flow out … there was magic in Brock and the Dragonlands, but nothing could match that. The first time I saw a shower all those years ago, someone had to come and drag me out of there,” she giggled. “I’d been there for three hours.”

(Displaced, Chapter 12)

A simple conversation between two females about a mutual love of a hot shower. Seemingly inconsequential, leading one to perhaps believe that the Bechdel Test is irrelevant, yet it is a test which shockingly few ‘popular’ works pass. The original Star Wars trilogy (Lucas, 1977; 1980; 1983) fails it, as does James Cameron’s Avatar (2009): the highest grossing movie in history. Even the Lord of the Rings trilogy fails the test: indeed, in the whole 10+ hours of film, or 1100+ pages of text, not once do two female characters even talk to each other. While this discussion may seem tangential, the popularity of the texts means that the discussion relates directly back to the notion that “stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and under-representation of female characters contribute negatively to children’s development” (Hamilton, et al, 2006, p. 757). These negative contributions could include – but are not limited to – limiting limit their career aspirations, framing their attitudes about their future roles as parents and even influencing their personality characteristics. Regardless of the gender/sexuality of the audience, a biased representation of 50% of the population can only be detrimental. When this occurs, it can result in audiences, both male and female alike, developing the belief that women are only ‘supporting characters’ in real life as well. Rather than well-developed humans in their own right, an entire gender is reduced to the role of ‘prizes’ to be won. This is visible can already been seen in the stereotypical action movie or video game archetypal plot: defeat the villain, save the world, get the girl. In this – just like in the depictions of women in some of the aforementioned texts – the woman is reduced to nothing more than a milestone. Indeed her actual identity is irrelevant: any other female could potentially be substituted in, with no other alterations to
the narrative needed. Many texts actively avoid this idea of gender typecasting, promoting multifaceted characters that are not simple stereotypical portrayals of one gender, but are whole and well-developed individuals in their own right.

In his 2014 study, Garcia conducted an investigation into the Bechdel test, developing a tool to quantify the effects of gender bias in media by examining large datasets of transcripts and dialogues from social media websites. In a comparison between movies and social media, Garcia found that there is a distinct male bias in Twitter – the largest social network – and movies, with the narrative dialogue of Twitter being more reminiscent of movies that do not pass the Bechdel test than those who do (2014, p. 4). Further, in an analysis of the ‘share’ rate of movie trailers (Twitter users reposting trailers they find interesting for their follower to also watch), it was found that trailers that do pass the Bechdel test are less popular than those which don’t, and that the users that share them tend to interact less with other male social networkers. This research relates to YA literature in that empirically supports the scholarly notions of a prevalent gender bias in (Western) discourse, and its far-reaching flow-on effects in society on online communities. This points, as Garcia suggests (2014, p. 1), to the subconscious components of gender inequality that may prevent many individuals from assessing their own gender biases in their everyday behaviour. Gender inequality, then, is enacted, but rarely consciously reflected upon, creating a pattern of biases that remains unnamed, despite being experienced by all. To return to the discussion on gender typecasting: the movement to subvert gender typecasting and depict multifaceted characters serves as an attempt to highlight these unnamed biases, and in doing so, demonstrate some of the flaws in society’s stereotypical assumptions. Rather than seeming tangential, an examination of gender biases in movies and social media relates directly back to YA literature because of the already-firmly-established role that YA literature played in the transmission of social mores and ideologies (Stephens, 1992). An examination of movies and social media reveals an undeniable, empirical bias, and YA literature holds a position whereby it can actively either support or challenge that bias based on the ideologies conveyed by YA authors.

Two texts that offer a subversion of ‘traditional’ gender-biased roles are Alison Goodman’s *Eon* and *Eona* (2010; 2012), which both provide an exploration of gender typecasting. Without exception, the Dragoneyes and their apprentices are male, and the reasoning behind this is stated early in the narrative. *Eon* establishes from the outset what the gender views of the fantasy world are, with
the blurb of the novel stating that “women are only hidden wives or servants” and the prologue further explaining:

> Women have no place in the world of dragon magic. It is said they bring corruption to the art, and do not have the psychical strength or depth of character needed to commune with an energy [spiritual] dragon. It is also thought that the female eye – too practiced at gazing at itself – cannot see the truth of the energy world (Goodman, 2010, p.2).

It is clear, then, that aspersions are placed on the entire female gender. Not only is physical size referenced, but the prologue also suggests that women are – as an entire gender – too vain and self-absorbed to be able to comprehend the workings of the wider world. It also states that there is ‘no place’ for women: not only are they barred accesses, but by extension, their very presence in the world of dragon magic (and as such, the narrative’s world of leadership and influence) is an affront to common sense. Most modern audiences would find this problematic – to say the least – however in the fictionalised world, the arrangement is portrayed as being not only acceptable, but as productive: the male Dragoneyes and their bonded dragons successfully act as China’s caretakers, thereby allowing female characters to spend their time on other (presumably) more ‘worthwhile’ pursuits, such as combing their hair or cleaning their husbands’ shoes. Furthermore, by implication, it is shown that the traits society values are social-awareness, clarity of perception, physical strength, and purity/lack of corruption. As such, the boys chosen to be presented to the dragons are those boys who are perceived to embody those qualities, as well as, of course, an ability to commune with the spiritual, which will be the cornerstone of their Dragoneye lives, if chosen. The flawed logic behind this belief is demonstrated through both the characters of Eona, as well as her Mirror Dragon. Eona proves herself to be just as capable as any of her male counterparts, and in many cases more so, and the female Mirror Dragon proves to be the missing link in the dragon ‘scale’, balancing out the others, and without whom there can be no harmony. The female gender, then, is demonstrably multifaceted and not easily typecast. The extract also serves to highlight the explicit gender biases of the created world. When biases remain unnamed and unuttered, then there is little opportunity for conscious reflection on them. Conversely, when they are presented in clear black-and-white text, it allows for a reader to reflect on them, and come to a decision about their validity, and their legitimacy.
*Displaced* also depicted a multifaceted character list that resists initial attempts at typecasting. At the forefront is Harriet herself, a character who is able to have a wistful sigh over a pretty dress, but is also just as comfortable in a stereotypical male setting: working on the land. This duality is highlighted at multiple points throughout the text. One such example is the following, a retrospective discussion between Harriet and Elayne while clothes shopping:

> At the end of the day, their purchases had been more practical than indulgent – new jeans and shirts for both of them, and new boots for Harriet – but that didn’t stop them from sighing wistfully over the pretty dresses in one of the boutique shops.

Elayne made a comment to Harriet that while there were many things she missed about their old lives, the clothing was not one of them. In Brock, Elayne had said, the people had dressed for practicality, and silks and gowns had been reserved only for the most special of occasions. As a dragonrider, her clothing had been more practical than most, and she’d never been considered important enough for anyone to buy her nice things.

“What do you mean, you weren’t important enough?” Harriet had asked incredulously. “You rode a massive fire-breathing dragon!”

“Not then I didn’t. I was only eleven when I bonded with my dragon, and before that, I was an orphan. A maid who cleaned the chamberpots of lords more influential and important than I could ever aspire to be.” Elayne had looked at Harriet sadly, her hand still clutching the ruffled fabric of the dress.

(*Displaced*, Chapter 11)

In this small narrative, the first thing of note is the purchases made: while the women appreciate the inherent beauty of the pretty dresses, their actual selections are boots and jeans: clothing which has a well-established utilitarian origin, and which (arguably) to this day is more commonly associated with everyday workwear than with fashion or aesthetics. Even the descriptor used for the dress store, a “boutique shop” is a title reserved for smaller, specialist stores that sell luxury items. Elayne also reveals several things, most notably the conditions of her old world. Brock is a land comparable to the empire Goodman constructs in *Eona*, where the patriarchy is clearly dominant, and where women hold a subservient place. Elayne is a chambermaid, serving people “more influential than [she] could ever hope to be.” This is a telling statement on the opportunities Brock offered, and on the potential for upward social mobility. Like *Eona*, Elayne was never given an opportunity pre-dragon to
demonstrate her capabilities to the world. In this sense, Elayne, like the majority of the women in Brock, would definitely have been restricted to a very select, stereotypical role. It is overtly suggested that if the dragon had never bonded with Elayne, then she would still be back in Brock, serving as a chambermaid at the whims of a male lord. As with Eona, though, the arrival of the dragon allowed Elayne to ‘escape’ her disempowered life, and to allow the world to see how capable she is. Furthermore, Harriet’s initial outburst in the first passage is also telling of her own world-views. Harriet doesn’t challenge the fact that Elayne came from a world where women ‘had nice things bought for them’, but instead leaps immediate to outrage at the injustice that a dragonrider could ever be considered ‘not-important.’ This outrage is telling in that it reveals some of the shared gender-stereotypes with Harriet’s own world (styled after modern-day realistic Australian society), namely the active role a male has in buying ‘things’ for the passive female who ‘accepts’ them. Like the aforementioned prologue to Eon, this excerpt also serves to explicitly state the typecasting prevalent, and the gender biases at work within the text, thereby allowing the reader to consciously reflect on their own views, and their own opinions of the events depicted (Garcia, 2014).

With regards to typecasting, it is important to note, though, that while Harriet is shown as being capable and practical this does not necessary equate to being depicted as ‘masculine’. The narrative constantly reinforces Harriet’s femininity, without belabouring the issue, just as in the aforementioned dress-window excerpt. Harriet’s competence is further reinforced by the every-day manner in which she goes about both her duties on the farm, and her life in general:

Throwing two bags of feed onto the back of a quad bike, Harriet drove them down to the chicken coop and cut them open. Usually she liked to spend some time with the birds and speak to them, but today it was all she could do to just dump the food and go.

Harriet parked her quad bike back in the barn, but as she snapped her bicycle helmet on and slung her school bag over her back, she looked down at her watch in worry. Period one started in less than half an hour, and it was easily a forty minute ride to get there. If she had one more ‘late’, then her teacher would give her a Saturday detention. And a Saturday detention required signed parental letters, so her father would find out, and she couldn’t allow that to happen.
Considering the time again, she eyed the quad bike with a critical eye.

*If I keep it to the back roads, and I don’t park it at the actual school...*

Harriet knew what she was doing was illegal, but it was hard to feel bad about it when she’d been on quads since she was old enough to walk. *I can handle one better than most adults can handle a car*, the arrogance wasn’t lost on her, but it was true nonetheless. She did make a point of putting on an extra jumper and her father’s riding jacket and helmet. Hopefully if anyone was to see her, they wouldn’t realise she was only fifteen. (*Displaced*, Chapter 2)

Again, the duality of Harriet’s character is highlighted. This juxtaposing passage serves the purpose of illustrating that Harriet is not a one-dimensional character. Harriet can demonstrate ‘masculine’ traits, such as ‘throwing’ the feed bags (presumably large and heavy) with ease onto the quad bike, without struggling or acting daintily; while also demonstrating ‘feminine’ traits, such as stopping to talk to and mother the chickens, showing sensitivity and maternal instincts for their wellbeing. She is clearly safety-conscious, ‘snapping on a helmet’, but also is willing to take risks. She does not operate in a binary world of clear black-and-white, but in one in which there are many shades of grey. She recognises that her actions are unquestionably legally-suspect, but tempers this with the moral discussion on social practices not always adhering to legal requirements.

Building on the discussion of the epistemology of the visual (society judging people based on what they look like) and typecasting (society judging people based on their characteristics and behaviours) is the significance of names and labels. Society, and by extension people in general, have a fixation on labelling people and things, for that is how our understanding begins. The problematic nature of this, however, is clear: it can be harmful to label a person into one category or group when they might not necessarily fit into it. For example, it is harmful to label someone as female or male simply based on their physiology when they might identify as a different gender. Because of the fixation with labels – and all of the connotations they carry – there is a tendency for some people to resist labelling, especially when the label would cause a social stigma to be associated with them. For most of the narrative of *Eona*, Eona’s journey could be said to be a stark embodiment of Trites’ (2014) argument that personal survival is predicated on understanding and conforming to the ideological power-hierarchies inherent in a given society. To access the dragon, Eona conformed to the patriarchy and succeeded, avoiding the fate of dying as a female slave. Trites’ central idea, however, is somewhat
subverted by the narrative’s denouement, where it is revealed that while Eona was ‘chosen’ by her dragon, and has an extremely acute awareness of it – she had been unable to fully channel the dragon’s celestial power into the earthly realm. The events of the narrative do not conform to Trites’ notions because Eona’s personal survival was hampered, not aided, by her conformation to societal names, expectations, and labels. The book’s climax coincides with the revelation that Eona’s stunted ability comes from her refusal to expose her real self to the rest of the world. The reader is reminded of the moment of bonding when ‘Eon’ first met the dragon, and what she was thinking and feeling:

My true name surged through me, dredged from the very depths of my being.
I had to call my [real] name to the world, celebrate the truth of our union. It was the dragon’s demand.
‘No!’
The name filled my head, thundering through it, spiking into crescendos of pain. Eona. Eona. Eona…
‘No!’

I am Eon. (2010, p. 96).

The Mirror Dragon’s only demand of Eona is that she admits to the world who she really is. Instead, Eona denies her femininity, and continues with her male guise, resulting in the dragon’s decision to still ‘join’ with her, while denying Eona the use of its powers. The first-person narration allows the reader to vicariously experience the power of the dragon as it “thunders” through Eona’s head, as well as the sensory experience of having Eona’s true name “surge” through the body; both of which are experience laden with suggestions of power. The first-person narration here also highlights the extreme psychological torment Eona is suffering as a result of her denial of her true self. She pretends to be what she believes the narrative-world wants her to be, and as a result she is both metaphorically and literally hurt, suffering from “spiking crescendos of pain”. These spikes of pain, while literal to Eona, could also be symbolic of the pains faces by real-world people who deny their true selves; pain which could manifest itself in the form of self-hatred, loathing, anxiety, disillusionment, psychological unsettlement, disengagement from family and friends, and possibly even self-harm. This sends an overt message to the audience: pretending to be something you’re not may gain results in the short-term, however runs a high risk of coming undone in the long term. The character of Eona and her actions could be said to be a symbolic denial of her own femininity, if it were not for the fact she’d thus far never accepted it: her sex had always been viewed disfavourably, both by the character, and by the narrative. This denial also highlights the significance that names have, and the connotations
they carry, not just with labelling things, but as a way of identification. Eona’s struggle is an apt embodiment and exploration of Stephens’ notion that ideologically-laden texts situate the reader within a complex of social practices so as to construct a number of self-other interactions. The crucial ideological implication then is whether the self demands the other replicate the self’s desires; whether the other overwhelms the self; or whether the other can negotiate the self so as to encourage personal growth (1992, pg 282). Eona moves through all three of Stephens’ suggested varieties of readings, with her name – an otherwise natural part of the world – acting as the lynchpin of the character’s identify after becoming laden with symbolic meaning. During the first self-other interaction, Eona’s character denies the self, and is overcome by the other. Later in the narrative Eona reveals her gender to the world – an embodiment of the self demanding the other replicate its desires – and in doing so, attains the full extent of her power:

‘Eona…’ I whispered, and the truth of the name was like a claw of light ripping through the misunderstanding, shredding the fear. I reached into the overwhelming blue, forcing in a thin sliver of hope. (2010, p. 417)

A large part of Eona’s growth as a character is her growth in understanding of her own place in the world, as represented by her acceptance of her name. When Eona ceases to deny her true identity, her dragon’s powers are finally made accessible to her, and so begin the process of the self and the other negotiating a balance, so as to coexist harmoniously. In a reiteration of the ‘positive acceptance of self’ message, the narrative concludes with the final revelation that the twelfth dragon is in fact itself a female, and it chose Eona as a partner because it sensed a kindred spirit. In this manner the narrative offers a scathing review of the empire’s fixation on labels and conforming to expectations, with the narrative stating that the twelfth dragon voluntarily withdrew itself from the narrative-world’s celestial cycle five hundred years earlier out of protest over the way women were treated. There was a day when the Dragoneyes always included at least one woman in their ranks, and when that system was abandoned, the narrative-world – as a direct result – became subjected to one year of horrible disasters for every eleven years of prosperity. Through the narrative’s depiction of such an arrangement – and such actions on behalf of the Mirror Dragon – the narrative is highlighting the problematic nature of having a society dominated by one gender, while at the same time offering a commentary on the steps possible to ‘fix’ things.
While the character of Eona explores the relationship between gender, power, and label/names, she is not the only character to do so. Another central character is the ‘Lady’ Dela: a transgender woman who identifies with the female (gender), but who was born biologically male (sexuality). As a powerful Dragoneye with access to a dragon, Eona is paired with Lady Dela by the powers-that-be, ironically as a punishment, but in a turn that ended as a blessing. Lady Dela is a foreigner to the empire, and it is explained that in her home tribe, she is considered a ‘twin soul’ possessing the body of one gender but the soul of both, and deserving reverence and respect. In the empire though, she is relegated to the lesser role of ‘Contraire’: a word meaning both possessing two opposites, and being contradictory. The unsaid suggestion is, of course, that (the empire believes) Contraires go against the natural order of things; contradicting what the Gods themselves have wrought. The result of this arrangement is that the empire is yet again portrayed as being ‘backwards’, with the effect compounded when it is held in comparison with the more progressive of Dela’s people. The fact that the empire within the narrative condemns Dela’s people and labels them ‘barbarians’ only further serves to weaken the empire’s own moral standing from the implied reader’s perspective. The duality of Dela’s character, and the contradiction in “her” nature – is established clearly from the outset, with the reader’s first impression of her being supplied through the focal point of Eona:

Although every move of Dela’s was that of a woman, I could now see the man behind the careful paint and rich clothing. And yet she was not a man.

She was Lady Dela. It was very confusing (p. 123).

Initially, Eona’s character was just as much an embodiment of Weigman’s epistemology of the visual as anyone who believes that Eona was ‘Lord Eon’ simply because she dressed differently and adopted a deeper voice. This is the first time Eona sees ‘the man behind’ the visual, and her character finds the experience to be ‘very confusing’. The hardships of Dela’s existence are further elaborated upon when ‘Lord Eon’ is visiting Dela’s quarters. Thinking she is not being observed, Eona holds up a pair of earrings to her ears. Eona contemplates what life would have been like if she had been allowed to be her own gender and wear pretty things, but when Lady Dela catches her, Dela understandably jumps to the wrong conclusion: assuming she has found a kindred soul with transgender inclinations. Dela gently takes the earrings off ‘Lord Eon’, stating:

‘I wish you could wear these things and feel safe, but there are people around here who will not tolerate this kind of difference. They will hurt you. Like they have hurt me.’ She pulled down [her] robe. A series of raw gashes, only
half healed, marred the smooth, flat skin over her heart. A character [was] carved into her flesh: *demon.* (p. 198).

The reader is clearly positioned to sympathise with Lady Dela’s character: if not for the mental hardships living with opposing gender/sexuality might bring, then at the very least by feeling the basic pity one human feels for another (even fictional) who has been physically abused. It is also likely no coincidence that the wound is over her heart, and reference is made to the “smooth” skin, with all the connotations of hairlessness and femininity it carries. Dela’s body was defaced in an area where her gender and her sexuality clearly did not match: her breasts. The focus of the narrative then shifts to Eona, and the juxtaposition of circumstances lends itself well to a transfer of emotion from the reader, further reinforcing the injustice felt against the empire’s patriarchy. After seeing Dela’s scars, Eona thinks:

> I knew she was right. If anyone found out about what I really was, then they would do more than brand me with their hate, they would kill me. A female Dragoneye was a travesty of everything natural in the world (p. 199).

