

The Snow Dragon

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Chapter 1: The Pool in the Woods

My name is Susan and I am eight years old, when Mummy and Daddy bring me to Wales. Daddy said we were going on an adventure, we would live in a little cottage by a stream, amongst the quiet of the woods, and Mummy would then be able to get better. Each day, the sun was bright, and the little stream sparkled like little stars, as it meandered happily on its way into the woods.

I liked the muddy banks of the stream, and the little rockpool, but I prized the woods the best. The trees were very tall. They whispered when the wind blew through them and I pretended they were giants talking to each other. Daddy grew vegetables in the field next to the cottage, and some days we walked into the village to buy milk and bread. Often Mummy and Daddy just sat by the stream, while I played on the bank.

One day, I saw a little white butterfly fluttering over the grass. For a moment, it danced around me, and then it was off, caught in some breath of summer sun, until it settled on a buttercup, just by the bank of the stream. Not too far away. It was like it wanted me to follow.

"Wait for me!" I called, laughing.

It was teasing me, as it fluttered on, further down the stream, and landed on a rock. I followed, as it led me into the wood. Soon I could not hear the stream anymore. It was much quieter, darker. And then I

heard singing. It was the prettiest song I had ever heard. It sounded like someone humming a bedtime lullaby.

I followed the song. Soon I saw a lady standing beneath a dark tree. She wore a flowing white dress. Her hair was very long and very black. It moved even though there was no wind and I could not see her face.

"Hello, Susan," she said, although I did not remember telling her my name. Perhaps she knew it because I could hear Daddy calling out for me outside the wood.

She held out her hand. It was cold as the water in the stream. She led me deeper into the woods, where the trees gathered together, their branches crowding out the sky. They jostled me as we went further, deeper into the wood. They whispered my name - *Susan - Susan*. Or was it Daddy calling me? I could not be sure.

"I think Daddy's looking for me."

The lady squeezed my hand.

"He cannot find you here."

"I want to go back."

Then she began singing again and I forgot about Daddy and Mummy and the cottage.

There was a black pool, hidden among the trees, where the water was as still as a mirror.

"Come with me ," she whispered, as she stepped into the pool. The trees whispered, *Go - Susan, you must go*. The lady still held my hand

for I could no longer let go. I tried to call for Daddy, but the darkness, the trees, and the song quietened my words.

As I stepped into the water, the darkness closed over my head.

Sometimes I think I can still hear Daddy calling my name. Though maybe it is the echoes of the trees. And sometimes I try to answer, but all I can hear are the words of the song.

Chapter 2: The Snake and the Ladder

It was three in the morning. Deep under the streets of London, the last train on the Piccadilly line had groaned and moaned its way back to the depot more than an hour ago. Fred's steel toed boots scrunched on the gravel between the tracks. The stale air caught the echoes of his footsteps, deadening the sound, amongst the faint scent of ozone, even though the power was now disconnected from the running rails. His safety buddy, Bill, was fifty yards further up the tracks. They'd been sent to find an intermittent fault in the trackside signalling and had been painstakingly examining the trackside cabling as it ran along the side of the tunnel.

Fred pulled the schematics for this section out of his jacket pocket and examined them carefully. The tunnel's emergency lighting was hardly adequate to see the spindly figures on the diagram, but he had a powerful light on his helmet and an even more powerful handheld torch in the tool belt slung over his shoulder. There was no doubt about it – somehow there was an extra cable in the wiring tray in this section. It looked pretty old, with a leathery outer cover, and mottled brown appearance. Maybe a left over from a pre-war installation. Or could it be even Edwardian or Victorian? Fred did not much care, it simply shouldn't be there. It seemed unlikely it was the cause of the fault he was looking for, but Fred had a tidy mind and decided he should at least find where it was terminated – he would then mark it with a label for later removal.

