

THE GATES
OF ILLUSION

SUE EATON

THE CERES ILLUSION

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

I

I'D DO ANYTHING for chocolate, everybody knows that. But I didn't kill Sanderson. Besides, we are — *were* — friends.

Sanderson lived in the apartment next to me, and as we worked in the same building we usually walked to the monopod together, but yesterday morning he didn't answer my call. I knocked on his door and, when he didn't answer, I walked in as I would normally do, calling out in case he was doing something I didn't need to see.

The smell hit me first: foul, fecal and with an underlying coppery odor. While I was trying to place it, I was horrified to discover a mess of blood and tissue with Sanderson's head lying at a funny angle on his living room floor. He was staring at me as if to say, "Help me, please."

That was the expression, not terrified as you would think, just helpless. Strange, as someone or something had ripped him to shreds. I didn't believe what I was seeing, and I certainly

don't believe that anyone here did that. I shook for hours afterwards and ate some of his chocolate because I'm told sugar is good for shock.

Sanderson and I, along with Big John, better known as BJ, have been friends since I can remember. Of course, we fight and fall out, only to become friends again. Sometimes we can do that all in one day, but we would never hurt each other. Not intentionally, and not seriously.

I am the only one apart from the Security Enforcement Team who saw it and they were quick to push me out and shut the door. Did I call them? I must have, or how had they known? I can't remember calling them, but then, I was in shock. I have been questioned by the Head of the Team and then let go. She didn't even hint that she thought I might have done it. In fact, she seemed eager to get rid of me. I was allowed the day off from work with the order to rest. In some ways I would have liked to have gone in, for the company, but I doubt I would have been much use. I mean, if Sanderson could be torn to shreds in the relative safety of his own apartment without anyone hearing a thing, it stands to reason that I could be too. It is not a comforting thought.

I kept my television on, as I found the chatter comforting, but it's not been on the newsfeed. The fact that he's dead has not been acknowledged by anyone.

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Today is a rest day and I am sitting on the steps outside of the apartment building Sanderson and I live in — *I live in*. I don't understand why the attack's not been on the newsfeed. It happened yesterday afternoon and things are usually broadcast immediately. I can understand them not wanting to upset morale. Everything seems to revolve around morale here. It's *don't do that it will upset morale, or you must do this in order to boost morale*. Living my life the way I want to would boost *my* morale far more than following the petty rules of the community. But we need to know what's going on and we need to stay alert; on

the lookout for anything strange. Goodness knows where it will end if something isn't done about it.

BJ comes by this afternoon before tea. "What's to do, Jax?" he wants to know.

"Just thinking," I tell him.

"What'yu thinking, Jax?"

"About Sanderson."

"What about Sanderson? He's gone." As if that was the end of anything to do with him.

"Doesn't that upset you?"

"Dunno." He sits down beside me on the step.

"He was our friend. I'm still shaking — look." I hold out a quivering hand. He doesn't look, not really.

"So?"

BJ hadn't seen what I had seen, but we were friends with Sanderson. Surely, he must feel something. I appreciate that in the main, people in the domes are reserved to the point of being frigid, but small friendship groups form, usually around a common interest. I know of no other way of living to compare it to. I feel the loss, so shouldn't BJ?

"What about his family?" I ask.

"What about them?"

"Have they been informed?"

"Dunno." BJ doesn't sound as if he really cares.

"Surely, they'll come for this."

"They might have a long way to come."

"Hardly. I know they must be in another dome, but they aren't that far away it takes a day to get here."

"I mean, they might be on Earth for all we know," BJ suggests.

"Hardly," I comment. Our parents were among the founder members sent out to inhabit this rather inhospitable lump of rock, and they all came from the Martian colony, not Earth. Earth is a bit of a dump these days, allegedly.