The language of Eona’s thoughts is salient: she uses ‘travesty’ meaning a ‘false representation’. This is demonstrably false, as it is later discovered that a female Dragoneye is not only possible, but historically necessary. Further, Eona depicts the unjust system as ‘natural in the world’. This narrative strategy positions the reader to feel sympathy for Eona, and for her lack of opportunity to experience social freedom. Importantly, this thought not only expresses the hopelessness of the position Eona’s character finds herself in, but the narrative now provides the audience with a clear origin: the unjust society that could ever condone such a ‘natural’ system, or a world that required it. Still, the situation is not without redemption. Lady Dela’s character offers Eona some bolstering advice (thinking that ‘Lord Eon’ was curious about what it would be like to be a woman, rather than guessing Eona’s true identity). When questioned about Lady Dela’s decision to choose the life of a ‘powerless’ woman, Dela’s character replies with a comment about how the first time she tried on a dress, she “felt complete” (p. 199). She then continues:

> ‘You are wrong when you say there is no power in being a woman. I found power in accepting the truth of who I am. It may not be the truth that others can accept, but I cannot live any other way. I do not wear women’s clothing because I am a woman in here’, she touched her head, ‘and here,’ she touched her heart. (p. 199)
Dela’s character directly correlates notions of truth with notions of power, and that false-labelling results in an untruth, and by extension a loss of power. This false labelling (and resulting power-loss) could be the result of a false label applied by society, or a false label applied by the self. Either way, returning to the previous point made in reference to Eona’s declaration of her name: a denial of the true self can be nothing but detrimental. A healthy person “cannot live any other way” but by accepting and publicly adhering to their own identity. Dela’s character also highlights that no matter what the outward appearance, be they man-made (clothing) or natural (biology), the true self inside will always remain, and it is this that must be one’s guiding force. Since Eona’s character is now established as an engaging figure, this effect is then extended to include Dela. Once readers are aligned with Eona’s character as a wronged person, they are hence more likely to view Dela as a wronged character. Ultimately, Lady Dela’s support works to bolster the morale and confidence of Eona’s character. As Eona comments: Dela “is a man living as a woman. She is a survivor. She would not align herself with a hopeless cause” (p. 198). Eona’s character draws hope from Dela’s: if someone as politically-savvy as Dela could believe in Eona, then surely it is possible for Eona to believe in herself. Ultimately, it is this newfound self-belief that allows Eona’s character to finally accept her femininity, announcing it to the world and gaining access to her dragon’s powers. Eona and Lady Dela’s characters both explore similar ideas: someone born of one gender, living in a world under the assumption of another. While their circumstances are different (Dela genuinely identifies with her chosen gender while Eona is forced to adopt the person of ‘Lord Eon’) both characters reinforce the notion of being true to oneself, regardless of the sexuality. Dela must be true to her identification as a woman, while Eona must be true to her own femininity. When Eona tries to masquerade as a man (or, through suggestion, if Dela were to deny herself) they would suffer, both emotionally, and otherwise (Eona loses her powers and her dragon). Trites’ (2000) ideas about power lend themselves well to this arrangement, as it involves adolescents and a “negotiation of the varied institutions which shape them”. It is only through this negotiation that Eona is able to realise her own place in the narrative, complete with corresponding powers and limitations. By adopting an alternate label, both Lady and Dela seek acceptance (with varying degrees of success) and their situation involves a negotiation of their own power and the powers inherent to the dominant empire hierarchy (Trites, 2000). Linking back to our previous discussion, this process of identification is a concrete embodiment of Weigman’s ‘epistemology of the visual’: because Lady Dela dresses and acts like a woman, conforming to the society’s stereotypes and expectations of women, she is (on the whole) dealt with as such. Likewise, because Eona adopts the mannerisms, appearance, and attitudes of a stereotypical male, society readily accepts her as such.
Displaced also presents a world where central characters demonstrate a tendency to name and label things. It has already been discussed how when Harriet – the newest Dragonrider – first meets Kit and Elayne, she questions them about what attributes and abilities Cloud will grow to have. While giving their explanation, Kit and Elayne outline each dragon species, rolling off attributes like a checklist:

“My blue. She’s a firebreather. Blues are also large – the second largest breed there is, equal with the greens and second only to the coppers. The greens are firebreathers too, but they’re much rarer than the blues. The coppers are the largest, so they don’t get any special abilities, but they are also the strongest, and their scales are the hardest. That means they can take a real beating without getting hurt, and they can uproot even the largest trees. Coppers can also carry multiple riders if needed, even when the men are loaded down with weapons and armour. The oranges are a little smaller than the blues and greens, and instead of fire they have acid sacs in the bottom of their jaws. And the acid will melt steel, and it burns through flesh like a weight through water.” She took a deep breath. “And then there’re blacks, of course, like Kit’s Nighteyes. They’re the smallest breed – no bigger than two fat cows, really – but they are also the fastest, and they have the best vision, which makes them perfect for scouts or for night-time sentries. They can even see in the dark as clear as day.” (Displaced, Chapter 8)

Each breed is relegated to its own category, with its own distinct attributes. If something is massive and thickly armoured, then it must be a Copper. If a dragon has excellent night vision, then it must be a Black. If it has acid sacs, then it can only be Orange. This can be likened to gender stereotypes: if you like violent sports then you must be boy; if you like playing with dolls then you must be a girl, etc. when Harriet is concerned that her dragon does not fit into the predetermined categories, she is quickly reassured:

“There could be any number of explanations,” Kit hurriedly spoke “Maybe there is something in the air that’s caused her colouring to change. Or maybe there was a variation in the shell. It could have been what she’s been eating; and that would also explain how she’s growing so fast. There are just too many
possibilities to narrow it down. It could even be a residual effect from the transportation. My dragon was down for a week after we arrived, and it was full-grown to begin with. I can’t imagine what effect the transition might have had on an egg.”

“The main thing to remember,” Elayne spoke soothingly, “is that Cloud is healthy and happy in every way, and even a blind man could tell that she loves you more than life itself. You two have a great bond. And now we just need to get you to safety.”

(Displaced. Chapter 8)

Kit is quick to point out that there are myriad factors that go into creating ones attributes and identity, not just their birth. Both nature and nurture play a part, and it’s ridiculous to try and ‘narrow down’ the root cause of a person’s very essence. This demonstrates that while they dragonriders do possess a firm belief of what each dragon ‘should’ be and look like, they recognise that there is room for variation. Their views also highlight their prejudice however: they try to search for a reason for Cloud’s being, as if she were an aberration, rather than just unique and individual: if there is something different for the dragonriders, they must think that there is an equivalent and logical cause for it. Following this, Elayne continues with a reinforcement that while Cloud may not be a traditional ‘blue’, that despite whatever name is chosen – despite whatever label is applied – the Dragonriders reference the only important aspect: the Cloud is happy and healthy, and if full of love and life. This message explicitly states that skill, attributes, and abilities (and by extension gender itself) are irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, so long as the child has the proverbial ten-fingers/ten-toes. In a way, the only breed dichotomies of Brock could be likened to the older gender mindsets of the Dragonriders’ world: the breeds were fixed in place, with no room for change, and so too were the gender-specific societal roles. In the ‘modern’ setting of Australia, however, the breeds of dragons have been subverted, and so too has the traditional gender stereotypes.

A further consideration is the context in which the piece is produced. The relationship that a text has with power has already been discussed (Trites, 2000), and the nature of a text is that it can either reinforce or challenge a societal viewpoint, or a some combination of both. In his seminal text Orientalism (1978) literary theorist Edward Said explored the tendency for people to designate familiar space as ‘their land’ and the unfamiliar space beyond as ‘barbarian land’:
A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call "the land of the barbarians." In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary, [in that it] does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours".

(1978, p. 54)

Said speaks of a physical, tangible, space, but the same holds true for a notion, with the ‘space’ being the area in which the notion is accepted. As Said explains, those who are outside the space – and who do not hold the notion – are considered barbarians, the ‘other’ both in their territory and in their mentality. The heart of Said’s notion is the arbitrariness of this sometimes-deepl y held belief: the point of difference in opinion or thought may be minor, but it is still enough to separate, and to create a distinct us/them dichotomy. Such differences may arise from differences in opinions of class, religion, or gender. While humans are, as a species, multifaceted and diverse, humanity itself has an undeniable history of expansion and tendencies towards imperialism. The natural progression of this notion is to constantly strive to push the boundaries: further increasing ‘our land’ while at the same time reducing the barbarian land: an idea at the very heart of colonialism.

Said’s concept of us/them territory could be said to be embodied by the character of Eona, again in the abstract: with territory being areas of acceptance. The obvious ‘territory’ in *Eon/Eona* is that which is occupied by the protagonist herself, as exemplified by those characters who accept her, and those areas where she can ‘be herself’. At the outset of the narrative, Eona’s ‘territory’ consists of only herself, and the kitchen slave she befriended (abstract territory) as well as the small corner of the kitchen in which the two of them are safe and free from interruption or persecution (concrete territory). It was only when Eona’s character is alone or with the slave that she feels she understands the world, and isn’t subjected to the ‘barbarianism’ of Empire society. In *Eon/Eona*, the “them territory” in the us/them dichotomy is occupied both physically and mentally by those who will not accept Eona’s character if they knew the truth about her identity. Eona’s world is full of misogynistic
characters: even the ones who seemingly empower her – such as her ‘master’, who allows her to contend for Dragoneye status despite knowing the truth of her gender – are actually subverting her for their own uses/gain, and as such, are only contributing to her initial disempowerment. It is simply more beneficial for their own ends for them to keep her secret, rather than challenge the status quo. Her master, for example: rather than being an accepting and meritorious man, is merely presented as an opportunistic slave-owner, who is so dismissive of the life of a female that he cares not if she is caught and killed when her ruse is (inevitably) discovered. However, when Eona obtains her dragon-bond, her ‘territory’ (both physical and intangible) is increased: her character gains possession of her former master’s physical house and lands, allowing her to both metaphorically and literally shape it to be what she wants. The gardens are replanted in a way theta is pleasing to her, and the occupants of the house (servants and gardeners) are forced to either adopt the ‘progressive’ vies of Eona’s character, or are forced to leave and seek employment and housing elsewhere. Similarly, Eona’s character is able to also recruit and inculcate a new inner cadre of attendants and friends, thereby increasing her ‘territory’ again, as more people are noe aligned with her methodological and thoughts. As the narrative continues, Eona’s physical territory and metaphorical territory (again, as represented by an acceptance of the ‘other’, and well as clear notions of the importance of gender equality) continues to expand. When Eona’s character becomes a Dragoneye, she gains a significant block of the royal residence, as well as the people inside. When she is again promoted to advisor, her land is increased to virtually the whole of the royal city. Finally, when she shifts into a leadership role and becomes romantically involved with the Emperor, Eona’s territory now expands to encompass all of the narrative world, with no-one and no-area she cannot exert her influence over. In a sense, Eona’s character undergoes a process of colonisation. She has entered a new area as a foreigner with different ideas and demands, has shaped the new land to her will, regardless of the perceived to the detriment of the existing populace (perceived by the populace itself), and then has used the newfound recourses of the new land to improve her own station and situation, both ideologically and literally.

In a further expansion of Said’s us/them notion of territory, Displaced explores how Harriet expands the metaphorical territory of the dragonriders, as defined by the sphere in which they are accepted and free from persecution. The book’s epilogue details how Harriet safeguards not only her dragon’s life, but also the lives of the other dragons by negotiating a deal directly with the Prime Minister of Australia
himself. Here, Harriet literally expands her ‘territory’ and reduces that which could be deemed barbarous:

It had caused the Prime Minister’s advisers no shortage of headaches to try and find a place, and eventually the suggestion had come from Harriet herself. The Grampians National Park – as well as the several dozen surrounding suburbs and towns – now formed the world’s largest No-Fly-Zone, and the world’s third largest satellite black spot.

It had been part of her negotiations with the Prime Minister. It was always hard negotiating from a position of weakness, but Harriet liked to think she’d done well. Elayne had certainly been happy, and Kit said that the only person who might have been able to do it better was Captain Torven, from their old band. (Displaced, Chapter 27)

The Prime Ministers advisers are presumably highly intelligent and highly educated people, and the problem of the dragons has reduced them to confused answerless people full of ‘headaches’. Harriet, conversely, was able to see to the heart of the issue, and not only offer a ‘suggestion’, but is able to stand her own ground and successfully ‘negotiate’ a very generous settlement. Harriet is now recognised by all as a strong and capable young woman, and the dénouement of the narrative clearly suggests that under her guardianship, the future of dragonkind is in safe hands. This dénouement is also a further example of Said’s (1978) theory about the dichotomy of ‘our land’ versus ‘barbarian land’. At the outset of Displaced the area Harriet can lay claim to (being area where both herself and her bond with her dragon are accepted) is limited to only her bedroom, or perhaps even to the edges of her family farm (if we accept the safe assumption that her father would not persecute her upon learning of the dragon). For the other dragonriders Elayne and Kit, the area is even less: they have nowhere they can call their own. Even their Sydney apartment is more of a safehouse than a home. All areas outside of this ‘territory’ are shown to be barbarous, where normal humans are hunted like beasts by the Suits, and where dragons are no more than beasts themselves, to be used and abused for corporate gain. As the narrative progresses, however, the ‘barbarous’ land is decreased through the dragonriders’ efforts: after helping stop a bushfire, they can claim the Grampians as a place of safety (due to a sense of loyalty from rescues citizens) and later, mirroring Eona’s close relationship with the dominate force, Harriet aligns herself with the Australian Prime Minister, and effectively increases the size of their territory again, to finally end with their own wildlife preserve, and sanctuary across Australia, guaranteed by the Prime Minister himself. In this way, the dragons are functioning as an
agent of change: a catalyst which allows the dragonriders to make colonisation inroads in increasing ‘territory’ that would otherwise be impossible, or at least highly improbable: both in tangible land and – like Eona – in the metaphoric territory occupied by thoughts of acceptance from the other occupants of the physical space.

Dragons in YA literature can play an important role in exploring and subverting notions of gender within literature, and by extension within society itself. Firstly, dragons can act as an equalising force within a text, allowing men and women to be put onto a fair and even playing field, as their access to dragons limits their reliance on physical attributes. In this sense, dragons can allow for characters within the narrative to be viewed and judged based on their own merits, rather than on their gender. *Eona* is a salient example of this: when Eona fully communes with her dragon, and is given access to all of the dragon’s power, she is on an equal standing with the other Dragoneyes despite her diminutive physical stature, and her lack of skill with a sword. The narrative proposes, then, that while one gender might be biologically predisposed to be stronger and taller, in a battle of wills and intelligence, there are no inherent differences. In a similar way, the dragons also act as an equaliser to unfair advantages in technology, such as when the dragons act as a counterbalance to the superior military technology of the Nightmen. In this sense, dragons mimic a supposed gender imbalance in that they are employed as a device to make up for disparity between resources and physical abilities (i.e. the strong get the desired resources simply because they are strong). This idea will be further explored in the subsequent chapter on class and social inequality.

Secondly, the dragons can also act as representations for genders themselves, either directly (in their literal genders) or in a more metaphorical sense, whereby the dragon takes on the attributes or characteristics of a stereotypical gender, and then reinforces or subverts them in some way. One such example is that of the dragons from *Displaced*, who each possess specific characteristics which are at odds with their stereotypical genders. Elayne’s female dragon is the largest and most dangerous, which Kit’s male dragon is the smallest and weakest. In a further subversion, Harriet’s dragon is an unknown quantity: no judgements can be made about her while young, because the only way to see what she will be like is to wait for her to grow up and demonstrate it firsthand. In this sense, dragons can be used within a narrative to highlight the inaccuracies of certain presuppositions held by an example society.
Finally, dragons can act as a catalyst – an otherworldly impetus for social or ideological change, which may stem from the dragon, but which has wider implications. For example, in Goodman’s Eon and Eona, the female Mirror dragon was the agent of change which allowed the titular Eona to bond with a higher power, and forcibly insert herself into the governing body of the Empire. Once inside, even once Eona’s true gender was exposed, the characters around her were required to continue to accept her because the alternative was untenable. Many characters, however, willingly accepted the presence of a female, because after having been exposed to Eona in her male disguise for so long, they were able to see her for the capable and intelligent person she was. The dragons, then, allowed for the truth to be revealed, in a situation where it might otherwise have been impossible.
CHAPTER TWO
Class and Social Inequality

It is important for literature – especially YA literature – to depict differing representations of social class for the same reason it is important to depict differing representations of gender: as “characters portrayed in children’s literature mould a child’s conception of socially accepted roles and values, and indicate how [individuals] are supposed to act” (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994, p.70). For any healthy society, social equality – that is, the ‘evenness’ with which differing groups have access to resources and opportunities – is paramount. Citizens should have the ability genuinely believe that through hard work and perseverance they can succeed, and that the balance of power isn’t isolated to a small, select group of individuals (Marmot, 2004). In this sense ‘class’ refers to the standing an individual occupies within a given society, in terms of monetary wealth, political influence, and access to services. A stereotypical ‘lower class’ will have fewer assets, lower annual income, and reduced access to quality services (education, police support, medical aid, civil infrastructure) while conversely, a stereotypical ‘upper class’ will have the opposite. Classification in these tiers is typically dependent on three factors: level of education, occupation, and income (Marmot, 2004). Social inequality refers to differences in groups of people that are hierarchical in nature. At its most basic, it refers to the hierarchical distribution social, political, economic, and cultural resources. A closely related concept is that of stratification; a more specific and technical term that refers to a model of social inequality that specifies the relationship between particular variables, such as wealth and social standing. It implies the idea of a systematic and enduring pattern of inequality that is transmitted across generations, built into institutions, and practiced in everyday activities. (Habibis & Walter, 2009. p. 3). This raises the question of how problematic defining inequality can be; whether it should only encompass a disparity in wealth, or also take into consideration one’s access to benefits based on who they know (such as having the CEO of a business as a family friend) or the effects of having a lifestyle others consider to be different (overseas holidays, cultural events)? It also questions whether physical or health differences should also be included, as well as what the relationship between poverty and inequality might be. It can be surmised then that representations of class inequality in YA literature are in fact
representations of power, including both the inherent power-structures of a society, and the ways in which it is distributed and abused. (Trites, 2014)

A discussion of class is a logical progression from a discussion of gender ideologies in young adult literature, for a case can be made that class ideologies and gender ideologies overlap significantly (Trites, 2014). Initially this can appear to be a problematic assumption, until one considers that when one gender is being marginalised by society, they are essentially being treated as ‘second-class citizens’. Inequality is inseparable from ideas of social division and the creation of a sense of distance and separation between social groups: “it creates relations of domination and subordination that carry with them judgements about the value of different groups. In identifying some groups as inferior to others, inequality opens the door to processes of dehumanisation and violation of human rights” (Habibis & Walter, 2009. p. 4). Social class, then, constitutes another form of identity politics (Trites 2000, p. 46). Depictions of class ideology in young adult literature are worthy of examination, for YA texts are “important influences that shape us by reflecting the politics and values of our society. Books provide role models: from this, children learn what behaviour is acceptable for them, for their peers, and for adults around them” (Turner-Bowker, 1996, p. 463). The texts then become a source of power, inculcating in the next generation a sense of obligation to think and act a certain way. If an adolescent develops the notion that they are of a ‘lower’ class, then this can influence all aspects of their lives, including – but not limited to – personal happiness, social engagement, likelihood to engage in criminal behaviour, political involvement, and education goals (Lareau, 2003). Essentially, notions of class can become self-fulfilling prophecies, especially if coupled with the notion that one’s social worth is unchangeable. This idea is perhaps best summated by Kathryn Hume: “[young adult] stories encourage belief in the possibility of meaningful action. They deny that the individual is worthless, a negligible statistic. Even at the lowest valuation, this reassurance has psychological value, for people who cannot believe in themselves have trouble engaging in life in any fashion (1984, p 53)”.

Just as dragons are relevant to portrayals of gender imbalances, they also hold a key position in YA portrayals of social inequality in fantasy fiction. Thanks to the current shift in society towards a more inclusive global mindset that does not intentionally discriminate against – or label with negative connotations – minority groups and individuals, it can be problematic if an author marginalises
(intentionally or otherwise) one race or nationality in their work. Rather than highlighting racial disparity, an author could instead be accused of continuing to perpetrate racism themselves. Even at best, they could be accused simply of being overtly didactic, and thus gain no widespread appeal. It is this niche that the use of dragons can occupy: by utilising them as a species or sentient subset, authors can depict the same marginalisation, without fear of accusation of racism. It is in this manner that texts including dragons can act as a conduit for ‘discourse analysis’ (Gordon, 1980, p. 34), a process through which many experts agree “hierarchies may be uncovered and questioned by way of analysing the corresponding fields of knowledge through which they are legitimated.” Essentially, through an examination of the discourse in which they appear, hierarchies (in this case class ideologies) may be broken down to their constitutive elements, and analysed accordingly. Though this method, narratives foreground injustices and can suggest possible future directions (Gordon, 1980).