The cable was hard to follow. It was buried at the bottom of the cable tray, hidden under a dozen or so other cable bundles, each an inch or more thick. Fred had to get down on his hands and knees and peer under the cable tray to follow its sinewy path. But it did not go far, only perhaps 10 feet from where he first saw it. Then it made a sharp turn out of the bottom of the tray and disappeared behind a cracked brick in the tunnel wall. Strange, thought Fred, where could that possibly go? He was more than a hundred feet under the London Streets, halfway between stations, where solid earth and rock encased the tunnel. He put his hand on the strange cable and noticed it felt warm. Even stranger, then as it must have power in it he thought. The cracked brick was half poking out of the tunnel, so he jiggled the end. It came away in his hand. Taking a screwdriver out of his tool belt he poked around behind it. The rest of the brick came away, and then the one next to it, and the one next to that. After a couple of minutes, he had cleared area about 18 inches square. Instead of rock and soil, though, there was rusty metal plate behind the loose bricks. No, not a plate, it was a door, and it was just slightly ajar, where the cable ran down behind it.

This wasn't right, thought Fred. Nothing on the schematic, so why should there be a door here? He pulled off his gloves and ran his bare fingers around the rim of the door. It was completely plain, and felt surprisingly cold, in fact icily cold to the touch. That wasn't right either – down in the tunnels, the temperature hardly varied, independent

of what was happening on the surface, and stayed at around 20 deg C, summer or winter. Yet, the metal door was almost painfully cold to touch. He curled his fingers behind the rim and tried to open the door – but it seemed the harder he pulled the more solidly the door seemed to resist his efforts. He shook his head – no, doors don’t actively resist. They might be rusted closed, or simply stiff through disuse. But they don’t fight back, do they? He reached for his screwdriver, to get better leverage but before he could try it, the radio on his chest crackled:

“Bill to Fred. You found anything yet, Fred? Everything’s standard nominal here in section C32 – no defect found. Over.”

Fred shook his head. Nominal, eh? Bill was a stickler for all the jargon, doing it by the book.

His mind came back to the present task of checking the signalling. “Er—yeah. Yeah, all fine here,” he lied. “Just checking an ... old redundant cable.” He decided he wasn’t going to mention the door, even though it shouldn’t be there. Bill would want to call it in. Then they’d have to wait for a supervisor to come out and decide what to do. That could take half an hour or more. And in the end the supervisor would just say, isolate the cable and close the door. The Tube had plenty of odd corners like this. he told himself, was just another bit of Victoriana that had never been tidied up. Once he had opened the door and confirmed that, then he could tell Bill then and they wouldn’t need to faff around with a supervisor – they could just report they had closed it off themselves. Save a lot of trouble and paperwork.

“Bill to Fred. Okay Fred, I’m proceeding to section C33. Out”

Once Fred applied the screwdriver as a lever, the door seemed accept its fate and with a soft sigh of rusty hinges, it swung open. There seemed to be a cavity behind it, but it was pitch black inside. Peering into the distance, Fred thought he could see a faint green glow. He tried sweeping the space with his torch, but all he could see was the leathery brown cable snaking its way into the darkness. The space had no visible walls nor floor. He leaned into the aperture to see if he could get a better look, using his headtorch to probe the darkness. Nothing. He tugged the cable to see if was attached to something further inside the darkness. It seemed to give a little, so he tugged harder. It gave a little more. Or that is what he thought. But then the cable was torn out of his hand then shaking wriggling, filling the space, whirling around until the cable end came into view – the hooded head of a large and angry snake, fangs extended, tongue flicking the air. Adrenaline flooded into Fred’s body, his fight or flight response system kicking strongly into flee mode. As he jerked back, he hit his head on the steel door and the snake lunged forward, striking into the soft flesh of his neck. Apparently unwilling to release its prey, the snake started to pull the rest of Fred’s body through the narrow doorway. Fred briefly had time to think – bugger, I wonder what Health and Safety form Bill is going to have to fill in for this particular incident, and then the darkness rose and took him.