I suddenly realise that we rarely speak about our past. It is as if we have only the vaguest memories of our earlier lives. We

know we have parents, we've been told about them, but everyone talks in generic terms, like, our families came from Mars. Not my mum or my dad, but our families. Once we finish our schooling, we are moved from our families and set to work. There are only young people in my dome, DN 2, and all are workers. I suppose you could call it a dormitory dome. There's always talk about visits, but I don't ever remember anyone visiting and I have never been on a visit. I have likenesses of my family to help me remember, but I have to keep them hidden. A thought crosses my mind and I ask, "Where are your parents, BJ?"

"DN ... er ... I can't remember the dome number, but they are here."

"My ... mmm." I had been about to say that my parents lived in DN — but then find that I can't remember either. I have a brother, I think. I have a likeness of one anyway.

In fact, Sanderson is fading from my memory and I have to keep worrying at it to keep it sharp.

"Work tomorrow," muses BJ.

"It'll be strange without Sanderson."

"Who?" BJ is busy inspecting a nail.

See what I mean? I stand and shove my hands into my jacket pockets, feeling the remains of the chocolate as I do so. I decide then and there to go to the Security Enforcement Office in our dome at the first opportunity. I am curious as to why the story's not been on the newsfeed. I look at BJ. He is chewing his fingernails with an absent look on his face. Gormless lummoX. I will go on my own.

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"Who did you say you were looking for?" The Enforcement Officer stares at me, making me uncomfortable, but I will not back down.

"I'm not looking for anyone," I tell him. "My friend who lived in the apartment next to mine was killed yesterday and I'm wondering how the investigation is going."

"Who would that be then?" He doesn't even look at the technopad on his desk. He could at least pretend to be interested.

"7:5/1 Sanderson, Jaimz."

"Where does he live?"

"RN-10, T-2." We use initials for everything. Translated that means Room Number 10, Tower 2.

"I can only deal with things that happen in this dome," the Officer tells me with a straight face.

"It *is* in this dome. Sir, how many murders do you have on your books?" Perhaps I should be more respectful, but I am getting annoyed with his attitude.

"Don't you be cheeky, young madam. We have no murders. What are you talking about? I thought you'd lost your friend?"

"Yes, to *murder*," I emphasize. "I'm worried."

"Don't know anything about that. Why don't you ask your friend?"

"He's dead and I'm scared someone else might be next."

"You're scared? About what?"

"About being the next one to be attacked." Is he being deliberately obtrusive?

"Attacked? Who was attacked?"

"Sanderson."

"Sanderson? Who's that?"

"... Oh never mind. I'll ask my friends."

"Should have done that in the first place, young lady. Have a nice day."

I stamp out as belligerently as I dare and don't see what he does next.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

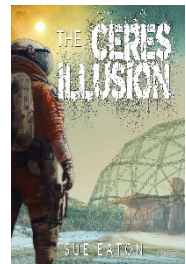
Sue Eaton was a teacher of children with autism and special needs for many years, and has written drama for children with communication and social needs, earning a Millennium award. She has published a science fiction/historical novel, *The Woman Who Was Not His Wife*, and has had short stories published in four horror anthologies, one science fiction anthology, and has edited an anthology of ghost stories.

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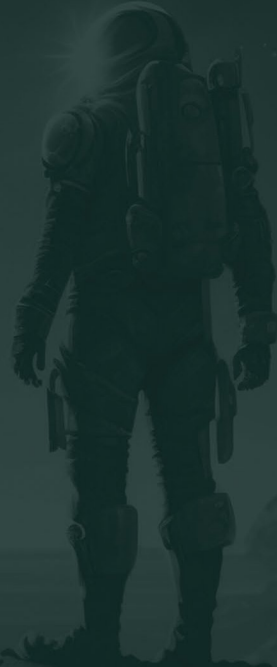
Something is definitely rotten in the experimental settlement on Ceres.



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**SOMETHING IS DEFINITELY ROTTEN
IN THE EXPERIMENTAL SETTLEMENT ON CERES.**

Jax wonders how it will affect her and her colleagues when along comes Nan and shows her a side to the complex she did not expect. Together, the two young women work to break the control the aliens have over the human settlers and begin to form the foundation of a fairer community.



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