Two such uses of dragons occur in the two novels that will be examined in this chapter in addition to the previously used creative artefact Displaced. The first is Stephen Deas’ (2009) The Adamantine Palace: a political fantasy set in an empire of nine kingdoms, each with their own royal houses, and each of which are in turn ruled over by a single ‘Speaker’ – a High King selected from among their ranks – who wields their power with an iron fist. In the Nine Kingdoms, political power is determined by personal strength, and personal strength is determined by access to dragons: unintelligent beasts that are good only for rapid transport and waging war. The narrative revolves around the nine royal houses each vying to become the new ‘Speaker’, and the lengths the contenders will go to in order to succeed, not the least of which is their use and abuse of dragons, which are seen as a means to an end. As the history of the Nine Kingdoms states, the original nine kings were the nine knights brave enough to fight back against the dragons, and eventually ‘domesticate’ them. Their descendants continued to rule, and their descendants alone hold the balance of power. The new kings’ closest friends became their warriors and dragonriders, and likewise, their descendants continued to occupy these positions. There is no social mobility in this world (save for the movement of a king to a high king), and the peasantry have no way of breaking free of the same class system their great-great-grandparent occupied.
The second novel is Rachel Hartman’s *Seraphina* (2012), set in the fantastical Kingdom of Goredd, where a human society is approaching the fortieth anniversary of their crushing victory of the sentient dragon societies, ending a war that had raged for decades. The titular character, Seraphina, is a half-human half-dragon hybrid, forced to hide her parentage at a time when dragons are loathed and held under constant suspicion for their ability to adopt a human form, even though they find human emotions and idiomatic expression baffling. Due to the atrocities committed by both sides during the war, and due to the Pyrrhic nature of humanity’s victory in the war against the dragons, society has turned a blind eye to the injustices inflicted upon dragonkind in the intervening years. Injustices include: violent harassment by humans; restrictions on where the dragons can and can’t go; restrictions on who they may interact with; restrictions on where they may live and work; and restrictions on what physical form they are allowed to take. In addition to this, the narrative opens with the decapitating assassination of the human Crown Prince Rufus. This act only serves to heighten tensions during an already tense period, especially since all evidence leads the assassination being perpetrated by dragon. Throughout the narrative, Seraphina treads a fine line between her two peoples as she comes first to the knowledge of her mixed heritage, and then to and understanding, and eventually and acceptance. She knows, however, that she is unlikely to ever find acceptance among her fellow humans, should her secret be revealed. Not only is a dragon-human union illegal according to the laws of both races, but as Seraphina’s human father ominously warns: “few cases [like hers] ever come all the way to trial; the accused have usually been torn to bits by mobs, been burned alive in their houses, or simply disappeared” (2012, p36). With such strict laws in place, it is unsurprising, then, to learn that the dragon races in *Seraphina* are also segregated from the human physically as well as socially.

When discussing social inequality, it is impossible to differentiate it from notions of class, despite claims that “class is dead” (Habibis & Walter, 2009, p. 3). Class is a multi-faceted concept, and to help understand its relationship with social inequality, social scholar Louis Kriesberg divides the larger notion of class into three distinct power relations:

Class inequality – refers to differences in the material privileges associated with positions or the material resources possessed or controlled by persons.

Typically these differences are in money income [sic] and in ownership or control of property.
Status inequality – refers to differences in prestige or honour accorded to persons or positions. The prestige or honour may be based on shared standards regarding lifestyle or ancestry, or on symbols or characteristics associated with different positions, for example uniforms or other special clothing.

Power inequality – refers to differences among people in their ability to impose their will upon others. [This consists of] two forms of power: the ability to command obedience from others, and the ability to refuse control by others. (Kriesberg, 1979. p. 24)

This division will be expanded upon subsequently, however at this stage it is important to note that ‘class’, clearly relates to ideas of power: how it is distributed, and how it can be used to both “impose one’s will upon others” and “refuse control by others”. If one is able to do both of these, then they have significant power (Trites, 2014), and as such occupy a higher ‘class’. It is important to reiterate at the outset that the term ‘class inequality’ as used by Kriesberg is not to be confused with the broader concept of ‘Class’: which is merely one facet thereof. ‘Class’, then, is an encompassing term that covers the interrelation of those three subdivisions.

_The Adamantine Palace_ clearly embodies the notion suggested by Kriesberg regarding the three levels of social inequality, and their interaction. The Speaker clearly has an excessive amount of influence, able to impose his will on others while avoiding having others impose on him. He has greater access to material wealth and possessions, and has a high status level. At the opposite end, the peasantry who work the farms have limited status, no access to wealth (they work land owned by their masters), and are subject to the wills and whims of almost everyone else. In between these two extremes, the various groups mentioned in the aforementioned five-stage hierarchy have staggered levels of inequality, whereby once again, the closer they are to the top of the ‘ladder’, the more favourably they are treated. In _The Adamantine Palace_, then, the dragons act as a visible representation of social inequality. It can be argued that in a modern capitalist society, people ‘get what they deserve’, but it is hard to argue that the dragon-riders ‘deserve’ their status purely from the accident of birth. _The Adamantine Palace_ raises this issue in a non-overtly-didactic manner, leaving it up to the reader to accept – or more likely question – the power structures depicted.
The Adamantine Palace additionally explores the notion of class hierarchies in the way it depicts dragons: the most tangible class differential in the narrative. In order to obtain a dragon, one must belong to the right class, as is explained in the novel's foreword:

When a dragon-rider wishes a new dragon for his eyrie, he will write to one of the dragon-kings or queens, petitioning them for favours. If the rider is wise, the letter will come with a gift. It is understood that the more generous the gift, the more likely the rider will receive a favourable response. The gift is the first of many payments and is made long before a suitable dragon is even born. (p. 1)

It becomes clear that it takes vast amounts of money to obtain a dragon: money that could only be possible for those who already own dragons. It is a never-ending cycle, with the wealthy using their money to become wealthier, and the poorer citizens forever being excluded. The perk of dragon ownership are also elaborated on, summarised perfectly by one of the Nine’s queens:

Being alone on Mistral’s back was one of the nice things about being queen. Everything seemed so small from up in the sky. Over her shoulder, to the rest of the realms, the volcanic Worldspine mountains ran from the desert to the sea. North of Shezira’s eyrie, the empire lands faded into the trackless Deserts of Sand, Stone, and Salt. At the opposite ends of the realms, King Tyan’s capital was built on the shores of the endless Sea of Storms. When she stood among the mountains or in the emptiness of the desert, everything seemed so vast. Yet from up here it was all nothing.

(p. 39)

The ability to ride a dragon is valued, for it put life into perspective for the Queen. It allows her to gain an appreciation of the greater world in which she lived, and what's more, the dragon provides her access to that world. To travel the Nine Kingdoms on foot would be infeasible, yet form the back of her dragon Mistral, she has not only done it, but relishes the doing of it. To bring this into a modern example, it would be as if only one, small, selected group of Australians had access to automobiles, and everyone else only had walking or horseback available. This notion is again reinforced later in the same chapter:
A few hours flight was enough to take them around the south side of the Purple Spur peaks to Drotan’s Top, a dome-shaped hill with a flat crest big enough to land a whole eyrie full of dragons. (p. 52)

The description given seems limited, and almost irrelevant, but it represents a huge disparity in ability. For the Queen, this mountain peak was only “a few hours flight”, but for a person with no dragon, that might represent a journey of weeks and months, and perhaps even then the sheer cliffs would make it impossible. The same could be said for the deserts and mountains references in the previous extract: to get there on foot would involve a fatal journey, but for a dragonrider, it could simply be a lazy Sunday picnic. The dragons not only allow for rapid transport and communication, but they allow for passage to and through areas that are wholly inaccessible to non-dragonriders. In this manner, the inequality is tangible and undeniable: one class has access to areas that are forever denied to citizens not of that class.

Further, the dragons in The Adamantine Palace are also made to represent inequality in the abstract. In one scene Prince Jehal, the Machiavellian would-be king, is being presented with two small dragon statues made out of solid gold by the trader Meteroa:

Meteroa opened the lid. Inside lay three strips of plain silk, two black and one white, and two tiny golden dragons with ruby eyes.

Meteroa pulled out one of the silks and snapped the box shut. “Best that others do not see,” he murmured. “Here. Wear it around your eyes. You will not be disappointed.”

Jehal smiled, and wrapped the black silk around his eyes. Immediately the world seemed to shift and shimmer. For a moment, he thought he saw himself, as if looking through another’s eyes. Jehal ripped away the silk. Meteroa was still holding the box, but now he had it slightly open again. Four glittering ruby eyes peered up at Jehal.

“They can fly. Wear the silk and they will obey your thoughts. They will see and they will listen and you will have their eyes and ears. There will be no secrets you cannot unlock.” (p. 115)

The dragon statues are imbued with magic. Through them, the character of Jehal can spy on his friends and enemies alike, with the statues serving as mobile surveillance drones, reporting only to him and
suggested by none. When these gold ‘statues’ are coupled with the actual dragons Jehal has access to, this privileges him above others contending for the throne, and places him far above the realms of what could be hoped for by the lower classes. Jehal has dramatically increased his ability to impose his will upon others, while in no way compromising himself. The narrative presents these statues as yet another way the upper classes have of accessing power, which also reinforces the notion of class providing opportunity.

In the world of *Seraphina’s* Goredd, class structures are germane to the entire narrative, as the tension – and subsequent plot – arises from the conflict between the humans and the subjugated dragon class. As well as enacting the aforementioned treaty – along with all of its evident injustices – the humans in Goredd have taken matters further, and have imprisoned one of the Quigs – an offshoot species of dragon that shares their physical foreignness, without their size or martial skill – in a ghetto, which is such a ‘hole’ that it is named as such:

The Quighole was closed after sunset, technically. Only two streets led into [it]; each had been fitted with a tall wrought-iron gate that the Queen’s Guard, with great ceremony, padlocked every evening. (146)

My father had defended the quigs, but gates went up at the entrances to the Quighole nonetheless, locking its nonhuman denizens in for the night – for their own safety, of course. The Quighole became more of a hole (pp. 62-63)

The Quigs are second-class citizens, forced to live on the scraps of society and the generosity of strangers. Their only trade are the small gadgets and mechanical marvels they can make and sell, but these are little more than trinkets, and even then are seen as evil and despised by the human citizens. Furthermore, the Quigs are confined to a small section of the city; literally locked up behind walls, and not allowed to roam freely. Violence against them is common, and is considered to be of no significance. Parallels could easily be made between the Quighole and the ghettos Jewish people have been confined to throughout history. Occurring throughout Europe long before WWII began, Jewish ghettos were almost a staple of larger cities (Rajiv & Rohini, 2004): area where Jewish people (non-Christians in an otherwise European Christian environment) were confined. The style of ghettos have varied, from the highly-affluent Jewish neighbourhoods of Venice to the crowded and disease-ridden slums of Rome (Rajiv & Rohini, 2004), however a common feature of many European ghettos were
the walls that surrounded them. Walls that could be sealed to protect the occupants during times of violence, but walls that could also be sealed from the outside, to confine the occupants during peak times of Christian worship (Rajiv & Rohini, 2004). Seraphina’s Quighole takes this notion one step further, and likens it more to the ghettos of Nazi Germany: the occupants are essentially prisoners, forbidden from interacting with regular ‘respectable’ citizens, and locked away at night: incarcerated rather than protected. The Quigs, then, are an underclass in Seraphina’s world: they have minimal access to material wealth, they are shunned and mistreated by those with power and rights, and they are forcibly detained, for no other reason than because they can be.

The previous extract demonstrates how all the Quigs have been amalgamated into one homogenous whole: they enjoy no individuality, and the sins of one are generalised to the entire group. Once again, parallels can also be drawn to classist and racist notions. Further, the extract highlights how Quigs are legally bound to their ‘hole’ at night, unable to roam when and where they will. It is explained that this is a legal requirement, and while the penalty is never explicitly mentioned, the case with which people feel they can commit violence against them with no repercussions suggests that death would be likely. On her way to the Quighole, Seraphina encounters a Quig, and rather than feel repulsed, she instead decides to trade with it for a metal figurine it has created, only to be interrupted by strangers:

When I looked up again, the quig was gone. Two riders were hurrying towards me, with daggers drawn. “St. Daan in a pan,” one cried. “The sticky shite-eater scuttled right up the side of a house!”

“Are you alright maidy?” asked the shorter of the two. Shorty noticed my purse in my hand. “Aww, cack. You didn’t give it any money, did you?
That only encourages the vermin.”

“Begging worms,” Tallfellow spat. “You can’t go five blocks without getting hit up.” (p. 64)

The loathing which the humans hold for the Quigs is clear: they refer to them exclusively in slurs – “shite-eaters”, “vermin”; “begging worms” – and they approach with weapons out and ready to be used. They show no reluctance to inflict violence upon a Quig, and more so, give the impression that they were eager, and anticipate it. Further, as is highlighted by Thomas – one of the two men – later, this violence is not limited to the Quigs themselves. After that last encounter, Seraphina (unrelatedly)
faints, and wakes up in the house of her rescuers, only to have the following conversation with Thomas.

“I saw the quig idol in your purse.”
My face burned. I was ashamed against all reason, as if I were the guilty party, and not the person who’d been pawing through an unconscious woman’s belongings.


“Thomas, we’re going” his sister called from behind us.

“St. Ogdo calls you to repent.” Thomas released me roughly. “Pray for virtue, and pray we don’t meet again.”

I swayed, barely able to keep my feet. (p. 66)

The violence is not limited to the ‘nonhumans’ alone, but extends to any who associate with them; whereby even the briefest of contacts can be interpreted as something profound. This demonstrates a severe lack of power on behalf of the Quigs and – as Seraphina and her father prove: – Quig-sympathisers. They have a demonstrably low level of ability to impose their will upon others, and a similarly low ability to avoid having others impose their will on them. The total lack of power on the Quig’s part is explained ‘logically’ away as representative of the opinions of the highest people in the Kingdom. Below is an extract where the Princess (heir-apparent) debates social niceties with her friend Millie, who fears offending a dragon guest at a gala:

“Rudeness is rudeness.” said Millie.
Princess Glisselda rolled her eyes. “You know what Lady Corongi would say. We must show them we’re superior, and put them in their place. Dominate or be dominated. Dragons know no other way.”
That sounded to me like an extremely dangerous way to interact with dragons. I hesitated, uncertain whether it would be within bounds for me to correct Lady Corongi, Glisselda’s governess, who outranked me in every possible way. (p. 53)

The princess is repeating what has been told to her by her advisors, yet the words are powerful in their scathing judgement of any non-human. Dragons are to be “dominated” because otherwise it is the
humans who will suffer. This view leaves no middle-ground; no area for mutual prosperity. Also worth noting is Seraphina’s acknowledgement of the fact Lady Corongi is of a much higher class than Seraphina herself, who is only a music teacher. Due to this class disparity, Corongi’s words are above public reproach, even if they are fundamentally flawed.

Due to the top-down nature of the inequality, and the seemingly total lack of retribution for the humans’ treatment of the dragons (which in itself could be seen as an endorsement of said behaviours), it is unsurprising to find that even in the Quighole itself, the inequality is still present, as Seraphina discovers while waiting for her friend:

I sipped my beverage, keeping my eyes to myself, until a commotion by the door grew too loud to ignore.

“You can’t bring his kind in here,” snarled the tapmaster, who had come from behind the bar, dragging his muscular cool with him as backup.

Orma stood in the foyer, and [the dragon] Basind lurked behind him, his bell clinking plaintively. (145)

Even in a place known as ‘The Quighole’, the Quigs are presented by the narrative as still being discriminated against. This demonstrates a fundamentally disparity in all three of Kreisman’s branches of class: social, class, and power. The dragon Basind is not presented as a threat to be avoided: the narrative describes him as ineffectual, and that (like a helpless mewling kitten) he is marked by a jangling bell around his neck, which “clinks plaintively”. If he is no threat then, he is instead guilty of being part of an marginalised class, and as such is open to discrimination, ridicule, and unjust treatment.

_Dischaced_ also presents this disparity between the classes; however, it does it in an admittedly much more understated way. A key aspect of Kriesberg’s breakdown of class inequality is ‘status’ and the access one has to status symbols, such as clothing or uniforms. In _Displaced_, Harriet’s first experiences with the so-called ‘Nightmen’ antagonists are of suited men who come to her school to assault the students and teacher alike. Their appearance even led to her original name for them: Suits.

The Suits embody not only access to special uniforms, but also to disproportionate levels of power:

Harriet continued to contemplate her new dragon’s name while her eyes followed the PE students. As she watched, four men in black suits and sunglasses walked out onto the oval and started speaking to the teacher. Or,
more specifically, one of them started speaking to the teacher, keeping him occupied while the other three moved among the year 9 students, grabbing them by the shoulders to speak to them. Harriet frowned, wondering what it could be about. Even out here in the country, they had strict rules about strangers being allowed onto school grounds when students were there.

*(Displaced, Chapter 2)*

The nefarious nature of the suited men is clear: one of them distracts the existing power – keeping the teacher “occupied” – while the others forcibly impose their will on the children, “grabbing” them to talk to them, suggesting physical restraint and a lack of escape options on the part of the students. The Suits lose all sense of individuality to an outside observer. Their matching uniforms and sunglasses treat them as a homogenous mass: defying all laws of transparency in both law enforcement system and Australian legal requirements for working with children. Australian schools, like most around the world, have very strict rules about who is allowed onto the grounds while students are present, and who is allowed to interact with the students. Despite this, the Suits are able to go where they will, resisting any attempts for others to impose their will upon them:

The men in suits were still at the school, and they were still interrogating every student they could corner.

Not only that, but the men were armed. She saw it when one of them bent over to retie his shoelace. Under his left arm he had a black leather holster, with a sinister silver pistol tucked inside. As soon as she knew what to look for, it wasn’t hard to see that all of the other Suits were armed as well. *Who are these people?* None of them had identified themselves as being police or government, and none of them carried a badge. *This isn’t America, where people can just walk around carrying guns. Who the hell are they, and how do they know about my dragon?* *(Displaced, Chapter 2)*

The language used supports the notion that the antagonistic Suits have access to a disproportionate and unequal level of both ‘power’ and ‘status’. The word “still” – which itself already suggests a repetition – is used to suggest that the Suits’ presence is tolerated under duress: thereby suggesting their ability to impose their will upon others. Both the word “still” and this suggestion of impositions are repeated again in the next line: the students are obviously reluctant, as they are being “interrogated” and must first be “cornered” or caught. To reinforce this power inequality to readers, a comparison is made between Australia and America, where such a situation, while unlikely, is still very possible. The
Suits, then, are able to impose their will on others while resisting having others’ will imposed on them (in this case the will of the legal and justice systems on the occupants of Australia); they have access to preferential treatment (being their lack of fear of prosecution) and they have access to specialised/illegal equipment. Further, in line with Kriesberg’s discussion of status inequality and ‘specialised uniforms’, it could be said that their suits themselves constitute a uniform, separating them visually as well as socially from the people around them. This separation is not limited to the antagonists; the protagonists of *Displaced* also embody the facets of Kriesberg’s (1979) hierarchy, as is demonstrated in one of the final scenes:

Leaning off to the side, Harriet directed her dragon in a long curve that faced them back to the south, and in the direction of the new Dragon Hall: the shared residence where the three riders now lived.

The change in direction also brought a change in the wind. To protect her from the cold, Harriet zipped up her new leather jacket. It was the first jacket she’d made, and Elayne had guided her through the process after Cloud’s first moulting. Every time he saw it on her, her dad laughed, saying that he’d never seen her treasure anything else in the world – other than Cloud, of course – more than it.