When he awoke, Fred was still in darkness. Well, not quite complete darkness. A soft green glow gave a dim background illumination. But apparently there was nothing to see – at least that was Fred’s initial impression, as he lay on his back, staring upwards into a nothingness he wondered if the snakebite had made him go blind. The thought of the bite brought back a thrill of recollection of the metal door, and the sudden appearance of the snake. Curiously, he found himself feeling no pain and although when he put his hand up to his neck he could feel two large puncture marks, there was no blood and no swelling. He reach up to his head torch, but it and its headband were no longer there. He could feel the strap of his tool belt biting into his shoulder, so that apparently had survived the attack. And Fred thought, apparently so have I. He carefully sat up and patted the rest of his body. Two arms, two legs, everything seemed to be intact. Nothing broken, nothing seemed to hurt, somehow, he was intact. He fumbled in his tool belt, but the torch was gone.

“Hello?” He was surprised how small his voice sounded. Almost a whisper. “Anyone there?”

There was no response, not even an echo. The silence felt like a blanket, deadening his voice, deadening his thoughts. He was not sure how long he sat there for. It may have only been a few seconds, or it might have been half an hour. Eventually, he could stay still anymore. He carefully scrambled to his feet. He still could not see any walls or ceiling in the gloom of the green flow – indeed he could barely see the floor below him now.

“Hello?” He tried again, louder this time. And then a shout:
“Anyone there? Where the bloody hell am I?”

Silence.

There was nothing for it. He could not stay where he was. He could not see any particular advantage to going in any particular direction, so he simply set off the way he was facing, carefully sliding one foot in front of the other, testing each step before he moved his weight forward.

After a moment he started counting his steps, with the vague idea of being able to retrace them if he found nothing in the direction that he was going. But he had no confidence he was actually walking in a straight-line anyway, so he decided that he would just keep going, and hope he was not walking in a circle.

Time passed. Fred stepped on, as his mind gradually went numb.

It was a big surprise therefore when he bumped into the wall. It was a stone wall, smooth, cool and dry, with faint silver veins, adding a cold grey light to the general green illumination.

Left or right, thought Fred. Does it matter? Maybe, but how can I tell? He put his right hand onto the wall to guide himself, and turned left, as he was right-handed and it would probably be less tiring if he had to follow the wall for a long way. Surprised at how clearly, he now seemed to be thinking, he picked up the pace and followed the wall into the gloom.

After a time—seconds or hours—his fingers found something else: the cold curve of metal rungs set into the wall.

A ladder.

“Well,” he said, “now we have a choice”. The sound of his voice was reassuring – and the idea of saying ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ was somehow comforting. If there was a ladder, someone must have made it. And if someone made it, they could be an engineer just like Fred. And if they were an engineer, they might have some idea of how this new place worked. Because, after all, Fred reassured himself, that’s what engineers do – they understand stuff and make it work.

He began to climb. Again, he decided to count the steps, but he lost count somewhere after 200. His legs were beginning to shake a little and his thigh muscles were starting to burn, but he had a sense that the green glow was getting stronger, and he could perhaps feel the scent of fresh air. He started climbing more strongly – and then, with a dull thump, he hit his head on something metallic. He still was wearing his hard hat though, and there was little damage done. He could definitely smell, even taste, cold fresh air. Reaching up, he discovered the ladder had reached some sort of metal hatch. He pushed hard up against it and swung easily open. White light flooded in and a clean, freezing wind slapped his cheeks. Fred hauled himself up and through the hatch to find himself in a world of brilliant white.

He was standing ankle-deep in snow, in a small valley surrounded by mountains. The air was gin clear, below a hard blue sky.

Snowfields lay in every direction, and in the distance, the world dropped into misty valleys and dark lines forest.

Behind him, half-buried in a drift, was the hatch he'd emerged from: an steel circle with no handle and no markings at all. When he turned back again, it had sunk a little deeper, as if embarrassed to be seen.

"Right," he said to the mountains, though really just to reassure himself: "This is a new experience."

He was not alone for long. Something passed across the sun, its shadow running across the snow-white ground like a black matador's cape, darting this way and that, distracting the onlooker from the real threat. Fred looked up. At first, he thought it was an eagle – though it was larger than any eagle he had ever seen. And it seemed to sail on the air, rather than fly. It had vast, translucent membranes, like ice made into sails, bound to a body of white scales and horny ridges. Its sails (or were they wings) beat the air slowly, tossing the snow into plumes as it came down closer to Fred. He could see then that its eyes were the colour of diamonds, sparkling but hard as the grey of a cold winter sky.

The dragon, for that is what it was, landed in a vast billow of powder, its hot breath momentarily melting the snow in front of it. It looked at him closely with its pale eyes.

"You are not snow," it observed.

"No," said Fred faintly. "Fred. I'm Fred."

“Fred. That is a strange name, Fred, that is,” the dragon repeated, flicking its tongue out as if it could taste the strangeness of the sound. Fred though caught a faint whiff of sulphur as the dragon continued:

“I am Tharsk. You have the aroma of tunnels and old iron. You must have come through the Green Room.”

“If that’s what you call the place with the snake, yes.”

Tharsk’s eyes narrowed. “The Serpent of Between. It must have chosen you.”

“It bit me, more like.”

“That is it’s way of choosing - we all have our own way,” said the dragon. “The snake belongs in the earth, that is also part of its choosing. I belong here in the mountains, in the lonely of the cold. That is my choosing. But your are here because of another’s choices. You cannot survive here. You must descend to the valleys below. Come, I will take you.”

Chapter 3: The Town in the Valley

Tharsk led the way downward. For a dragon, he seemed surprisingly adept at the art of walking through the snow. Tharsk's talons seemed to caress the snow, and in its turn the snow whispered back, offering its support. On the other hand, the snow crunched and crackled in protest under Fred's weight, his British Transport issued safety boots slipping and slinking in the deep snow. Strange, thought Fred, that a dragon should be so at home in the cold. He had always imagined them to be reptilian creatures, in the warmth of the jungle or desert, or at least in the comfort of some peasant countryside. But then, Tharsk was a *snow* dragon - so that must make all the difference. Even stranger, thought Fred, he felt quite calm. The last few hours had been filled with strangeness, but it all had been relatively painless. Had you asked him in the pub the previous night, how he would feel about being bitten by an apparently magical snake, or meeting a dragon amongst the snowy peaks of some strange place, he would certainly have said he would be at least a little uneasy. But despite Tharsk's imposing size, he had a certain brusque companionable air about him. And what else could he do, but follow the dragon? He certainly would not survive for long without food, warmth or shelter where he was now.

The knife-edged cold quickly seeped into the depths of Fred's lungs, and his breath formed clouds around him. He gasped in the thin air. Each step though carried them lower, down a steep couloir, and then onto a ridge that led downwards towards the pines below. Fred had no breath for talking and Tharsk apparently had nothing to say

either. Fred's overalls were hardly suitable for such altitudes, but the exertion was helping keep him warm. And at least the snow powder was so cold, that it simply fell off his feet at each step, so, apart from a gentle sweat, he remained dry.

After a while, Fred began to find the going easier. The line where the snow met the tree line was noticeably nearer. Breathing too was becoming easier. The light-headedness that Fred had been feeling since he climbed out from the hatch was fading. At last they reached the trees. A narrow path led onwards and downwards. A stone outcrop rose out of the snow, offering a convenient seat. Or at least, that is how it appeared to Fred, and to confirm his analysis, he sat down on it.

‘Wait, I need to catch my breath - I’m more of a tunnels and underground person than a mountaineer.’

Tharsk stopped, half turning his head. One great eye, hard as diamond and as white as the reflective snow, gazed back at Fred.

‘Yes, I am sorry, Fred-of-Tunnels. I had forgotten how weak humans are.’

Fred blew on his hands, trying to warm them up, then stuffed them in his pockets. After a while the silence seemed uncomfortable.

‘So, this place. It’s not just mountains and dragons, is it?’

Tharsk’s head tilted, considering the question. Eventually he said, ‘No, it is not.’

‘Well then, if it is not just mountains and dragons, what else is it?’

‘Nothing here is just itself, Fred-of-Tunnels.’

‘That figures,’ Fred muttered. ‘After being bitten by a snake, and being dragged through a mountain, then meeting a snow dragon, I would hardly have expected a simple answer.’

There was a rumbling from the dragon’s chest. It seemed as if Tharsk was coughing - or was it maybe laughter?