*Cloud’s my dragon, and I’m her rider. Now anyone can tell that just by looking at us.*

As well as her new jacket, she also wore a dragonscale leather belt. Her sword hung proudly from it, and she wore it still, even though she hadn’t seen a Nightman for over a year. *(Displaced, Chapter 27)*

This passage starts by referencing the new “Dragon Hall”. While the dimensions or nature of the Dragon Hall is never explicitly stated, it can be safely assumed that in order to house three large dragons and their riders, it will be quite substantial. Considering that land prices in Australia are high, as well as the cost of building and supplies, it is – once again – a safe assumption that considerable cost and effort has gone into the creation of the Dragon Hall. This narrative revelation is a salient embodiment of Kriesberg’s (1979) discussion about social inequality revolving around preferential access to resources, wealth, and land/property. The notions of inequality or preferential access to resources is compounded by the revelations of the rest of the extract: Harriet is now in possession of a new dragonscale leather jacket: an almost textbook example of an exclusive uniform, with only two other dragonscale jackets – Kit’s and Elayne’s – mentioned in the narrative. Harriet has access to a visible status symbol that has properties (fire-resistant, lightweight but bulletproof, etc) unavailable to
the vast majority of the population. Even the making of the jacket is exclusive knowledge, with Elayne – rather than a professional tailor – guiding her through the manufacturing process. This exclusivity is not something that goes unnoticed by Harriet, either: she herself notes the fact that anyone will now know who and what she is just by looking at her, and this makes her proud. Finally, Harriet has access to a new sword. Ignoring the (presumably) significant costs involved with making this weapon, Harriet is carrying a Type-1 Prohibited Weapon, that has been illegal in Australia since the Controlled Weapons Act of 1990 (VicPolice, 2016). Harriet has received – along with her other numerous concessions – permission to carry the weapon: a right that is denied to almost every other person in the country.

It has been suggested that “class is dead” (Habibis & Walter, 2009. p. 3), or at the very least that “class is not as important as it used to be” (Scase, 1992 p. 1). Superficially – in Australia at least – this may well seem to be the case, with an – arguably – thriving capitalist democracy in place. One needs only to look at Australia’s nominal Head of State – Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II – to see that “even the aristocracy have to work for a living.” Far from living the pampered life of their forefathers, the modern royal family is active in the community, with the heir-apparent and his younger brother both serving an active role in the military, as well as volunteering in multiple rescue-group/SES type organisations. In response to those who claim that class is a defunct and obsolete classification that holds little merit in a democratic and capitalist world, class theorist Roger Scase – and others – argue that class-based inequalities are very much still present; that even within the so-called “working class”, which most Australians broadly occupy (1992, p 1), there are deep divides between blue-collar ‘hands-on’ workers and white-collar ‘thinking’ workers, including a deep divide in both their access to education, and – frequently – their income (1992, p 11). Importantly, inclusion in a particular class is defined by one’s professional occupation, not one’s own self-identity, which can be skewed by the connotations involved with the label ‘working class’. Even though many Western societies have shifted away from nobility, gentry, merchants, and peasants, and have moved into socialist democracies revolving around capitalism, there are still distinct class divides, with resulting social inequalities.

To return to Kriesberg’s (1979) comments about class, it is important to remember that the idea of class itself is based not on labels, but on notions of power: namely the different access one has to status, power, and material resources. To explain this concept of class existing without the traditional
“class” structures in place, the term ‘stratification’ is used (Scase, 1992, p. 27). Concepts of social stratification are often confused with social class and the two terms are often used interchangeably. Their relationship, however, is more closely likened to that of cause and consequence: stratification systems reflect the control relations that constitute the core elements of class structures (1992 p. 27). As Scase argues, the “stratification of western capitalist countries tend to be similar in the ways in which occupations are differently rewarded. Reflecting class relations, managerial and professional occupations are generally more highly rewarded than others” (1992, p. 27). As Scase suggests, a similar pattern persists in different countries, with a top-down hierarchy resembling the following:

1. Owners of large enterprises and individuals with substantial property assets.
2. Directors, managers, and higher grade professional and technical employees.
3. Lower grade professional, managerial, and technical employees, and owners of medium and small enterprises.
4. Skilled or semi-skilled manual or clerical employees.
5. Unskilled manual employees. (Scase, 1992, p. 27)

As can be seen, even within the capitalist system, there are still ‘class’ divides. The large property or enterprise owners now occupy the place previously held by the upper nobility. Middle management becomes the lower nobility, all the way down to the unskilled labourers occupying the same niche as the peasantry of old. In essence, the further up the ‘ladder’ one’s occupation resides in, the better their access to education, health and civil services, social mobility, and increased job opportunities.

Superficially, this 1992 model may seem to be outdated, and does not factor in ‘modern’ occurrences such as ‘fly-in-fly-out’ (FIFO) workers, celebrities, sportspeople, or entertainers (actors/musicians/performers/etc). These occupations, however, are far from modern, and have existed for thousands of years back into antiquity. In the above system, FIFO workers are technical employees, and are paid commensurately high wages to director and managers, but obviously less than the wages of the owners of the company employing them. Celebrities or sportspeople, then just like their gladiator ancestors, could be considered entrepreneurs or even CEOs of a brand. The brand may be themselves, but it is a brand nonetheless, with an image and reputation that they must uphold and expand. In this essence, it is not the celebrities actual skill at their profession that counts, but their skill at enhancing their brand, which accounts for celebrities such as Paris Hilton, who are famous simply for being famous.
Again, it is important to note that most importantly, these ‘stratified’ relationships have at their core notions of power. Just like Kriesberg’s (1979, p. 24) hierarchical breakdown of ‘class’, stratified relationships express themselves as control relationships; especially between those who are responsible for strategic decision-making, and others who are subordinate and tightly controlled in the performance of their work tasks (Scase, 1992, p. 23).

These five tiers of ‘class’ are depicted clearly in the hierarchy that exists in *The Adamantine Palace* (Deas, 2009), on the proviso that one thinks of the nine kings/queens being CEOs of their family business. Given this analogy, their primary concern is still the acquisition and retention of money, power, and influence. They still seek to make as much profit from their labourers as possible, while decreasing the costs involved with keeping them operational. Adopting the five tiered system, the society of *The Adamantine Palace* would appear as follows:

1. The Speaker and their immediate family/heir.
2. The ruling nine kings and queens of individual kingdoms.
3. The dragon knights, and the Scales (the group responsible for breeding and training the dragons).
4. The military personnel, and the clerical staff required to keep daily operations running. Small business owners/merchants.
5. Farm workers and labourers.

It may seem redundant to apply a modern capitalist theory to a feudal depiction, when the theory itself was intended to convey feudal ideas to a capitalist society, however the exercise has merit. There exists in many modern capitalist societies a belief that everyone has an ‘equal shot’ at things, and those who rise to the top do so based on their own merit, wherewithal, and gumption. *The Adamantine Palace* takes this notion and twists it: there are still people who become very successful based on their intelligence; however, there are also people who owe their success purely to their status at birth. The society presented in *The Adamantine Palace* is somewhat of a bridge between a feudal world (potentially too far removed for some didactic messages) and the ideal Western democracy (with *ideal* being the key word); incorporating elements of both. The Nine Kingdoms have monarchs who rule by Divine Right in their own realms, yet they also have a democratically elected Speaker (albeit democratically elected from a very small pool of candidates). The dragons are restricted to an exclusive group, yet (as will be explored later) for the right price, it may be possible for a commoner to obtain one. Relating the
possession of dragons to a more modern example, dragons could quite easily be substituted for a valued resource such as oil. It was ‘tamed’ (discovered) by a select few (House of Saud, Koch Industries) and they have since retained the monopoly on it, and have become a powerful global force because of it. Or in a perhaps less abstract example, the dragons could be substituted for education. In many places around the world, those who had education in the past rose to power, and have since kept it by ensuring their children were also the recipients of a good education. Wealth begets wealth, and as the generations progress, more wealth is accumulated among those original families. Conversely, people from a lower socioeconomic bracket might now be able to obtain a government-subsidised education, but they still have to contend with the generations of accumulated wealth, which still acts to restrict their own social mobility. Even within a single social strata in The Adamantine Palace, there is a vast disparity: small business owners (merchants) and the rank-and-file of the military may occupy a single ‘level’, but the merchants have differential access to income, education, and personal freedom, while the military have steady access to housing, and have vastly different “power” in their ability to impose their will upon others, while at the same time resisting having others of the same or lower classes impose on them. In this way, The Adamantine Palace offers not only a stylised version of real-world historical situations, but also a narrative which provides a commentary on the ethics of such a social arrangement, with the unfavourable nature of it evident in society’s ultimate upheaval at the conclusion of the narrative, all of which was made possible through the use of dragons as an agent of change.

While Displaced is set in a vastly different world from that depicted in The Adamantine Palace, parallels can still be drawn, particularly with regard to power. The dénouement of Displaced involves an abrupt shift in the point-of-view narration, with the focalisation switching to that of Agent James Lacchiana, a man in charge of protecting the Prime Minister of Australia at Kirribilli House:

Federal Agent James Lacchiana was bored. He knew he shouldn’t feel ungrateful, not really. It was a well paid job, and except for the constant training sessions every week, he didn’t really have to do any work. *Not a bad life*, he decided, shifting his feet slightly and re-evaluating. *Not bored … just peaceful*. Better than being stuck behind some desk for forty years, that’s for sure. His wife had bought him new shoes a few days ago, and he hadn’t yet worn
them in properly. The blisters were hurting, and he made a mental note to put some wet scrunched up newspaper in them that night.

_(Displaced, Chapter 26)_

Lacchiana unquestionably falls into the same ‘class’ as the vast majority of Australians – the working class (Scase, 1992 p.1). His ordinariness is highlighted in three separate ways: first his boredom, which workers from all walks can relate to. Second, his mundane concerns: “new shoes, blisters, and scrunched up newspaper”. Thirdly, his desire to earn the most amount of income – “a well paid job” – for the least amount of effort – “didn’t really have to do any work”. Agent Lacchiana seems like a stereotypical ‘working class man’, however as is soon highlighted when three dragons approach, even within the same ‘working class’, different strata with different levels of power are evident:

“Hold your fire,” Lacchiana ordered.

“But…” one of the agents countered.

“Hold your fire,” Lacchiana repeated, this time with iron in his voice. He might report to Commander Gattuso, but these men reported to him. He was in charge of this situation, and he would be damned before he fired on someone offering a truce.

The agents shifted nervously, but true to orders, not a single one of them had a finger on the trigger. _**(Chapter 26)**_

At the same time, Lacchiana recognises that there is another level above him – Commander Gattuso – to whom Lacchiana must report. Within the one working-class strata then, there are three – at least – distinct levels of disparate social status, power, and influence. And, when the request of the landing dragonriders is made known, a fourth strata is introduced:

“Hello,” there was a timid note to [the dragonrider’s] voice, despite her method of arrival. “We’re here to see the Prime Minister, please.”

Lacchiana blanched at the unexpected politeness of the girl. He said the first thing that came to his mind.

“Do you have an appointment?” _**(Chapter 26)**_

The Prime Minister of Australia, just like the Speaker of the Nine Realms in _The Adamantine Palace_, is a democratically elected official. Theoretically, anyone in Australia can be elected, however in reality, the modern-day Prime Minister comes from a much narrower selection-pool. Class is still very much a part of the social hierarchy, both in the real world Australia and in _Displaced_’s depiction of it.
However, in *Displaced*, its influence has been severely reduced/minimised by the presence of dragons, just as theoretically the influence of class in the real world has been mitigated by factors such as welfare provision.

It is then clearly established that social inequality – as represented through all of the class differences I have outlined – is a definite presence, not only in Young Adult literature, but historically in life in general. What remains to be examined is how each narrative treats such inequality: ranging the whole spectrum from favourably to unfavourably. The representation of the inequality – and subsequent treatment of it by the characters and narrative itself – is just as important as the inequality itself, for as Habibis and Walter (2009, p. 6) comment, “inequality offends the principal of egalitarianism that is fundamental to social justice. The result that some people should be privileged as a result of an accident of birth while others face a lifetime of hardship seems fundamentally unfair and a denial of human rights.” Due to the nature of inequality’s relationship with power (Trites, 2014), this becomes an issue relevant to all of society, however when it is remembered how crucial YA literature can be in socialising young adults and instilling in them views and morals that may be long-lasting, then Crabb and Bielawski’s (1994, p.70) comment that “characters portrayed in children’s literature mould a child’s conception of socially accepted roles and values, and indicate how [individuals] are supposed to act” becomes even more salient. As part of the message that can be portrayed by class representations, two interpretations are evident: the presented ideology can either support or challenge the existing social paradigm. Peter Hollindale divides the ideologies of any given text into one of three categories:

1. Overt – whereby “ideology appears as an overt or explicit element of a text, openly proposing progressive and enlightened ideals.”
2. Passive – whereby the ideology is an “implicit presence in the text of the writer’s unexamined assumptions”.
3. Inherent – whereby the ideology is ideology inherent to the language of the text, such as in the words themselves. This form of ideology works to “suppress articulations of conflict, and to restrict signification to the attitudes and interests of dominant social groups.”

(Hollindale, 1988 p.10)
Regardless of the nature of the ideological message, or the form it takes, it is still very much evident with every text. Hollindale’s tripartite approach also addresses those texts with seemingly no didactic ideology: passive ideology can range from a number of things, such as presenting only two discrete genders (male and female), presenting only stereotypical occupations (male builders, male lawyers, female clearers, housewives, etc) or even inherent social structures, such as police being trustworthy or education being valuable. Indeed often, the passive forms of ideological representation can be the preferred vehicle, as active representations can be problematic in that explicit didacticism tends to promote resistance in the readers to the message, while at the same time admitting that these ideals are only possessed by a minority, and as such are in need of advocating (Hollindale, 1988).

YA literature then, in its function of socialising young adults, possesses the power to reinforce, support, or challenge notions of inequality. An examination of class representations in Australia in particular is especially important, as “contemporary Australian elitist discourse is distinct in that it is posited on a foundation of minimal egalitarianism through residual welfare provision.” (Habibis & Walter, 2009, p. 24). Since government welfare and support in Australia theoretically “ensures that no one need experience absolute poverty or lack educational opportunity”, then there is the chance for the rise of widespread perception that “those who fail are judged to have no one but themselves to blame” (2009, p.24). Due to this (potentially widely-held) mindset, inequality is no longer always viewed as inherently ‘bad’: perceptually, if people are wealthy then it is because they have ‘tried hard’ and worked to succeed and better themselves, while conversely, people who live degenerately have only themselves to blame for their poor ‘lifestyle choices’. While this viewpoint fails to take into consideration myriad other factors, it is nonetheless pervasive, and potentially in need of ideological challenge.

While the Machiavellian machinations in The Adamantine Palace seemingly only serve to improve the nobles’ standing – and repeatedly result in inequality and injustice for the lower classes – this strategy is demonstrably ineffective. To counter the royal Prince Jehal, the narrative also deploys the point-of-view character Kemir, a mercenary sell-sword whose only thought is of his next meal, and eventually getting revenge against the dragonriders who killed his family. Kemir represents the lowest class, one step even below a peasant, for he has no land to call his own. Time and time again, he is ridiculed and debased by the upper classes, but by none more so than the dragonriders themselves. Kemir is depicted as lacking agency, unable to resist having others’ will imposed upon
him, while at the same time powerless to impose his own will on others. Eventually Kemir reaches a breaking point, and is responsible for the deaths of countless dragonriders, as well as the liberation of one dragon, to prevent a new replacement rider from rising to power. Through this process – a dragon being removed permanently from the nobles’ influence – it is revealed that dragons are far from the mindless mounts the lower classes were led to believe. Instead, the liberated dragon slowly starts to regain its sentience, and it is revealed that all dragons are given a regular ‘potion’ by the noble classes, that keeps them mindless and ignorant, unable to resist having the nobles’ will imposed upon them. The dragons then, could be a substitute for narrative’s the so-called ‘uneducated’ lower classes: the upper class keep them in ignorance of the true nature of things, because it furthers the nobles’ own machinations.

While Kemir is only one man, it is strongly suggested that he is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back, and that there will be a revolution in the immediate future. The Adamantine Palace, then, serves as one continuous warning to the implied readers about the dangers of inherited power. The novel constructs a society heading towards an inevitable collapse, either through the warring upper class killing each other off to extinction, or through the imminent rebellion by the other classes. While the dragons do give the upper class the advantage, it is still made implicitly clear throughout the narrative that if a rebellion were to eventuate, there is no guarantee the dragons would be enough to carry the battle in the nobles’ favour. Further, with regards to their actual ability to lead, those in command are presented as possessing no grasp of the realities of everyday life, so are in no position to decide what course of action is best for citizens. Likewise, the people who do know the appropriate course of action are barred from ever actually enacting it by dint of birth. To return, then, to Turner-Bowker’s (1996) original contention – that YA texts are “important influences that shape us by reflecting the politics and values of our society” and that children learn what behaviour is acceptable for them, for their peers, and for adults around them” (p. 463) – then it could be said that as well as providing positive role-models, YA can just as effectively convey “positive” ideologies by providing negative role models, so long as it is made clear that these models in fact are undesirable or morally wrong. The Adamantine Palace provides a glimpse into a life of luxury; however, the narrative conveys the view that such luxury is morally undesirable through its references to how many people suffered for the nobles to live in this style. The narrative further reinforces this notion through the fact that the nobles, in the end, are unable to maintain their opulent lifestyles after the rebellion of the oppressed lower classes.
Seraphina also offers a distinct moral message regarding class-based systems. While many of the characters in Seraphina’s narrative favour an unequal society in which the dragons and dragon-subspecies are treated as second-class citizens, it is apparent to the implied readers at the outset how unjust this is. Notably, it is made obvious that the claims by the ‘Sons of Ogden’ – a fundamentalist quasi-religious group of vigilantes who seek to reignite the war with dragons so humans can wipe them off the face of their planet – are demonstrably untrue. This is highlighted early in the narrative when a dragon in its human form is cornered:

The fellow pinned against the bridge railing was a dragon.

I pitied the dragon now that I saw his face. He was a raw newskin, scrawny and badly groomed, all awkward angles and unfocused eyes. A goose-egg, puffy and grey, swelled along his sallow cheekbone.

The crowd howled at my back, a wolf ready to gnaw whatever bloody bones the Sons might throw. Two of the Sons had drawn knives, and a third had pulled a length of chain out of his leather jerkin. He twitched it menacingly behind him, like a tail. (p.14)

Then, with a feral roar, the mob came alive. The Sons charged the newskin, slamming him back against the railing. I glimpsed a gash across his forehead, a wash of blood down the side of his face before the crowd closed ranks around us, blocking off my view. (p.15)

The dragon is plainly depicted as a victim. First he is outnumbered, with three humans against one human-dragon, and a mob of humans to support the Sons. Secondly, the dragon is pictured as incapable of defending himself: he is a “raw newskin”, who has already suffered and attack, with a bruised swollen lump the size of a “goose egg” on his face. Like a gangly teenager, the dragon is all “awkward angles”, and not only is it not the cunning predator the Sons claim, but he can’t even control his “unfocused eyes”. The Sons, conversely, take on the monsters they purport to hunt, with one of them even physically resembling them, with his chain weapon “twitched menacingly behind him, like a chain.” And the mob themselves are compared to a “wolf ready to gnaw on bloody bones”. This excerpt appears in the first chapter, and notably is also the extract chosen to appear on the blurb. Out of the entire narrative, this is the excerpt selected to give readers a preview of what the book revolves around. Further, while Seraphina is visiting the Quighole – as previously discussed – she observes that:
We were in some sort of public house. There were rickety tables and a variety of patrons – human, dragon, and Quig. Humans and dragons sat at the same tables here, students engaged in deep discussions with teachers. There was a dragon demonstrating the principals of surface tension by holding a glass of water upside down with only a slip of parchment between his rapt students and a drenching. In another corner I saw an impromptu dissection of a small mammal, or dinner, or both.