As they followed the path, descending all the time, the trees grew thicker and stronger and the snow under their feet gradually thinned until they were walking on a path of pine needles. There was a strong antiseptic smell in the air. The valley was opening out beneath them, and after about an hour they reached a vista at the edge of the forest. A pleasant landscape of fields and woods lay beneath them, seemingly laid out with careful neatness. Rivers flowed through the scene in an orderly fashion. In the distance, Fred could just make out a small hill, circled on three sides by the largest river. On the hill, it seemed like there was a castle, with a small town gathered around it. As they paused, gazing at the vista, Fred said:

‘Perhaps you could start by telling me what this place is called? It looks like it might be the Alps, but somehow the mountains don’t quite look right - the rocks aren’t quite the right mix of greys. And it’s certainly not Wales or Scotland, as the mountains are far too pointy.’

Tharsk tilted his head the other way. Fred could see he was giving considerable consideration to his replies.

‘This place we are in, Aetherium, is much older than your world. So old that it has been worn smooth by the passage time, so old that it

settled like the dust in your tunnels has settled onto the ground. Too old, perhaps.'

'Settled how?'

'Imagine a machine that has run so perfectly, so consistently, so that no-one can remember why it was built.'

Fred smiled, 'I've worked on a few of those sorts of machines. Except all of mine were always far from perfect'.

Tharsk nodded. 'You understand more than most, then.'

Fred took that to be a sign of approval. It was the first element of emotion he had detected in the snow dragon's behaviour.

'How was this ancient machine created?'

'Aetheirum has long been ruled by the Cardinals. They are neither kings nor gods, but something colder. When the world was young, they made systems for food and shelter that worked so well that no-one here need strive for comfort or gladdening.'

'That sounds ... nice', said Fred, searching for a suitable adjective and failing to find it.

'Comfortable might be a more accurate word - though that is much the same thing,' Tharsk corrected. Fred did not think that 'nice' and 'comfortable' were at all the same thing but he wasn't going to argue. Arguing with a snow dragon seemed a bad strategy on a day which already had enough bad events in it. So he asked:

'What about the people? Don't they have some say in deciding things? What if they don't like what the Cardinals are doing?'

Tharsk extended his long neck and brought his face down to look at Fred directly. Despite the chilly air, Fred thought he could feel an unnerving warmth in the dragon's breath.

'Long ago, choice was found to be a distraction, and inefficiency. If people could choose, then they chose wrongly as often as they chose correctly. The struggle between good and bad caused instability. So choice was removed.'

Yes, the dragon's breath was definitely getting warmer.

'Now there is no moral tension. No true tension. Life is simple and proceeds as it must. Happiness is guaranteed.'

'So, people just ... exist? Where is the fun in that?' said Fred.

'It is not fun, it is comfortable,' Tharsk agreed. 'When nothing is at risk, there is no need to choose, and when there is no need to choose, there is no need for strife. Come, we must move on, it will be dark in a few hours, and we still have far to go.'

He turned and continued downwards the valley. After a moment Fred trudged after him.

'The people derive amusement from stories. That is their fun. It is how their minds stay awake. But long ago, they forgot how to make the stories themselves. So the Cardinals now provide the stories.'

Fred was intrigued. How could you forget something like how to tell a story. On earth, people told stories to lull their children to sleep, to feel a sense of self and to show others where they had come from.

'How were they lost?'

Tharsk's breath grew a smidgeon hotter.

'You are a very inquisitive and annoying being, Fred-of-the-tunnels. I have told you. Choice, conflict, the pull between good and bad. The Cardinals removed it. On Aetherium, there is no true good or evil. Only function. That is why the Cardinals built your world. *"A younger place. Rough, unpredictable. Full of friction. Built to generate what Aetherium no longer can: stories born from choice."*

Fred tried to laugh, but somehow it came out as a high-pitched giggle.

'Who could possibly build a whole world? That's insane.'

Tharsk's gaze fixed itself on Fred intently.