No one came to the Quighole who didn’t have to. I had more personal dealings with dragons than most, and I’d only been once. I had never seen both my peoples together like this. I found myself a little overcome.

(p.147)

This scene is notable for three reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates that inside the Quighole are regular humans, and not only that, but humans who interact with the local residents as equals and as friends. Secondly, it highlights that there is an exchange of knowledge going on between the two classes, with teachers and students both engaged in the business of bettering themselves. This shows that while each of the classes may have its predefined roles and values, that they are not mutually exclusive, and that all can benefit from a harmonious shared-relationship. Finally, Seraphina notes the humanity displayed by these ‘inhuman monsters’. Not only are they talking and laughing together, but she can see students locked in deep philosophical conversations with their teachers. She witnesses a whole range of emotions on display, and rather than revulsion, her reaction is simply one of relief at seeing “both [her] peoples together.” The use of dragons in this text, then, conveys a social message: it is possible to set aside differences in pursuit of a common goal, and in the end, even people who seem to be directly opposed can find common ground. The dragons within the narrative act as a vehicle for this ideological suggestion by acting as something outwardly bestial and foreign but displaying an openness and willingness to mingle. Without the dragons, this ideological suggestion could be somewhat problematic to convey, for the Quighole mimics a Jewish ghettos, and so therefore the same ideological suggestion could only have been achieved through overt discrimination against a real-world nationality: something that modern audiences might not necessarily accept or enjoy.

The ridiculousness of the prejudiced beliefs held by the dominant groups in Seraphina’s narrative is also highlighted in many smaller ways, such as when Seraphina visits a dragon friend who has been injured:
An aged monk led me to the infirmary. “He’s got the place to himself. Once the other invalids learned there was a dragon coming, they miraculously got well! The lame could walk and the blind decided they didn’t really need to see. He’s a panacea.”

The other invalids are not being forced out of their sickbeds: they willing choose to leave despite it being categorically against their best interests. They are being offered an affordable and superior level of healthcare to anything else they can expect, and they give it up because they don’t want to associate themselves with something that a member of the dragon/lower class associates with. Instead, they seek – as Kriesberg suggests – access to specialised and privileged services, which are available to them and their class alone.

Seraphina realises the challenges inherent in bringing together the two classes, but she also recognises that the benefits are numerous (beyond the obvious equality issues) and that in order for this integration of classes, strong leadership will be required. The strong leadership is there, in the form of the Queen who negotiated the peace itself. This is noted when the Queen herself brings dragons to the royal gala, and forces interaction between the two classes:

“I have bought some additional guests,” the Queen said, ushering in four dragons.

“Oh,” squeaked Glisselda. “To what do we owe this, um—”

“To a treaty signed nearly forty years ago,” said the Queen. “I believed, perhaps erroneously, that our peoples would simply grow accustomed to each other, given the cessation of warfare. Are we oil and water, that we cannot mix? Have I been remiss in expecting reason and decency to prevail, when I should have rolled up my sleeves and enforced them?”

The humans in the room looked sheepish; the dragons, discomforted.

The Queen recognises what most do not: that equality is not something that comes naturally to the masses, but is something that must be forced. Under her leadership, however, the people around her prove willing to adapt and embrace new mindsets, as is exemplified by her grandson, a prince, who is the first to dance with one of them:
All around the room, conversations trailed off or were suspended as heads turned towards the prince. I found myself holding my breath; I surely wasn’t the only one.

I stayed a few minutes longer to watch them dance, smiling to myself. It could be done, this peace. It just took a willingness to do it. (p. 85).

The narrative thus firmly establishes that equality is possible, and following this narrative move, the pro-equality messages become more and more evident, and the arguments of the class-elitists become less tenable. As the narrative progresses further, Seraphina recognises that the fight is no longer about class equality, but about identifying and isolating those who seek violence simply for the sake of violence. As the dragon-king says:

Comonot turned, his voice filled with calm authority. “Can you not see that it’s no longer a question of dragon-versus-human? The division is now between those who think peace is worth preserving, and those who would keep up the war until one side or the other are destroyed. There are dragons who see the good of the treaty. They will join us. The young have been raised with peaceful ideals; they won’t sympathise with those grizzled generals.” (p. 339)

The dragon-king recognises that there may always be tension between classes, but to continue to subjugate one class is not the answer. Strong leadership is what is required for equality to prosper, and what’s more; strong leadership from both classes. As the extracts show, this leadership is demonstrated at various times by both the human Queen and the dragon-king, on both occasions resulting in increased equality and intermingling.

While not all major characters in Seraphina’s narrative come to accept equality between the classes, dissonant viewpoints are increasingly shown as barbarous, such as when Seraphina confronts the human brother of a fellow half-dragon:

“They are not all out to get us,” I said softly.

“How about the one who tricked your father, or who deceived my father and bore him a bastard?” I drew a sharp breath, and he glowered at me.

“My mother raised Lars as if her were my equal. One day he began sprouting scales out of his very flesh. He was only seven; he showed us
all, innocently rolled up his sleeve—” His voice broke; he coughed. “My father stabbed her right through the neck. It was his right, his injured honour.” (p.348)

The dragons are treated as inferior: just like the Quigs, violence can be committed against them, with no fear of retribution. The character scoffs at the notion of his half-dragon brother ever being considered his ‘equal’, despite the fact that the brother – Lars – is one of the most talented musicians in all Goredd, and selflessly risks his life to save Seraphine on three occasions. The narrative sets Lars up to be valued and admired – and hence sympathised with – by depicting him in these rescue scenes and clearly establishing him as a ‘moral’ character. The full-blooded human brother, conversely, much like his murderous father, is depicted as achieving nothing in life more notable than a series of night-time murders, and multiple attempts at inciting a war. In a previous extract, it was detailed how a human threatened Seraphine with death as a result of her brief contact with a Quig, where she purchases a figurine off him. The man threatens to end her life, claiming that no one will care and there will be no repercussions for a “worm-rider’s” death, and Seraphina is only saved by the intervention of a dragon character. Both classes then, are capable of good, and both classes are capable of evil. This event – like much of the narrative – serves to undermine sweeping class-based views, and instead suggests that value lies in judging people on a case-by-case basis, on a system of merit.

Much like The Adamantine Palace and Seraphina, Displaced also provides a didactic commentary on class-based systems through an exploration of what happens when they are abused. Displaced also favourably reinforces the idea of a working class meritocracy. In the excerpt used previously, Agent James Lacchiana is introduced, and is shown to be highly capable at his job. In this sense, the meritocratic ideology could be likened to that of Hollindale’s (1988) ‘passive’ system: Lacchiana is not explicitly pushed by the narrative as being an ‘everyman’ character, but his ability is demonstrated in the calm demeanour he keeps under trying circumstances, and in the fact that he is from a regular background, but has risen to a position of high responsibility. Lacchiana shows restraint in the face of a threat, and ensures that the men under him take the best course of action. Lacchiana has worked his way ‘to the top’, and is shown as the best man for the job. Similarly, Harriet is shown to succeed at what she does, as she is capable and hardworking. This is also presented in an inherent way, with no great emphasis being placed on Harriet’s femininity, and no other characters in the narrative – even in the antagonists’ ranks – demonstrating surprise or admiration that a female has achieved what
Harriet has achieved. The access to dragons simply accelerates what presumably would have happened anyway. The moral ideology of *Displaced* can also be seen in the just manner in which the narrative depicts the justice meted out to the Nightmen harassing the Dragonriders:

The side doors of the chopper opened, and men with guns leaned out to try and shoot down at Elayne. Breathing deeply, Elayne’s blue let loose with a huge spurt of fire.

The metal of the rotor blades warped, losing their rigidity and collapsing on themselves until the helicopter fell out of the sky.

Kit took a more direct approach. When Nighteyes grabbed onto the helicopter’s struts, he lashed out with its tail, swiping the massive limb through the fuselage connecting the body to the rear rotor. When Nighteyes let go of the helicopter, he did so with such violence that it was spun aggressively off balance. It was still trying to right itself when it crashed. (*Displaced*. Chapter 26.)

The Nightmen have been presented as belonging to an elite class, who can impose their will on others at any time. They solve problems with violence and subterfuge, and work exclusively for their own gain, heedless of the welfare of others. In this climactic scene, the narrative demonstrates that violence begets violence, and that a just comeuppance will occur. The Nightmen – failing to take the dragons alive – seek to kill the dragons and their riders, and they in turn are killed. In a repeat of the message of *The Adamantine Palace*, this episode exposes a life of privilege, demonstrates how that power is abused, and then links the abuse to the downfall of that power. It also demonstrates that lower classes, while lacking in power, still possesses skills and abilities, and that they should not be underestimated.

The narrative also rather bluntly highlights how unfair a two-tiered class system can be, with Harriet complaining to Elayne that their constant flight is not a life worth living:

“What sort of life is this? Tell me, in Brock did you have to sulk around in the shadows, only being able to fly for a couple of hours each night, and constantly having to look over your shoulder, wondering when they were going to come for you? Yes? No? I didn’t think so. Wouldn’t you rather be free? Wouldn’t you rather be able to help people?”

“What do you want from us?” Elayne spread her arms wide. “This isn’t Brock. We’re not free. Of course we’d rather be helping people! Do you think we’re heartless? But we can’t! The Nightmen will get us. You’re right.
This world isn’t like Brock. It’s worse. Much, much worse!”

(*Displaced.* Chapter 26.)

The (presumed) meritocracy of modern-day Australia is compared to a feudal land with (as was established in the chapter on gender) obvious inequality in regard to class, race, gender, and wealth, and Australia looks to be a place characterised by such inequality. The Kingdom of Brock is a place where women are subservient – either as ladies with minimal actual power, or as maids and menial workers with virtually no actual power or access or privileged resources or training – and where class is strictly defined and adhered to. Even with all of its flaws (presumably obvious to a modern Australian audience – even one of teenage years), Brock is still explicitly stated as being the preferable option [to Australia] due to its acceptance of the dragonriders. In essence, this arrangement of preferences equates the intolerance of the Nightmen (and likeminded people) to sexist and racist people. Such an arrangement of perspectives predisposes the reader to ideologically align themselves with the protagonists’ meritocratic goals, shifting away from the class-based system of privilege. This alignment of sympathies is also strengthened by the desires of the dragonriders, and what they would do with their freedom: “help people.”

It is clear, then, that Young Adult literature does depict differing representations of social class. Any healthy society must allow citizens access to resources, opportunities, and education, and if this is unfairly denied to some then it can be a source of conflict. Social inequality refers to differences in groups of people that are hierarchical in nature. At its most basic, it refers to the hierarchical distribution of social, political, economic, and cultural resources. A closely related concept is that of stratification; a more specific and technical term that refers to a model of social inequality that specifies the relationship between particular variables, such as wealth and social standing. Stratification implies the idea of a systematic and enduring pattern of inequality that is transmitted across generations, built into institutions, and practiced in everyday activities. (Habibis & Walter, 2009). These notions of class and social stratification, while being designed for wider society, can be both seen in, and explored by, YA texts and in the ideologies they depict. At the heart of theories of class and stratification are notions of power (Trites, 2014). By extension, then, representations of class inequality in YA literature are in fact representations of power, including both the inherent power-structures of a society, and the ways in which it is distributed and abused (Trites, 2014). In representations of class, dragons play as role as a vehicle for ideological commentaries (Gordon, 1980, p. 34). Through an examination of the discourse in which they appear, class ideological hierarchies may be broken down to their constitutive
elements, and analysed accordingly. Through this method, injustices may be seen, and possible future directions can be suggested (Gordon, 1980).

Class can be both predicted and defined based on several factors, however Kriesberg’s (1979) triple-consideration approach is the one I have found the most comprehensive, whereby class is defined by ones access to: status (prestige or honour associated with position or occupation, and access to status symbols); class (material resources possessed or controlled); and power (ability to impose will on others and resist having others’ will imposed on you). Overarching, class is again fundamentally concerned with ideas of power: how is distributed, and how it can be used to both “impose one’s will upon others” and “refuse control by others”. If one is able to do both of these, then they have significant power (Trites, 2014), and as such occupy a higher ‘class’.

Stephen Deas’ (2009) *The Adamantine Palace* and Rachel Hartman’s *Seraphina* (2012) both depict worlds with inherent class hierarchies and ideological differences. In *The Adamantine Palace*, the dragons act as a status symbol, and as a resource denied to all other ‘lower’ classes, allowing for the rapid transportation of people and goods across vast distances by the ruling elite, as well as a weapon of war that makes the ruling class nigh on all-powerful in terms of military might.

Seraphina, conversely, depicts dragons as being sentient, but undesirable. The presence of dragons and dragon-like creatures within the narrative has created a literal two-tiered society where even the lowest of humans is superior to the mightiest of dragons in terms of rights and social standing, and dragon-like creatures are relegates to slums and ghettos reminiscent of Jewish enclaves in World War Two.

Finally, the artefact *Displaced* also presents a narrative wherein dragons act as an ideological vehicle, however in this instance the dragons themselves act neither as a status symbol nor a burden, but they do allow for the highlighting of differential access to privilege. Through Harriet’s access to the dragon Cloud, the narrative allows the reader to highlight all the injustices involved with access to specialised equipment that are denied to everyone else. The antagonists within the narrative, the Nightmen, use their guns and helicopters to hunt down dragons for material, capitalistic, gain, and they are unconcerned with the collateral damage that is caused by their search.

In all three texts, the dragons themselves allow for the author to convey ideological messages. As Hollindale (1988) suggests, the nature of these ideological messages can be overt, passive, or embedded within the language of the narrative itself. Regardless of the vehicle used, an ideological message is always present within any text.
CHAPTER THREE  
Speciesism and Anthropocentrism

Animal studies sociologist Nik Taylor has suggested that “gone are the beliefs that animals do not matter to humans, structures, organisations, or society as a whole. Instead, in place of these beliefs is a growing catalogue of work that points to the opposite – to the very importance of animals in individuals’ lives and in the lives of different societies and cultures. In short, animals do matter – personally, institutionally, historically, and socially” (2013, p.3). Taylor is undoubtedly correct in saying that animals do matter, however while this view may be growing in popularity, it is far from universal, as is evidenced by the damage done to habitats and animals all around the world on a daily basis, as part of an anthropocentric mindset.

A logical progression from the study of gender and class is an examination of the notion of speciesism: the assignation of preferential treatment - different values, rights, and responsibilities - to individuals based solely on their species membership (Weil, 2012). At its core, speciesism is concerned with the notion of anthropocentrism, the idea that the status of being ‘human’ gives one greater moral rights than non-humans. It is a prejudice against ‘animals’ in favour of our own species, with the central tenet being that other animals are only ever mediated through a human perspective, and that humans judge the importance and interests of other animals by their respective importance and interests to humans (Taylor, 2013). This perspective obviously has a negative consequence for some animals, as they are defined only for their importance to humans. If we don’t ‘own’ them or deem them important, then their legal standing can be detrimentally affected. Peter Singer first coined the term ‘speciesism’, and was the first to bring this formerly-neglected concept into academic discourse. His ideas initially garnered a lot of momentum, but were stymied by Singer’s insistence that species discrimination was on a par with racism or sexism in its injustice (Weil, 2012). While Singer’s views were argued as extreme, he was by no means the first person to have such strong opinions regarding human-animal interactions. As far back as 350 BCE, Aristotle influentially argued that “animals, having sense perception but lacking reason, fall below humans in a natural hierarchy, and are therefore appropriate resources for human purposes” (DeGrazia 2002). Aristotle contended that because animals lack rational souls, humanity’s dealings with them are not a matter of justice. This standpoint
became the dominant one throughout most of the following two millennia, with most subsequent Western philosophers and theologians concurring that animals exist for the use of humans, who alone are rational. The Christian Bible largely reinforced the Aristotelian view of animals by asserting that God created humans in his own image, and that humans are free to use natural resources – including animals – for their own purposes.

This anthropocentric viewpoint provides both the reason and the justification for an increased scholarly examination of speciesism, as it is also often the justification for the way some humans plunder the planet for natural resources, and in doing so damage or destroy the habitats that animals need to survive. As Taylor argues, the human paradigm might indeed have shifted a long way, but there is certainly still more that could be done. As I will discuss later, dragons function as a useful narrative device: they highlight the inequalities that exist in the relations between humans and more conventional animals. For the purposes of this chapter, the term ‘animals’ will be used to describe living non-human creatures.

Anthropocentrism is countered by ecocentrism: the view that nature is central not only to human existence, but to the concept of life itself. Ecocentrism seeks to decentralise humanity, and instead acknowledge nature’s intrinsic value, beyond what it can offer to humans. The exploration of this notion has come to be the defining characteristic of animal studies as a discipline. Addressing the destabilising nature of animal studies, Kari Weil has argued that this field of study should mimic early race and gender studies, as it “stretches to the limit questions of language, epistemology, and ethics that have been raised in various ways by women’s studies: how to understand and give voice to others, or to experiences that seem impervious to our means of understanding; how to hear and acknowledge what it may not be possible to say” (2012, p. 6). Just as (prior to mainstream gender studies and the feminist movement) women have lacked a ‘voice’, so too have animals, with no one to speak out for them. While it is suggested that animal studies be modelled on gender studies, the problematic nature of this is clearly evident. Women’s and race studies sought to redress the underrepresentation of those groups in academia by not only discussing them, but by empowering those groups to enter the discussion and represent themselves. This obviously is not possible with animals, as they cannot speak any language recognised by humans. And so, the need for animal studies is clear: the suffering of animals around us is undeniable. Studies and representations on animals can hope “to make decisions
This lack of speech is why the use of dragons in young adult literature is so salient. By using dragons as elements of narrative, authors are able to artificially create a species that is at the same time both an animal, and also capable of sentient communication. Essentially, dragons can ‘talk’ without stretching the bounds of credulity. The use of dragons as a literary device also has the added effect of potentially avoiding categorising animals into one homogenous group. One of the ways that animal studies differs from gender or class studies is that individual people or groups were able to take their own voice, and to represent themselves and their own meanings within society. The challenge, then, for animal studies is to somehow realistically “render non-human animals visible without fixing their meanings. With regard to issues of representation of women, it became clear that promoting any particular image of women could be counterproductive, confining women into a preconceived mould or function” (Weil, 2012, p.26) In a similar fashion, the representation of various nonhuman animals poses the question of how they might be seen on their own terms, rather than seen as fitting into categories imposed upon them by humans. These preconceived notions also inhibit the ways that animals themselves can be represented and still be appealing to a widespread audience. For example, if a representation is overtly cruel (for example, a dog being tortured for fun) then an audience may simply look away: avoid the emotions by choosing not to witness it. At the other end of the spectrum, representations “cannot be too sentimental; something the representation of animals has often been associated with” (Weir, 2012, p. 26). Representations of animals then, must not be either overtly cruel or overtly sentimental, but this can be challenging, as real-world animals each come with their own preconceived notions and prejudices. The challenge then, is realistic representations that do not particularly favour one extreme or the other: representations that could be conducted through dragons. Because dragon and dragon-like characters are so varied, there are fewer presuppositions.

In this examination of speciesism and anthropocentrism in texts featuring dragons, two texts will be analysed. The first is the creative artefact Displaced, which has already been previously examined in the preceding two chapters. The second text is the 2014 novel The Great Zoo of China by Matthew Reilly. This narrative incorporates a Jurassic Park-esque scenario, whereby the Chinese government has managed to locate a hidden cache of dragon eggs, left over from the age of the dinosaurs when they were a variant of flying dinosaurs, and have created a huge theme park around them, with the dragons
as the tourist attraction. The narrative follows Dr. Cassandra Jane "CJ" Cameron, an expert in alligators and reptiles, who has been invited to join a tour of the park before it becomes open to the public, in order to promote it through a National Geographic article. While the tour is in progress, the dragons escape, revolt, and eventually destroy the park, after which only a very small group of humans survives the ordeal.

At the heart of any discussion of speciesism is the notion of naming and classification, for in order to establish an anthropocentric species-hierarchy, the species themselves must first be defined, so as to clearly establish an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy. A structuralist approach to literary criticism – developed in the late 1910s/early 1920s – has at its core the awareness of the interconnectedness of language, and of words themselves, suggesting that humanity’s understanding of a concept is a result of a process of binary oppositions. As Ferdinand de Saussure contends, this structural-linguistic branch of structuralism concerns itself with ‘the examination of language as a series of interconnected units’ (Bally & Sechehaye, 1916, p 44). In his development of structural-linguistics, Saussure highlighted the interconnectedness between relations in ideas:

> Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world (Blackburn, 2008, p. 45).

In this sense, humans reference things not just by what they are, but by how they relate to other things. To illustrate, one cannot understand the concept of ‘wet’ without relating it to their understanding of the concept ‘dry’. Likewise the understanding of ‘human’ is predicated on the related concepts of ‘non-human’ or ‘animal’ (Blackburn, 2008). This concept is a clear reinforcement of the aforementioned ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, as our own language – indeed our very understanding of the concept – of animals is centred around creating a divide and a distinction.

Jacques Derrida argued in his work *The Animal Therefore I Am* (1997) that the very term ‘animal’ is “a word that humans have given themselves the right to use … in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept” (1997, p. 3). Derrida’s approach is considered post-structuralist, and as such his central contention is sometimes contrary to Saussure, whose ideas he used as a foundation to expand from. Derrida’s categorisation is problematic, to say the least, as it makes no differentiation...
between different species of animals, their moral standing, their level of sentience, their emotional range, or their ability to achieve abstract thought. As such Derrida questions the very term itself, as “to put the word *animal* under scrutiny is to accept that the differences between animals may be far greater than what we all share, and that we may be more like some animals than we are like each other” (1997. p.3). As Derrida aptly comments, “the animal is the foundation on which the notion of ‘human’ is constructed.” (1997. p. 20). As well as the obvious problems that arise from this, the ‘animal’-construct-as-foundation also gives rise the situation whereby after the us/them division has occurred, “animals have been homogenised into a singular concept, demonstrating blindness to the differences that exists among animals as they exist among humans” (Derrida, 1997. p. 20). Authors can potentially use dragons to redress these fallacies, though an exploration of both the creatures themselves, and their own hierarchies and societies, showing them to be every bit as complex as humanity. By extension, this knowledge could then be extrapolated to other species of animals.

In *The Great Zoo Of China*, the scientists at the zoo unequivocally state that they have named and classified all the re-discovered species of dragon. First comes the classification process, as described by one scientist:

“What precisely is a dragon? The answer is actually quite simple. The animal we know as a dragon is a dinosaur, a most unique kind of dinosaur that survived the meteor impact that condemned the rest of its species to extinction.” (2014. p. 80)

Here, the scientist establishes the view of the zoo: the dragon is an animal. They are a dinosaur, which makes them a very rare and otherwise extinct animal, but they are an animal nonetheless. This classification sets the fundamental tone for the rest of the narrative; since the dragons are viewed as ‘animals’, the scientists anthropocentrically believe that their treatment of the dragons is justified.

The numbers changed constantly, giving data in real time. Impressive.

“You can see the heart rate of every dragon in the zoo?” CJ asked.

Zhang smoothed his tie again. “We want to maintain a close eye on the health of our animals. If any of them catches an infection, we want to detect it early, both to save the animal in question and prevent an epidemic spreading to the other dragons.”
Below the main map screen was a legend, which allocated the coloured icons to names written in both Chinese and English:

RED-BELLIED BLACKS
YELLOWJACKETS
PURPLE ROYALS
EASTERN GRAYS
GREEN RIVERS
SWAMP BROWNS

“Nice names,” Ambassador Syme said. “Catchy.”

“Thank you,” Hu said. “We hired a brand-consultancy firm in Los Angeles to come up with them. Of course, we have given the dragons formal Latin names—Draconis Imperator, Draconis Rex and the like—but this facility is built for tourists, not academics. (2014. p.100)

The scientist – Hu – clearly states that the facility (the zoo) is built for tourists, a notion reinforced by the other scientist’s – Zhang’s – use of the term ‘animal’. It is a revenue-raising operation, and the dragons are the product that will raise the revenue. The morality of animals in zoos will be discussed later, however the focus here is on the names themselves. In a reflection of the view that the dragons are a profit-making product to sell, their names have been created much like a new brand-name would be: something catchy and memorable. Names that roll off the tongue easily, and that can be grasped by children and adults alike. This process of naming not only reduces the ‘animals’ to how they relate to humans, and what they can do to further human goals. Despite the fact the fact that many –if not all – animals have both a Latin name and a more easily-accessible colloquial name (eg. lupine/wolf; ursine/bear), the dragons are differentiated by the process: The names are chosen to complement the ‘brand’, and in doing so further that humans’ goals of selling tickets and making money. Thus far the focus has been on the naming of species. At an individual level, the names become even more calculating. Several dragons are trained to perform, with the lead dragon given the auspicious name of Lucky, and the rest reduced to mere numbers:

Four more dragons flew out of the sky and landed on the stage around her. They were the same size as Lucky, but different in colour. CJ saw that they too had brands on their left hind legs: R-22, R-23, R-24 and R-25. (2014. p.81)
In this case, the animals are reduced to stock. All that is missing from them is a barcode, and as is later explained by a scientist, the barcode itself is redundant, as all the dragons have been fitted with surgical tracking implants. To return to Derrida, the naming and classification process used here has fundamentally reduced dragons from whole and complex creatures down to their base element: their names – and as such their most memorable feature – have been derived from nothing more complicated than the colour of their scales, and in some instances, the type of habitat the scientists have arbitrarily decided to place them in.

In *Displaced*, the protagonist Harriet still undergoes a process of classification and naming when confronted with the dragon, however in a different manner to what was depicted in *The Great Zoo Of China*. The process she undergoes for classification is more a process of elimination, as she struggles to understand just what the dragon is:

*What did I just see? That thing has wings? There’s no such thing as a reptile with wings. Only birds can fly.*

The new information confused Harriet completely. She mentally made a list of all the reptiles – it *had* to be a reptile, with scales like that – but she couldn’t think of what it could be. *It has legs, so not a snake. It has wings, so not a lizard.* All her options were coming up short. There was one thing… but it surely couldn’t be that, so she kept working through the list. *Too big for a skink, but too small for a monitor. Still no fit. And it can’t be that… they’re only a myth. They’re not real.*

She pushed the crazy thought to the back of her head, and kept working her way through all the reptiles she knew. *Definitely not a turtle, since it has no shell. Can’t be a Gila Monster. They’re only found in Mexico.* As more and more animals were eliminated, her crazy notion seemed increasingly likely. But it was crazy, so she continued. *Too strange to be an iguana, and the shape’s all wrong for a crocodile…*

*It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. The only description it matches is…*

A dragon.  

(*Displaced*, Chapter 2)

In this instance, there is still very much a process of categorisation, when Harriet seeks to classify the new animal; however, the narrative presents this process as Harriet’s attempt to understand, not an
attempt to relegate the animal to a preconceived category. It is established that Harriet is a country girl, and has an interest in helping animals, so her quest to identify the animal supports her aim to provide it with the best treatment. Once the dragon is correctly identified, Harriet then undergoes the naming process:

Harriet only listened to her teachers that day with half an ear, instead spending her lessons doodling names in the back of her exercise book. Most of the girls in class did the same, but rather than writing initials in a love heart, Harriet was deciding what she wanted to name her dragon.

The obvious choice was ‘Draco’, but she dismissed it right away. Obvious was boring, and her dragon was anything but that. ‘Blue’, ‘Skye’, and ‘Marine’ were all rejected straight away, and all for the same reason.

*I need something cool…*

She liked ‘Sapphire’, or even the variation ‘Saphira’, but when she said it a few times aloud, she realized that it was the same name as a dragon from a book she’d read, and she’d hated the book.

*Something original…*

Turning her attention away from the dragon’s colour, she focused on what it could do: fly. ‘Airborne’…? ‘Apollo’…? ‘Icarus’…? Gab! *All of these sound stupid. Too militaristic, and Icarus isn’t even a girl’s name!* She considered ‘Harrier’ briefly – like the jumpjet – but decided that the name was narcissistically close to her own, and could get confusing.

*Abb… this is useless!*

Throwing her pen down, Harriet leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. Her classroom was next to the oval, and there was a PE group out playing footy. She watched them exhaust themselves under the bright sun, and her eyes were drawn upwards. Except for a single wisp of fluffy cloud, the sky was complexly bare.

*A cloud,* she toyed with the word, repeating it several times in her head.

*Comes and goes. Lives in the sky. Can be calm and beautiful, but woe betide anyone caught unawares if it decides to turn violent.* The more she thought about it, the more fitting it sounded.

Cloud.
Harriet chooses a name for her new dragon with the notion of ‘coolness’ in mind; however, she does also make an effort to find a name that suits the dragon’s personality and appearance, dismissing names that are overly ‘militaristic,’ ‘boring,’ or masculine. In this sense, Harriet’s naming of Cloud could be likened to that of a pet being named. Again, the dragons in both narratives undergo a classification and naming process by the respective humans who discover them, but what differentiates the two sequences is the ‘spirit’ behind the process. Harriet’s classification is to understand, rather than to ‘brand’, and her naming process derives from the belief that any companion (like a pet) should have a name. While Harriet and Cloud will later in the narrative form a much closer bond, at this stage, Cloud is very much seen as a pet-like character. In both narratives, the initial dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is still established, and is not broken down until the narrative progresses significantly. Harriet clearly states that she ‘has’ a dragon: showing a clearly possessive sense, verging on ownership.

Both narratives, then, treat the dragons as animals, or ‘less’ than humans, at least at the outset. Over the course of each narrative, this ‘dragon-equals-animal’ assignation changes, largely due to the shift in moral status that is assigned to dragons. Animal rights advocate David DeGrazia describes moral status by likening it to the treatment of a dog:

To claim that a dog has moral status is to say that a dog has moral importance in her own right, and not just simply in relation to humans. More precisely, it is to say that the dog’s interests or welfare matters must be taken seriously – independently of how the dogs welfare affects human interests. To put it simply: it is treating the dog well for the dog’s sake.


To give animals moral status, then, is to allow that they have their own moral rights, and are worthy of consideration outside of what they can do for humans. DeGrazia has assigned two methods for giving animals’ needs consideration. The first is the ‘Equal Consideration’ model, where animals are to be given – as the name suggests – equal consideration to humans regarding the animals’ needs and wants. This is not to say they are to be given equal treatment, but only equal consideration. Following this model, if a land developer seeks to build a house on an empty suburban block, then they might need to consider the tree in the backyard that houses a family of birds, and the ant mound in the front middle of the lot that house several million insects. Equal treatment would stipulate that the ants and
birds have just as much right to the land as the humans do, however equal consideration dictates that the developer at least consider their needs, and take action accordingly. This might involve moving the animals, or it might (coldly) mean developers continue with development as is. What matters here is not the resulting action, but the act of genuine consideration, which theoretically will then influence said actions (DeGrazia, 2002). The second suggested alternative model is the Sliding Scale approach, whereby:

Humans deserve full, equal consideration. Other animals deserve consideration in proportion to their social, emotional, and cognitive complexity. For example, a monkey’s suffering matters less than a human’s suffering, but more than a rat’s suffering, which matters more than a chicken’s suffering. (2002, p. 24)

Following this Sliding Scale approach, animals are essentially ‘ranked’ in order of importance, as judged their level of potential suffering. Continuing with the previously-used backyard-birds example, the birds might be deemed important enough to either leave the tree intact, or relocate the nest to the park, whereas the ant hive is deemed non-essential, and is destroyed by the development. Regardless of which model is adopted, both are salient in their treatment of animals as worthy in their own right, rather than only in relation to how they impact upon humans. When animals are not given consideration (equal or otherwise), the potential for exploitation is clear: habitats can be destroyed for human benefit, species can become endangered or even extinct, and living creatures can be reduced to base commodities (DeGrazia, 2002). The attitude taken towards dragons in young adult literature is salient, as it offers a model that the reader can then apply to animals in their own spheres of existence. The dragons also offer an abstract representation of animals, so the reader has a fresh chance to judge them on their own merits, rather than applying preconceived notions, as in the case of the birds and the ants. The level of consideration given to the dragons as part of this attitude also directly influences the behaviour and treatment of the dragons themselves.

In *The Great Zoo of China*, the dragons are attributed with very little moral status, if any at all. It is established from the outset that they are a product and a commodity to be ‘sold’, and even up to the end of the narrative, this viewpoint does not change in the minds of the Chinese businessmen and zoo executives. No consideration is given to their wants and desires, or even their personal wellbeing, as can be seen during a demonstration given to the zoo tour group:
Four more dragons landed on the stage.

Their tails slunk back and forth behind their thin muscular bodies and they also had armour plating with striated patterns. CJ saw that they too had brands on their left hind legs: R-22, R-23, R-24 and R-25.

As the visitors gasped at these new arrivals, Yim threw each dragon a treat of some sort: they looked like dead rats to CJ. The dragons caught the morsels in their mouths and gulped them down like—CJ winced—like performing seals.

Oh, God, she thought. They've trained them . . . (2014. p.86)

The dragons here as depicted as being no different to Shamu, the resident Orca at SeaWorld: trained to perform on command in exchange for treats. And, just like many of the animals at an amusement park, they are tagged and labelled, not with names, but this nothing more sophisticated than a chronological designation. “R” for their species (Red-Bellied Blacks) and a number indicating the order of their birth. These dragons are not pets, and they are not friends to the humans. Instead, like a circus animal, they are trained to follow orders in a timely fashion. The training methods do not stop at positive reinforcement though. As well as the ‘carrot’, the dragons are also exposed to the ‘stick’:

Yim said, “A prince dragon has a bite pressure of 15,000 pounds per square inch. Allow me to demonstrate.”

One of the red-bellied blacks strode lazily forward. It stared at Yim with what could only be described as insolence . . . and didn’t do anything.

It just stood there.

Then CJ saw Yim produce a small yellow remote control from her belt and subtly hold it out.

Seeing the yellow remote, the dragon promptly turned and, with a loud crunch, casually bit down on the bicycle. Like a soda can being crushed, the bike crumpled within its massive jaws.

The audience gasped. The red-faced dragon spat out the bicycle and stomped back to its place, its forked tail slinking behind it.

But all CJ could think about was the yellow remote that had prompted the creature into action. Trained animals reacted to stimuli: rewards and treats or, in the less enlightened places of the world, pain. She wondered what
kind of stimulus that remote triggered and suspected that the answer was pain. (2014. p.95)

While CJ gives the zoo trainers the benefit of the doubt, other bits of information in the prologue and main narrative confirm for the reader that pain is a well-used motivator at the zoo. It is even hinted at in this scene, with the device causing obviously fear in the dragon, and the trainer going to great effort to hide it from the majority of the tour group audience. The language also reinforces this theory: Yim is being ‘subtle’ with the remote, trying to avoid making it obvious to the audience. The dragon as being described as ‘insolent’: a far-from-willing participant. Even the way it ‘casually’ crushes the bicycle then ‘stormed’ back to its spot are reminiscent of a child dragging their heels before completing a chore they detest, then acting out minutely after having completed it. This all demonstrates a lack of dragon moral status, as the ‘trainers’ have clearly decided to treat them poorly for personal gain. It is very much a case of the ends justifying the means, rather than the wellbeing of a living creature being paramount.

*Displaced*, in contrast, assigns a very different level of moral status to dragonkind, and as such, depicts a different kind of treatment. As in *The Great Zoo of China*, there exists a faction (the ‘Suits’) who want possession of the dragons – or at the least control over them – for less-than-altruistic reasons, and again there is a female protagonist who is altruistically positioned in opposition to them. However, unlike *The Great Zoo of China*, the dragons in *Displaced* are under the auspices of the sympathetic protagonist rather than the corporation. In the following extract, Harriet realises for the first time that the Suits are after her dragon:

> The men in suits were still at the school, and they were still interrogating every student they could corner. Harriet listened to them talk, and the way they asked questions without actually mentioning what they were after confirmed her worst fears.
> They were after her dragon.
> And not only that, but the men were armed. She saw it when one of them bent over to retie his shoelace. Under his left arm he had a black leather holster, with a sinister silver pistol tucked inside. As soon as she knew what to look for, it wasn’t hard to see that all of the other Suits were armed
as well. *Who are these people?* None of them had identified themselves as being police or government, and none of them carried a badge. *This isn’t America, where people can just walk around carrying guns. Who the hell are they, and how do they know about my dragon?*

Harriet vowed that they would never get their hands on Cloud. As much as it would hurt her to do so, Harriet would rather see the dragon released into the wild than live in some cage with the Suits poking and prodding her. *(Displaced, Chapter 4)*

The malevolent nature of the Suits — and by extension, their regressive and anti-social views — is evidenced by the way they are described. They are not merely questioning the students, but “interrogating” them. Further, the students are not willing participants, but must first be “cornered”. Even the Suits’ guns are “sinister”, and this is highlighted by comparing Australia’s strict gun-laws explicitly with America: a very different country in terms of gun ownership and rates of gun violence. A firearm itself cannot be sinister: it is just a tool, like a knife or an axe. Rarely would a policeman’s sidearm ever be described as sinister — a fact acknowledged when Harriet differentiates them from these honest professions — however, in the presence of the mysterious Suits, in a location where it should never be, the gun takes on a much more ominous symbolism. In the extract, Harriet’s first instinct is to protect Cloud. If Harriet’s only concern was for herself, she would simply abandon the dragon, either by just dumping it somewhere, or by giving it straight to the ‘Suits’. By willingly risking her own life to try and protect the dragon — disregarding how much the process may “hurt [Harriet]” — Harriet is demonstrating that she is giving the dragon equal consideration, and has assigned her significant moral status.

At great personal risk, Harriet decides to spirit Cloud away. Harriet accomplishes this by smuggling the dragon out of town hidden inside of a camping backpack, convincing the dragon to get inside with the promise that “it’s only for a few hours. When you come out, we’ll be in a totally new home. One where you can fly around all you want. You can hunt, and roar, and I’ll come visit you all the time but no one else will ever know you’re there.” *(Displaced, page XX)*. While it could be argued that forcing a living being into a cramped backpack for hours on end goes against the principals of moral rights, it should be noted that the focus is on the *consideration* being equal. As DeGrazia points out, “this equality does not, of course, extend to succumbing to an animal’s want all the time, no more
than you would for a child. Greater needs must be taken into consideration by more rational minds. For instance, even though a child would love to eat sweets every day, an adult must regulate their intake for nutritional purposes. Likewise, even though a cat may find it distressing and unpleasant, a human may forcibly take them to be treated by a veterinarian” (DeGrazia, 2002, p. 12). Being placed into the backpack would be a temporary negative situation, but would be serving a greater good. The moral status the Harriet attributes to Cloud is also evident in Harriet’s emotional state at the prospect of their parting, even when Cloud is hindering Harriet from erecting a tent:

Swearing in frustration, Harriet tried to chastise Cloud, but the dragon merely flew in circles around her head, chirping happily.