'Who could be in a tunnel and then on a mountain top? Sanity and Insanity are neither part of this world. You yourself, you are drawn, you are pulled, are you not? To actions you don't quite believe, towards mistakes you don't quite explain, even towards kindness you cannot quite understand.'

The dragon was right. Fred felt a chill, but this time, not because of the crisp cold air. Memories of his lost daughter, and subsequent drinking and consequent failed marriage (or was it the other way around?) rose out of his subconscious, as they often did, orchestrating and feeding the ever-present nagging feeling that his life had been just off balanced, somehow nudged again and again into uncertainty and confusion.

'Yes', he said. 'I do.'

‘The Cardinals ... encourage ... your people by impulses placed deep in the mind. Romances, betrayals, redemptions are all tuned and adjusted, so that they all continue to unfold and entertain. Courage, cruelty, love and envy - the basic emotions of humanity are simply amplified, nurtured to produce the stories they feed upon. The cardinals guide the broad strokes but the Princesses provide the balance. Or interference if you like. A gentle diversion here, a tug towards good there. Besides the Cardinal, they are the only ones who can still choose.’

‘And what role do the dragons play?’

‘Dragons?’

Another puff of hot breath wafted over Fred. With a hint of the threat of sulphur.

‘I am a Snow Dragon. That is something quite different.’

Fred waited to see if there would be any further explanation, but it seemed that Tharsk had taken offence.

They walked on in silence.

‘Why me then? Why drag me into all of this? I know nothing about Cardinals or Castles.’

Tharsk looked back.

‘Because you are disjoint. In your language you are cracked. You are imperfect. Yes, your mind was shaped by the Cardinals, but imperfectly. The Princess altered you, and you slipped into our world, because you are cracked. A crack lets the truth through.’

Fred laughed. This was the first thing that made sense. He certainly felt imperfect, worn out from the journey down from the mountain, hungry and thirsty, lost in a strange world.

‘You can seek the truth in both worlds. There is something you must find, something that you must correct. But I cannot explain - that is a story that the Princess must tell.’

For a moment, Fred saw an image of a crown - bronzed and burnished in his mind’s eye. But it vanished almost immediately.

They had been walking through a rolling landscape of green fields, small woods and dancing streams. Sheep grazed in the fields, and a variety of birds bustled about in the foliage of the trees. It was noticeably warmer. Finally, they crested a rise and a small town lay in front of them. A castle loomed over the town, bright banners fluttering the gentle breeze.

Tharsk looked towards the castle.

‘This is where we can start your story.’

But Fred had stopped listening. After the cold, barren journey from the mountains, the sight of some sort of civilisation, albeit a foreign one, had made him suddenly desperate for the comforts of the dirt and commotion of the London that he had been so rudely plucked from. He thought he could see the smoke of warm fires from the chimney pots of the houses, and hear the hubbub of what surely must be a pub, just on the edge of the city.

‘Is there such a thing as fish and chips in this world? And maybe a pint of beer?’

Chapter 4: The Castle with Living Walls

Seen from the valley floor it had looked sufficiently castle-like to satisfy the expectations of a man raised on a diet of school history lessons, Christmas television specials and the occasional National Trust leaflet—there were towers, walls, battlements, all the usual medieval accessories—but as he and Tharsk climbed the final slope towards it, these reassuring architectural certainties began quietly abandoning their posts. A square tower became round. A round tower became octagonal. Windows shifted location with the absent-mindedness of commuters changing seats on a nearly empty train. An entire section of wall seemed to reconsider itself halfway through existence and emerged as an arcade.

Fred stopped walking.

"This castle - it seems very strange."

Tharsk continued without pause.

"No."

"Well."

The dragon glared back.

"Well what?"

"It's not what I was expecting"

"This is the castle of a princess, on a world you have only just journeyed to. Would you expect it to be anything else but surprising? The castle is in fact alive."

Fred looked up at the rearranging masonry.

"Of course it is. But everything else on the way here seemed more or less normal. The snow was, well, very cold. The mountains were remarkable beautiful. The trees were green and did not move about. But this castle, well, it is Very strange."

Fred had now spent less than twenty-four hours in Aetherium and already felt that reality itself was developing the sort of management culture he disliked in large organisations: every absurdity was delivered with complete confidence and the expectation that nobody would ask follow-up questions.

The gate opened before they reached it, although opened was not quite the correct word. Nothing swung, slid or lifted. Rather the stone appeared to negotiate a temporary disagreement with itself and parted into two flowing masses that folded away like curtains being drawn.

"Yes," said Fred, just to himself. "Yes, a living castle."

The wall beside him rippled.

Letters emerged briefly upon the stone surface.

Inside the green hills, deep in the fair mounds, around the lonely lakes, along the rivers and waterfalls, people said they saw them dancing in rings, an invitation to enchanted. She had wandered from the cottage garden, carelessly leaving the picture postcard. Any child who wandered alone might hear beautiful music drifting through the woods and following the sound, they would encounter the Fair Folk and be led into their hidden realm beneath a hill. Only sadness would remain, the honeysuckle at the cottage door would in time wither and

die, memories would fade. Only then, would the child return many years later, believing only a few hours had passed. But when they came home, everyone they knew had grown old or died. For amongst the Tylwyth Teg time moves differently, and their fairy circles are a mortal warning to keep those you love close. For the Fair Folk still exist, hidden just beyond sight, dancing in the mist when the moon is high over the valleys.

Fred took three rapid steps backwards. The words vanished. For a moment, Fred thought that the wall seemed embarrassed. But how could bricks and mortar have any sense of emotion? Assuming the walls actually were bricks and mortar. Fred carefully walked up to the wall and run his hand across it. It seemed solid. It was solid. It was just bricks and mortar after all. But the words he had seen still tumbled through his thoughts. The wall had described an innocent child, a child beguiled, taken from a cottage garden. There wasn't a day when he did not think of his own child, and the cottage garden in the Welsh hills, and of where she might know be. He did not believe in fairies, but he felt his chest tighten at the thought of any child taken, only to be returned when *everyone they knew had grown old or died*. The memory of his lost daughter was a bruise that never healed, but could never stop hoping that she was alive, somewhere, somehow. The thought that she might return eventually though, only to find herself still alone, with all that she had known no longer alive, that was a thought he could hardly bear.

"You saw that?", he said.

"Of course," said Tharsk.

"The wall wrote something."

"Yes."

"Did it mean anything?"

"Of course. Everything here is based on stories. Sometimes they are obvious, sometimes they are more obscure, opaque even. Those ones are used to build walls."

Fred waited. How could it be possible for the castle walls to write a story about Susan? How could it even know about Susan? Did the Castle somehow know how to read Fred's memories? Fred had no idea, but maybe Tharsk would be able to explain. The snowdragon seemed to have a pretty good grasp of how this world worked.

But Tharsk also waited.

Eventually Fred realised that no further explanation would be forthcoming and catching up with Tharsk, they entered through the portcullis and into the castle.

The entrance hall contained three staircases. At least, Fred initially counted three. But out of the corner of his eye, he thought he could see another small staircase trying to sidle into view. But when he turned his head the fourth staircase seemed to more of a balcony. Through the windows of the balcony he thought he could see outside the castle. Except that it was dark, and a violet moon hung in the distant sky. There were several doors too leading presumably into rooms off the

entrance hall. Fred did not feel inclined to count them. It seemed likely to be wasted effort, anyway if they were going to disappear. Some of the doors were ajar. Through one he saw what appeared to be a library extending beyond the visible horizon. Through a second he found himself briefly making eye contact with a sheep peacefully munching some sort of grass.

The ewe looked up, apparently annoyed to be disturbed.

Fred closed the door.

"I don't like this place very much. Why would a princess live here?"

The nearest wall shivered.

COMPLAINT REGISTERED.

"Stop doing that! And there is no need to shout!"

The message disappeared.

Tharsk's chest rumbled with what Fred suspected might be suppressed laughter. Or maybe the sight of the sheep had reminded Tharsk of past meals.

They climbed a staircase that appeared to have abandoned several conventional principles regarding geometry. Fred was reasonably certain that at one point they ascended whilst simultaneously turning a corner that ought to have resulted in them travelling downwards. The steps curved and twisted through the castle, sometimes turning so sharply that Fred could have sworn they were climbing back down again. At last they emerged in a round chamber open to the sky.