“You’re an idiot,” she said lovingly, tears springing to her face as she realised how much she had grown to like the little monster. And tomorrow I’ll have to say goodbye forever. She’d told Cloud earlier that she’d come and visit … but she wouldn’t. A clean break was best. (Displaced, Chapter 4)

There are several suggestions implicit in this passage worthy of note. The first is that there is a shared belief that Cloud actually can understand what Harriet is saying. Cloud is able to follow English instructions, and at several points, can be seen to calm down or get excited when Harriet verbally tells the dragon something new. There is also the explicit understanding that Harriet lied to Cloud for the dragon’s ‘own good’. Much like the aforementioned cat being forcibly taken to the vet, Harriet’s dragon is lied to (something which will eventually cause great distress) because a human has sentiently decided that she knew what the best course of action was. Even though it goes against what Harriet personally would want and prefer, she understands that the best thing for Cloud’s wellbeing is to be removed from human contact: to be ‘freed’ into the wild. The altruism behind this decision is reinforced by the fact that Harriet doesn’t just talk to Cloud, she speaks “lovingly”, and she is not merely sad at the prospect of their parting, but “tears spring to her face”. Harriet also goes to great lengths to ensure that the ‘wild’ the dragon is freed into is a habitat that the dragon will be able to enjoy and thrive in:

The dragon didn’t show any signs of discomfort or fear at its new surroundings. Quite the opposite, it was happy to whizz this way and that, snapping at bugs and insects as they flew through the air, and one time even darting down to pounce onto a skink that had been unlucky enough to sun itself on a nearby branch.
Watching the dragon, Harriet felt better. *This is where it’s meant to be. Not cooped up in some bedroom, where it has to stay hidden and by itself most of the time.*

*It’s an animal, and it should live in the wild.*  
*Displaced*, Chapter 4

Once again, Harriet recognises that what’s best for the wellbeing of the dragon is different to what Harriet’s wants and needs are. The italicised thoughts focalise through Harriet’s mind, giving a glimpse into her thought processes. In Harriet’s eyes, Cloud is still an ‘animal’, and as such, it is only reasonable – in Harriet’s eyes – for a human to actively take a part in deciding what’s best. However, the dragon is also seen as its own being, and not just relegated to a human-oriented standpoint in terms of what it has to offer. As such, the treatment it receives is directly influenced (DeGrazia, 2002). This scene demonstrates Harriet’s embodiment of DeGrazia’s Sliding Scale model of animal consideration: Harriet sees a skink being killed, but it is a swift end, and the dragon uses it as nourishment to survive. Likewise, the bugs and insects that suffer the same fate are so insignificant as to barely even be worth mentioning. One being’s needs are put ahead of another’s, as in the case of a human eating meat to survive. Harriet (who also eats meat) shows no sign of discomfort at Cloud’s actions, implicitly suggesting that a ‘food chain’ where dragons and humans are on top is acceptable.

It becomes apparent then, that the moral status assigned to a particular being (dragon or otherwise) usually correlates with their perceived level of sentience. In this case, sentience is more than the capacity to respond to stimuli: it is the capacity to have at least some feelings … including conscious sensations and emotional states” (DeGrazia, 2002, p. 18). Overwhelming scientific evidence (Weil, 2012) supports the idea that “a wide range of animals, including most or all vertebrates, and probably some invertebrates, possess a rich variety of feelings” (DeGrazia, 2002, p. 39), and aside from that, any pet-owner will anecdotally recount many examples of their companions showing emotions and reactions previously only thought demonstrable by humans. More than anecdotally, however, the sentience of animals has long been empirically documented: ‘Washoe’ was the first chimpanzee to be taught sign language, and proved able to combine signs into new and even abstract representations (Weil, 2012. P. 8). This shows clearly that animals are (to a certain extent, at least) capable of rational, abstract thought (Weil, 2012. p. 8). Some detractors of this notion may contend that Washoe was merely joining pre-existing ‘signs’ and ‘signifiers’ through rote learning; however, the abstract representations she was able to form is a testament to the opposite, and, as Pepperberg
observed, language not as the putting together of the sign and the signified, but as a response to a social environment in which one is motivated to communicate (Weil, 2012, p. 9).

The idea of sentience – as evidenced though abstract though, forward planning, and an understanding of action-and-consequence – is repeatedly explored within *The Great Zoo of China*. In this narrative, the dragons are assumed to be dumb beasts by the zoo executives, but the protagonist CJ doubts this right from the outset. She is the sole character who respects their intelligence, having had numerous years of close interaction with alligators as part of her career. CJ observes in the dragons similar traits to humans: loyalty, courage, and defiance, as when CJ’s group stumbled across a small clutch of dragons:

Two yellowjacket princes popped up from within the emperor’s embrace. They had been sleeping inside its massive limbs and although they themselves were nine feet tall, they looked positively tiny beside the emperor. Ever the loyal lieutenants, they leapt to their emperor’s defence, placing themselves between it and this group of intruders. (2014, p. 180)

While the dragons have been firmly established as ‘animals’, they seemingly possess very personable characteristics. The younger princes are not just near their emperor, they are within his “embrace”, suggesting that they are being nurtured, cared for, and respected. As such, it is logical that they are then “loyal”, and were consequently inspired not just to rise up, but to “leap” to the “defence” of *their* emperor. All this, despite the fact the humans have superior weapons, as well as electronic defences that mean the dragons cannot get within twenty meters of them, lest they receive an electric shock from a chip planted under their ears. Still, it could be argued that this behaviour does not show sentience, and is merely reactionary; a result of classic ‘pack mentality’: by looking after their leader, the princelings are in effect looking after themselves. As the narrative progresses, however, we begin to see that their actions are not merely instinctive, nor primal. The narrative clearly supports CJ’s viewpoint, showing the dragons to be highly capable right from the outset, but especially so when they finally overthrow their human ‘captors’:

Suddenly there it was, right in front of CJ and Na!

It was a prince-sized red-bellied black dragon.
It hissed at them, right in their faces, and CJ saw the deep bloody wounds where its ears should have been.

It was a creature of another time, a terrible serpent-like thing. It was everything that human beings—soft and clawless—feared. Its fangs were long, its talons scythelike, its hide armoured. No human could fight such a thing. And you couldn’t reason with it either.

She realized that she had seen this one before: it was one of the dragons from the amphitheatre, the sullen prince that had reluctantly performed for the female trainer.

The dragon moved before CJ could react. It snatched Na’s throat in one powerful claw and bit her head off with a shocking tearing bite.

Blood sprayed all over CJ’s face. (2014. p. 170)

These actions could superficially be seen as merely an animal’s instinctive response: lashing out at a clear threat, and defending their own lives from further risk. The language defies this base interpretation, though, as the dragons are shown to be anything but instinctive. The reader is reminded that the dragons were acting “sullen”, and only “reluctantly” performed in the amphitheatre because they were threatened. This defies all conditioned responses (the usual method of training animals) as for “base animals” it would merely be a case of the animal performing a trick for an expected reward, with no greater foresight of planning than what is immediately present. Referencing the dragon’s past actions also places their current actions into perspective: they are motivated by revenge. The dragon has been mistreated, and rather than removing itself immediately from danger, it has sought after and specifically targeted those that mistreated it, and seeks to cause pain and death. Revenge itself is an action rarely attributed to “non-sentient” animals, and is indeed more closely aligned with humanity.

The crucial aspect of the dragons’ actions, however, is noted here by CJ herself: the dragons have ripped off their own ears. This would—obviously—involves a significant amount of pain, but it clearly shows that dragons are capable of forethought and abstract reasoning they recognise that they are prevented from getting close to humans, they have determined the cause of that, and they have taken steps to remove it. Even though the removal will cause them significant pain, it is pain they is worth it for the future reward. This behaviour is indicative of high intelligence, and if there was still any doubt in readers’ minds, the narrative reinforces this intelligence through the scene where CJ fixes the wing of the dragon Lucky, while at the same time convincing it to come to the aid of the surviving humans. Lucky is the recipient of an experimental chip, which also functions as a kind of translator,
using years’ worth of observations by the zoo’s scientists to render dragon vocalisations into their English equivalent:

CJ returned to Lucky in the exam room.
The dragon was standing now, testing the staples and stretching its wings.
“Lucky good?” CJ asked.
Lucky mewed. “Lucky strong . . . White Head good human . . .”
“Lucky . . . fight?”

The salient aspect of this exchange is the dragon’s use of the word “good”. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ are not concepts animals might be expected to understand, as morality is considered a distinctly human concept. In nature, there is no good or bad, only action and consequence; only strong and weak. By using “good”, Lucky demonstrates an abstract reasoning and grasp on morality that previously has only been hinted at with the dragons depicted. This leaves no doubt as to the intelligence of the dragons, and is a clear indication that the ability to ‘speak’ in a language humans understand (unaided, that is) is certainly not correlated with a lack of intelligence or sentience. In even these brief words, Lucky the dragon has shown a capacity to differentiate between humans, separating those who are benign from those who mean him harm. He has demonstrated that he is capable of making decisions based on new information (changing allegiances) and has shown himself willing to risk his life for a cause he deems just: a cause he is not being coerced or blackmailed into supporting, and a cause in which he has no direct vested interest.

Displaced also addresses the issue of sentience, and as in The Great Zoo of China, the dragons are shown to be capable of abstract thought, emotion, independent decision-making, and forward-planning. They are also shown to be able to understand the relationship between temporary and permanent states, as is evidenced when Harriet asks Cloud to remain uncomfortably confined inside a backpack in order to escape from pursuers, until freed by the dragonrider Elayne:

Elayne ran to the bag and ripped the straps open. Cloud was still exactly where Harriet had left her, and true to form, she hadn’t made any noise the entire time to give away her presence. Once she could see daylight, though, she obviously saw no need to stay confined, and took to the air
with frenzied wingbeats. Rising straight up, Cloud pinpointed Harriet immediately and flew down to land on her shoulder.

Cloud curled her body around the back of Harriet’s neck in her usual perch, but this time her tail wrapped around the front of Harriet’s neck protectively and her wings flared wide to make the two of them seem bigger and more imposing. Harriet didn’t think it was possible, but in that moment she fell just a little bit deeper in love with her dragon. Even against overwhelming odds, in the face of a potential threat the dragon only had one thought in mind: to defend Harriet. *(Displaced, Chapter 7)*

Cloud clearly shows an understanding that she is in an adverse situation for a greater good (just like the zoo-dragons ripping off their ears for future benefit), and she obviously understands third-party motivations, so does not hold Harriet accountable for her confinement. In this way, the dragons – and by extension, some real world animals – are shown to be capable of much greater intelligence than some humans would attribute them with.

The language used to describe Cloud’s movements support her sentience and skill: she doesn’t just fly out of the bag, but “[rises] straight up”, assessing the situation and her surroundings, and “pinpointing” her target before “immediately” rushing over. Cloud demonstrates “protective” behaviour, which in animals could be attributed to either familial protection or pack mentality. Familial protection, however, is not a likely explanation, as Cloud is the junior, and weaker in every way. Pack-mentality is also unlikely, as it typically revolves around ensuring the pack’s survival by both survival of the fittest and protection of the next generation (the young who can’t defend themselves). Cloud is neither the fittest nor the eldest of the pair, and so her behaviour could only be described as a result of loyalty, and even perhaps friendship: both traits exhibited by highly intelligent beings.

Furthermore, like Lucky, Cloud also shows herself willing to differentiate ‘good’ humans from those who mean her harm, and shows herself both willing and able to take independent action in support of those humans, even to the detriment of her own personal safety, as occurs during a bushfire when Harriet attempts to escape the flames using a dirtbike:

> The flames swept through the forest faster than Harriet’s little bike.
> A shadow appeared above her, and Harriet whooped with joy. Cloud had deposited her passengers, and had returned for her rider.
The cry fell from her lips as she realised Cloud couldn’t do anything for her: the trees were too narrow for her to be able to pick up Harriet easily, even if they hadn’t been on fire.

Now that she knew her dragon wouldn’t be saving her, the burning roadblock ahead of her suddenly took on a much more sinister meaning. Demonstrating that dragons were far from mindless mounts, Cloud flew ahead. Landing roughly, Cloud sank her front claws into the burning tree trunk, and started pulling against it. (Displaced, Chapter 24)

The text itself acknowledges Harriet’s attitude towards other animals. Despite the fact that she has ridden across most of the state of Victoria on horseback, she still refers to a common mount as “mindless”. At first this seems incongruous, until one realises that a horse is only ‘mindless’ when compared to a dragon. Harriet fully acknowledges how intelligent horses are, so by calling them mindless in comparison, she implicitly suggests that dragons possesses a sentience almost as great as that of a human, if not more so. Furthermore, the dragon’s actions actively reinforce this sentient assignation, with Cloud showing herself capable of deeper understanding in the way she communicates with her rider. It is established earlier in the narrative that dragons are not able to ‘talk’ vocally, but that they are able to form a mental bond with their chosen rider. This bond does not allow for specific words or information to be communicated, but instead is an ‘emotional’ bond, allowing the other to sense when one is angry, upset, etc:

Another bend in the road, and in the distance Harriet could see the clear crosscut of the major highway. The gravel road extended on the other side of the highway, however over there didn’t look to be the roaring flame that was on Harriet’s side.

A mental image floated down the bond from Cloud above. It was a serene and peaceful feeling, and one that Harriet instinctively associated with a deserted beach.

Deserted beach… Deserted beach… Beach? No, we’re in a forest. Deserted… Deserted… Deserted! Empty! No one there! Safe!

Smiling at being able to interpret Cloud’s message, Harriet didn’t slow down as she approached the highway. The trees blocked her vision down the road, but she blew across it blind, trusting Cloud’s message that there were no cars to hit her. (Displaced, Chapter 24)
Harriet has previously demonstrated her capacity to manipulate the bond in order to have Cloud feel certain emotions (such as a sense of danger or urgency) but here Cloud shows herself equally as capable, passing on the sensation of a deserted beach in order to convey that the road ahead is free of cross-traffic. This scene is also telling, as the reader has followed Cloud’s journey since her birth, and so is aware that Cloud has only been to a beach once in her life, and that was for a scant few minutes, under the cover of darkness. She will have had no first-hand experience of a deserted beach being associated with “serene and peaceful feelings”, but is able to intuit this feeling based on what she has shared with her human rider. In essence Cloud can take several snippets of unrelated information, and use them to make accurate and evidence-based assumptions. Finally, Cloud again shows a willingness to put her own life at risk for what she perceives to be a greater good:

“Cloud! Get out of there!”

Harriet knew her dragon could hear her cries; the bond told her as much. The bond also spoke to how frightened and angry Cloud was. Frightened because Harriet had been shot, and angry that her entire short life had been spent running away from these people, when she hadn’t even done anything against them. 

(Displaced, Chapter 24)

This scene also shows Cloud’s understanding of a very humanlike concept: fairness. Admittedly, the narrative is focalized through Harriet’s subjective understanding, and it is only through Harriet’s observations that we learn of Cloud’s thoughts, but the narrative depicts this bond as being close enough to assume a decent level of accuracy in emotion and in accuracy in reflection of Cloud’s mental state. Even if Harriet’s observations were not accurate in their representation, then the fact that the narrative presents it as such means that our analysis of Cloud’s abilities remains sound. Fairness is not a concept that animals are typically attributed with. They understand consequences, but the idea of fairness – treatment based on one’s own actions – is distinctly human.

Further, in a twisted commentary, the very nature of the bushfire itself could be said to further break down the sentient animal ‘us/them’ dichotomy. Fire has long been considered the first ‘invention’ of humanity, and our first step on our journey away from the animals. In the denouement of the narrative, a human has lit a fire that has gotten out of control and raged into a bushfire: the very essences of what sets humanity apart from the animals has been lost. All the while, the dragons – the ‘animal’ – themselves retain their own precise control over their own firebreathing capabilities, and what’s more, they show a resistance to the human’s fire, which they then use to humanely save as many human lives as they can.
Building on discussions of sentience and intelligence, animal studies poses the question of how ethical it is to keep animals in zoos or as household pets. An examination of pets and zoo animals is particularly crucial to animal studies, as there is a dominant perception that humans can interfere in an animal’s life/existence because of a notion that they ‘know what’s best’ for the animal. This leads to a prevalent (DeGrazia, 2002) situation of injustices against animals being ignored under the auspices of their ‘good’ treatment at the hands of owner/keepers. Yi-Fu Tuan contends, “as products of and subjects to the abuse of power, pets are potential victims, but their status is rendered ambiguous because of the care and ‘humaneness’ with which they are bred, trained and fed” (p. 88). To help remedy this potential injustice, DeGrazia outlines the conditions that must be satisfied in order for the ‘keeping’ of animals to be considered ethical:

Caretakers must satisfy two base conditions to justify the keeping of particular animals as pets or zoo animals. First, the animal’s basic physical and psychological needs must be met. Second, the animal must be provided with a life that is at least as good as she [sic] would likely have in the wild. (2002, p. 82)

It is important to note here that this is a discussion unrelated to the ethics of raising livestock for labour or consumption (leather, milk, eggs, meat), which – as explored earlier with reference to DeGrazia – “should only be kept after the moral rights” (p36) considerations have been taken. DeGrazia differentiates these two conditions as being specific for only the keeping of pets or zoo animals: that is, animals kept only for human ‘amusement’ (for lack of a better term). The essence of these two conditions are that their mental and physical wellbeing must not be affected detrimentally, and quality of life must be maintained. DeGrazia does, however, go on to makes exceptions for these principles, to be considered on a case-by-case basis: such as the necessity of a dog being trained to act as eyes for a blind person, or a bomb-sniffing dog in a warzone, or for an animal to be forced into captivity to prevent extinction. In these cases, the role the animal plays is considered more important than the exposure to personal danger: logic which holds true for fire fighters, police officers, or military personnel. Regardless of the exception, though, each animal should still be considered to have moral status, and all attempts should be made to preserve quality of life. In many instances, these two principles are upheld by humans who keep animals as companions: family pets are often offered unconditional love, regular meals, companionship, shelter, and regular medical treatment. While many
of these may still hold true for animals kept in the majority of zoos, a common area that is overlooked is the animal’s psychological wellbeing, and the assurance that their quality of life is not being detrimentally affected by being enclosed.

_The Great Zoo of China_ quite obviously revolves around a zoo, and the treatment of the dragons by the human ‘keepers’ is central to the narrative, providing both the explanation and the justification for the dragons’ eventual revolt and attack. As is explained clearly at the outset of the narrative, the mindset of the zoo executives is simple:

“When we conceived the Great Dragon Zoo, we didn’t want it to look like a prison. We wanted visitors to see our dragons as they were meant to be seen: soaring against the wide-open sky. Having said that, our dragons are still very much our prisoners. As you will see on this display, there are two barriers—invisible to the human eye—keeping our dragons captive here inside the zoo. The two domes are essentially invisible walls of ultra-high-voltage electromagnetic energy. They also extend underground, just in case our dragons attempt to tunnel their way out.

“Each dragon has a microchip grafted onto its brain … fitted to the limbic or pain centre of the dragon’s brain and it is capable of emitting a powerful electric shock in certain circumstances. One of those circumstances is when a dragon comes into contact with either of the electromagnetic domes.”

CJ recalled the yellow remote from the trick show and wondered if that was another such “circumstance.”

(2014. p.104)

It is important to note the narrative’s portrayal of the zoo executive, as evidenced by his choice of words: he “didn’t want [the zoo] to look like a prison.” It was not that he was adverse to a prison itself, or had any qualms about the imprisonment and subjugation of an entire species … he simply has concerns about what the “zoo” will look like, and whether the visitors have a satisfying experience. As such, he goes to pains to elaborate the sophisticated defensive procedures, and how they cause pain to the animals, but are – more importantly – “invisible to the human eye”, and how the electronic pain deliverance system is “grafted onto the [dragon’s] brain” and so will therefore not interrupt the ‘nature’ experience of zoo clientele. The Zoo executives clearly see the dragons as stock: they are there
to be financially beneficial, and like livestock to be sold, must be contained so as to avoid (as the retail world refers to it as) ‘shrinkage’. In order to manage this containment, the Zoo executives have shown no hesitation to detrimentally affect the dragon’s health and personal well-being. They have surgically altered the dragons in a highly intrusive way, and have ensured that the humans have a way of delivering extreme levels of pain (negative-reinforcement) at will. As is also shown by the reference to the “yellow remote”, there is a definite willingness for this pain to be administered beyond what’s needed for containment: it is used to ensure compliance during training and performances. The narrative positions the reader to feel outrage at the dragons’ unjust treatment, and proposes that utilising pain as a training tool is not only less-than-ideal, but is in the realms of cruelty and torture. The narrative further reinforces this notion through the scientist’s given justification, which is as morally-skewed as the treatment itself, as the executive explains:

“Make no mistake, my dear guests, these are dangerous animals and we know it. But then this is why people go to zoos in the first place: to see the dangerous animals. The tigers, the bears, the alligators. But we must also recognize that these are important animals, the likes of which the modern world has never seen. As such, we have endeavoured to develop systems that contain our dragons without unnecessarily damaging them. Wire fences, steel walls, even visible lasers were all no good. We want to alter our animals’ behaviour without harming them and we want our visitors to see our animals without the crude intervention of bars.”

(2014. p. 109)

Once again, the narrative depicts the Zoo executive’s morally-suspect perspective through direct references to his willingness and desire to permanently alter the dragon’s behaviour patterns and lifestyle. Even the way they refer to negative aspects reflects their clinical view of their ‘product’: they are not concerned with ‘harming’ a living creature, but instead about “damaging” them, as if they were a product to be sold. This acts as a stark juxtaposition of the way he views the clientele: as “dear guests”, so be pampered and nurtured, as they are the money-spenders.

In *The Great Zoo of China*, the two conditions proposed by DeGrazia have clearly not been adhered to. The animals’ physical and psychological wellbeing is clearly not being maintained, and their quality of life is not being maintained, let alone improved on. The narrative does, however, clearly illustrate the problems that stem from this, as illustrated by the dragon’s eventual revolt, and the gruesome and
horrible deaths of any and all who ever mistreated them. While this situation is clearly an extreme example, it nonetheless serves to reinforce the core beliefs espoused by the animal studies movement.

*Displaced* presents a much different relationship between human and dragon. The narrative treats Harriet’s bond with Cloud as just that; a bond. The scenario is not likened to keeping a pet, but rather to a friendship between two sentient individuals. Indeed it is even demonstrated that the bond is more than just a sentimental closeness:

Harriet’s own grumpiness about being hungry was showing itself. With measured slowness, she fed the Cloud, watching slice after slice disappear down its gullet. Strangely, as the dragon ate, Harriet felt her own hunger diminishing. By the time the bag was empty, the dragon’s belly was too bloated for it to be able to take off, and it promptly fell backwards onto the bed, already asleep. Harriet found her own hunger had disappeared entirely, and this confused her.

*How does that even work? It’s as if I was feeling its hunger in my own body. But that was impossible. Almost as impossible as a dragon appearing in the middle of the bush?*

We have a connection, she realised. *I can tell what its feeling. It also explained why she would feel so satisfied and content while the dragon was drifting off to sleep. The dragon was full, happy, and warm, and it was projecting its emotions to her. I’ll have to be careful with this. I can’t get stupid and forget to eat myself!* *(Displaced, Chapter 3)*

The bond, then, is an actual tangible connection. What happens to the one directly affects the other. This means that they both have a vested interest in the wellbeing of the other. The narrative also demonstrates (in addition to the aforementioned extract about the bushfire and deserted beach message) that the bond can convey emotional messages:

“Call your dragon.” [Kit instructed] “Think of a memory that conveys the emotion you need to express. For this situation, think of a time when you had to be somewhere in a hurry. Dwell on the sense of urgency as much as you can. Cloud should feel that, and understand that it’s time to move on.”
Harriet chose her memory: her brother’s graduation, when she and her father had been running late. They’d had to stay back on the farm when a cow went into labour, and even with a rushed birth, they still only made it to the ceremony a scant few minutes before he walked across the stage. He was the first person in their entire family to ever get into university – much less graduate! – and Harriet and her father had been so stressed about missing it. Yes … that’s definitely a time of great urgency. She concentrated on the image, and evidently it was powerful enough, for she had to wait less than a minute for Cloud to come lumbering up the sand to peer at her inquisitively. (Displaced, Chapter 19)

Harriet – by her own admission – chooses to convey to Cloud a memory of Harriet in a highly “stressed” mood, in an effort to “order” Cloud to do as Harriet wills – in this case, to return to Harriet’s side so they can leave. Again, the narrative is focalised through Harriet and her subjective interpretation of instructions. Harriet’s choice of memory could be likened to calling a dog to your side at the end of an off-leash walk in the park by scaring them into thinking what would happen if they were to be left behind and abandoned. It is clear that Cloud – much like the hypothetical dog – doesn’t understand fully what is happening, with a sharp transition from something pleasurable and relaxing to something scary and worrisome. This is evidenced by Cloud’s actions: she loses all grace in her rush to return to Harriet, “lumbering” up the sand, and her puzzlement is evident in her “inquisitive stare”. It could be said that this is a form of emotional blackmail, and if the bond only worked like this in one way, then that would indeed be the case, however as the ‘deserted beach’ bushfire message demonstrated, Cloud is also more than capable of conveying her own feelings and emotional messages in such a way. As such, rather than emotional blackmail, it becomes an attribute which both members of the bond can use to ensure the physical and psychological wellbeing of the other, thereby satisfying DeGrazia’s proposed conditions for animal interactions.

While society might still have a long way to go before it reaches the ideal suggested by Taylor (2013, p.3) that “gone are the beliefs that animals do not matter to humans, structures, organisations, or society as a whole”, it is clear from even a cursory examination of young adult literature (taken as a zeitgeist of society) that some progress is being made. Historically, an anthropocentric view has been dominant, whereby the status of being ‘human’ gives one greater moral rights than non-human
animals. More recently, however, anthropocentrism is being countered by ecocentrism: the view that nature is central not only to human existence, but to the concept of life itself: a view which seeks to decentralise humanity, and instead acknowledge nature’s intrinsic value, beyond what it can offer to humans. In aid of this, young adult literature is able to employ dragons, which serve a multifaceted purpose. Primarily, the dragons allow for the exploration of animal treatment while still remaining overtly abstract. For example, dragons can highlight the inherent assumptions humans hold with certain animal supersets or species, without actually didactically referencing the species itself.

In my discussion, it was found that dragons allow for the examination of notions of sentience, as well as the classification that is applied to certain animals. With regards to sentience, dragons, such as the character Cloud from *Displaced* or Lucky from *The Great Zoo Of China*, allow readers to gain an insight into an animal’s characters, emotions, and at times even thoughts, through the narrative bond established with other human characters. The end result of this is to create “animal” characters that are just as rich and emotionally-engaging as regular human characters, potentially highlighting to readers that many, if not all, animals have rich mental though patterns, and that ‘sentience’ is a characteristic denied to many animals that deserve it.

Secondly, this notion is taken to its next logical progression, and an examination of moral status as it applies to animals was developed. Two models were proposed, both suggested by DeGrazia (2012). The first model, the ‘Equal Consideration’ model, suggests that animals should be given equal consideration to humans regarding the animals’ needs and wants. This can be seen in *Displaced*, where Harriet actively pursue end results that will be beneficial for the dragon Cloud, and is contrasted by *The Great Zoo Of China*, where the dragons’ needs are not considered, and instead the humans only follow a course of action that will result in a better ‘entertainment’ experience for zoo guests. The second of DeGrazia’s models, the Sliding Scale approach, suggests that animals are ‘ranked’ in order of importance, as judged their level of potential suffering. This is the most common approach, and lends itself well to ‘survival of the fittest’: the characters within Displaced show no qualms about the Dragon Cloud killing other lizards and insects to eat, nor do they avoid eating meat themselves: they have judged one animal’s needs to be greater than that of another. Importantly, these two models do not need to operate in isolation: the equal consideration model is about actually considering the needs and wants of the animals, whereas the sliding scale approach is what will dictate your actions after consideration has been given.

Finally, as can be seen in both *Displaced* and *The Great Zoo Of China*, dragons can highlight the ethical problems of keeping animals confined, either in zoos or as pets. Two different scenarios are depicted:
one in which the dragons are given high moral status, and are treated accordingly, and one in which they are considered to be mere property, to be used and abused for personal and corporate profit. The ideological message conveyed through the vehicle of the dragons is found upon an examination of the ways the narratives treat this relationship between human and dragon: one favourable and one unfavourably.
CONCLUSION

Of all forms of literature, children’s – and more specifically, Young Adult – literature could be said to stand alone in its ability to shape the course of society through the way it socialises younger readers (Stephens, 1992). Whether it is as a reinforcement or a subversion of the social mores and values, it is almost impossible for literature for the young not to carry an ideological message. Such messages can range from the implicit, usually in the form of assumed social structures and ideas of thought; to the explicit, which can itself range from the overtly didactic preaching of ‘progressive’ or ‘enlightened’ views to implied ideologies, even hidden within the very language of the text itself (Hollindale, 1988). The subtlety of the message is no indication of its power: indeed, it has been suggested that every text involves implicit ideologies, and that these implicit ideologies are often the most powerful, as they are taken for granted as fact, and ideological positions are invested with overt legitimacy simply because they are regarded as normal, accepted, and unremarkable (Stephens, 1992).

Dragons play a central role in the YA genre, both as a narrative device, and also as a messenger-medium for ideological messages. It is important to reiterate a claim made at the beginning of this thesis: that while the preceding discussion centred solely on dragons, dragons themselves are by no means unique as mythological creatures and the dragon figure could easily be supplanted by any other such creature. Dragons however – perhaps thanks to their role as universal mythological beings – offer a familiarity to readers that is perhaps not as accessible as other mythological creatures. Dragons also offer a certain versatility, since they are easily represented as: intelligent or simple; mundane or magical; noble or villainous; or domineering or subservient, depending on the demands of the particular narrative. This versatility can be achieved without compromising the core notion of what a dragon is, because the notion itself is so diverse and malleable, and can change from culture to culture, as well as within a single culture. Again, it was because of dragons’ role as universal mythological creatures, combined with their popularity in modern mainstream media, that they were chosen as the central focus of this thesis.

Gender ideologies were the first key area on which I focused, as they can influence a reader’s socialisation; affecting the way in which an individual constructs his/her world view, learning how to
become human and to behave in ways that are acceptable to others (Gill, 1999). With regard to gender, dragons in YA literature can play an important role in exploring and subverting preconceived ideologies within the literature, and by extension within society itself. Firstly, dragons can act as an equalising force within a text. In a pre-modern world (and regrettably in many places still throughout the current political climate), there have been many historical examples of physical might being equated with moral might, and as such, females were often put at a distinct disadvantage. The strategy of making a character’s access to dragons the focus of a narrative allows for males and females to operate on an even field of play. In this sense, dragons can allow for characters within the narrative to be viewed and judged based on their own merits, rather than on their gender. Alison Goodman’s Eon (2010) is a salient example of this: when Eona fully communes with her dragon, and is given access to all of the dragon’s power, she is on an equal standing with the other Dragoneyes despite her diminutive physical stature, and her lack of skill with a sword. The narrative proposes, then, that while one gender might be biologically predisposed to be stronger and taller, in a battle of wills and intelligence, there are no inherent differences. In a similar way, the dragons also act as an equaliser to unfair advantages in technology, such as when the dragons act as a counterbalance to the superior military technology of the Nightmen in Displaced. The central protagonists – the Dragonriders Kit and Elayne, and their apprentice Harriet – have access to money; however, they lack access to military equipment, such as tracking technology and helicopters. They also lack access to firearms, and given Australia’s gun legislation, are unable to use their money to solve this issue. Their dragons, however, enable them to still oppose the Nightmen antagonists in a matched capacity. In this sense, dragons mimic a supposed gender imbalance in that they are employed as a device to make up for disparity between resources and physical abilities (i.e. the strong get the desired resources simply because they are strong).

Secondly, the dragons can also act as representations for genders themselves, either directly (in their literal genders) or in a more metaphorical sense, whereby the dragon takes on the attributes or characteristics of a stereotypical gender, and then reinforces or subverts these in some way. One example is that of the dragons from Displaced, who each possess specific characteristics which are at odds with their stereotypical genders. Elayne’s female dragon is the largest and most dangerous, while Kit’s male dragon is the smallest and weakest. In a further subversion, Harriet’s dragon is an unknown quantity: no judgements can be made about her while young, because the only way to see what she will be like is to wait for her to grow up and demonstrate it firsthand. In this sense, dragons can be
used within a narrative to highlight the inaccuracies of certain preconceived notions held about gender by an example society, such as females being smaller and weaker.

Finally, dragons can act as a catalyst – an otherworldly impetus for social or ideological change, which may stem from the dragon, but which has wider implications. In Displaced, Harriet’s dragon acts as the catalyst of change in Harriet’s life, and Harriet herself (acting alongside and on behalf of her dragon) acts as a catalyst for changing the lives of the other marginalised dragonriders, restoring the status quo and ensuring that the protagonists can live in a world that is safe for them. Likewise, Eon, the female Mirror Dragon was the agent of change which allowed the titular Eona to bond with a higher power, and forcibly insert herself into the governing body of the Empire. Once inside, even once Eona’s true gender was exposed, the characters around her were forced to continue to accept her because the alternative was untenable. Many characters, however, willingly accepted the presence of a female, because after having been exposed to Eona in her male disguise for so long, they were able to see her for the capable and intelligent person she was. The dragons, then, allowed for the truth to be revealed, in a situation where it might otherwise have been impossible.

The second ideological area of study, class and social inequality, was chosen because of the important role that depictions of class play in inculcating in readers a sense of appropriate behaviour, and how they should act in particular situations (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994, p.70). Any healthy society must allow citizens access to resources, opportunities, and education, and if this is unfairly denied to some then it can be a source of conflict. Social inequality refers to differences in groups of people that are hierarchical in nature, such as the distribution of social, political, economic, and cultural resources. Further, inequality can be compounded by the effects of stratification; a more specific term that refers to the idea of a systematic and enduring pattern of inequality that is transmitted across generations, built into institutions, and practiced in everyday activities. (Habibis & Walter, 2009). In representations of class, dragons function as vehicles for ideological commentaries (Gordon, 1980, p. 34). Through an examination of the discourse in which they appear, class ideological hierarchies may be broken down to their constitutive elements, and analysed accordingly. Through this method, injustices may be seen, and possible future directions can be suggested (Gordon, 1980). Class can be defined based on one’s access to: status (prestige or honour associated with position or occupation, and access to status symbols); class (material resources possessed or controlled); and power (ability to impose will on others and resist having others’ will imposed on you) (Kriesberg 1979). Stephen Deas’ The Adamantine
Palace (2009) and Rachel Hartman’s Seraphina (2012) both depict worlds with inherent class hierarchies and ideological differences. In The Adamantine Palace, the dragons act as a status symbol, and as a resource denied to all other ‘lower’ classes, allowing for the rapid transportation of people and goods across vast distances by the ruling elite, as well as a weapon of war that makes the ruling class virtually all-powerful in terms of military might. Seraphina, conversely, depicts dragons as being sentient, but undesirable. The presence of dragons and dragon-like creatures within the narrative has created a literal two-tiered society where even the lowest of humans is superior to the mightiest of dragons in terms of rights and social standing, and dragon-like creatures are relegated to slums and ghettos reminiscent of Jewish enclaves in World War Two.

Continuing with class depictions, Displaced also presents a narrative wherein dragons act as an ideological vehicle, however in this instance the dragons themselves act neither as a status symbol nor as an undesired burden, but they do allow for the highlighting of differential access to privilege. Through Harriet’s access to the dragon Cloud, the narrative allows the reader to highlight all the injustices involved with access to specialised equipment that are denied to everyone else. The antagonists within the narrative, the Nightmen, use their guns and helicopters to hunt down dragons for material, capitalistic gain, and they are unconcerned with the collateral damage that is caused by their search. By highlighting these evident inequalities, as well as suggesting to the reader how problematic such inequalities are, the narrative allows for the subversion of the current social mores of the narrative – which itself is highly reminiscent of modern Australia, and positions readers to critique aspects of modern Australian culture and ideology.

The final ideological strand examined within this thesis was speciesism: the notion of anthropocentrism, whereby the status of being ‘human’ gives one greater moral rights than non-humans to resources, or even existence itself. Historically, an anthropocentric view has been dominant, whereby the status of being ‘human’ gives one greater moral rights than non-human animals, although more recently, anthropocentrism has been countered by ecocentrism: the view that nature is central not only to human existence, but to the concept of life itself: a view which seeks to decentralise humanity, and instead acknowledge nature’s intrinsic value, beyond what it can offer to humans. While exploring speciesism, YA literature can employ dragons as a narratological device, which serves a multifaceted purpose. Primarily, the dragons allow for the exploration of animal treatment while still remaining overtly abstract. For example, dragons can highlight the inherent
assumptions humans hold concerning certain animal supersets or species, without actually didactically referencing the species itself, and in doing so alienate the reader by highlighting aspects of human nature they are not comfortable admitting.

In my discussion, I argued that dragons allow for the examination of notions of sentience, as well as the classification that is applied to certain animals. With regards to sentience, dragons, such as the character Cloud from *Displaced* or Lucky from *The Great Zoo Of China*, allow readers to gain an insight into an animal’s character, emotions, and at times even thoughts, through the narrative bond established with other human characters. The end result of this is to create “animal” characters that are just as rich and emotionally-engaging as regular human characters, potentially highlighting to readers that many, if not all, animals have rich mental though patterns, and that ‘sentience’ is a characteristic denied to many animals that deserve it.

Further, this notion was expanded into a discussion of moral status, being the consideration the animals should be given by humans. Two models were examined: ‘equal consideration’ model and the ‘sliding scale’ approach (DeGrazia, 2012). Equal consideration is seen in *Displaced*, where Harriet actively pursues end results that will be beneficial for the dragon Cloud, in contrast with *The Great Zoo Of China*, where the dragons’ needs are not considered, and instead the humans only follow a course of action that will result in a better ‘entertainment’ experience for zoo guests. Similarly, the sliding scale – the more common approach, and perhaps better known for its support to the ‘survival of the fittest’ mindset – was explored in relation to the characters within *Displaced* who show no qualms about the Dragon Cloud killing other lizards and insects to eat, and do not avoid eating meat themselves: they have judged one animal’s needs to be greater than that of another. Importantly, these two models do not need to operate in isolation: the equal consideration model is about actually considering the needs and wants of the animals, whereas the sliding scale approach is what will dictate your actions after consideration has been given.

Finally, speciesism’s ideological strand was examined through a discussion of how the dragons within both *Displaced* and *The Great Zoo Of China* highlight the ethical problems of keeping animals confined, either in zoos or as pets. Two different scenarios are depicted: one in which the dragons are given high moral status, and are treated accordingly, and one in which they are considered to be mere property, to be used and abused for personal and corporate profit. The ideological message conveyed
through the vehicle of the dragons is founded upon an examination of the ways the narratives treat this relationship between human and dragon: one favourable and one unfavourable.

Central to this entire thesis – both the creative artefact and the exegesis – was the concept of fairness. While often the word ‘fairness’ was not expressly used, it is clearly evident in the many discussions about equality and representation which feature in the exegesis, as well as the discussions around differential treatment based on particular characteristics. This ‘fairness’ discussion is seen throughout all three examinations of the ideological strands, both as they relate to the literature, but also their follow on effects in socialising young adults. While many of the scholars referenced throughout this thesis are working in non-Australian contexts, the concept is undeniably relevant to Australian culture. Specifically, the creative artefact *Displaced* combines these notions of gender, social class, and speciesism. While fairness is a concept deeply ingrained within Australia’s identity (Saunders, 2004), with the recent global shift towards isolationism and xenophobia – as evidenced by the elections of Australian Senator Pauline Hanson; American President Donald Trump and his 2017 ‘Muslim Ban’; and the somewhat negative attitude towards Syrian refuges in Europe – it is a concept that certainly warranted continued exploration.

To reiterate, the creative artefact *Displaced* is not intended as a model for ideologically ‘progressive’ writing, or as a proposed scaffold for how characters should be depicted, or even how the ideological strands should be evident within a narrative. Instead, this novel is simply an exploration of the ideological strands themselves, showing both ends of the ideological spectrum, encouraging readers to draw their own moral conclusions. Regarding gender: the narrative depicts a central, strong female character, but also shows her to have a weaker and slightly petty side, indulging in unnecessary competitiveness with her companions. Regarding class and social structure, the narrative includes characters who are millionaires but are persecuted, characters who are powerful but poor, and characters who, like many Australians, are simply ‘middle class’. Finally, regarding speciesism; the dragons and their sentience features heavily in the narrative, but there are also elements of possessiveness and even ‘ownership’ displayed by their human companions. Overall, the element which unites the creative artefact and the exegesis is their common preoccupation with how the figure of the dragon is utilised in various ways to foreground aspects of human practices and societies.
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