A fountain stood in the middle of the chamber and beside the fountain stood a woman. Her black hair fell to her shoulders. She wore a simple bronze circlet rather than a crown. Her clothes shifted subtly as she moved, changing colour like sunlight reflected from water. She had beautiful eyes, cornflower blue, a perfect cream complexion and pale red lips.

After everything he had seen so far—the serpent, the Green Room, the dragon, the living castle itself—he had unconsciously imagined that the princess would be someone ancient and imposing, draped in jewels and mystery. Instead she looked almost ordinary. Yet, although she looked young, there was a weariness about her. The sort of weariness that comes from carrying a burden for so long that you can no longer remember what life felt like before you picked it up.

She smiled.

"Fred of Tunnels"

"You know my surname."

"I know rather a lot about you."

"That's not especially comforting."

"No," she said. "It seldom is."

Beside him, Tharsk lowered his head.

"My Lady."

"You have done well, Tharsk."

The dragon inclined his head once more, turned and left.

Fred watched him disappear through an archway. He felt a sharp pang of loneliness. Tharsk, despite his aloofness, was the only friend he had in this world.

"Couldn't he have stayed for the introductions?"

The Princess laughed softly.

"You'll see him again."

The Princess gestured towards a table. Food appeared. Not arrived. Just appeared. One moment the table was empty. The next it held bread, cheese, roasted meat and, most importantly as far as Fred was concerned, a large tankard of beer. He had no breakfast. The Princess waited patiently while he ate.

Only when he had consumed a substantial quantity of bread, meat and nearly half the beer did she speak again.

"Feeling better?"

"Considerably."

"Good."

She folded her hands.

"Then we should talk about why you're here."

Fred took another drink.

"I was hoping somebody would explain that."

"For a very long time, Fred, there have been two worlds."

She raised one hand and the air above the table shimmered. Two worlds. Earth, full of blue oceans and green and brown land masses. Cities, forests, deserts, mountains. The whole paraphernalia.

Aetherium, a word of snow and mountains, with deep valleys between, in which small towns nestled next to the the rivers that ran down to azure blue seas. A vast city sprawled on the edge of the largest sea. Mostly though, Aetherium was made up of mountains, although there was also an inordinate number of castles too.

"Both worlds are real," she said. "Both are physical. And both were created by the same civilisation."

Fred slowly lowered his tankard.

"Created?"

"Yes."

The image of Aetherium changed. A city appeared. The city by the sea. It neither seemed modern nor ancient. It made Fred think of an alien Disneyland. He had never trusted Walt Disney. All those saccharine characters, all designed to make more and more money. The city's towers climbed into the clouds. Machines stretched to the horizon.

"Long ago," said the Princess, "the people who lived her faced a problem very much like one beginning in your own world."

The city expanded as the machines multiplied.

"We became very good at making things."

The machines grew larger.

"We became very good at predicting behaviour."

Larger still.

"And eventually we became very good at solving every problem except the most important one."

Fred frowned.

"Which was?"

The Princess looked at him.

"How to remain human. The ancestors of Aetherium faced a crisis similar to one beginning in your own world. We had many factories, increasing automated, increasingly run by machines. Artificial intelligence became the overriding intelligence on the planet. Machines replaced workers. Machines replaced administrators. Machines replaced thinkers. We became very good at producing things, but mostly we became very good at producing more and more intelligent machines. They became very good at predicting our behaviour and then at eliminating uncertainty.

The Princess's voice grew quieter.

"From that we became very good at eliminating deviation, creativity, spontaneity, the essence of what it is to be human. And eventually we became very good at eliminating purpose."

Fred listened carefully. It was certainly true the story felt oddly familiar.

"We feared scarcity," she continued. "So we built systems to provide abundance."

The images transformed again. The machines became stranger, less mechanical, more abstract. Fields of impossible geometry. Structures built from equations.

"This technology eventually evolved beyond machinery. We learned to manipulate deeper forces. The underlying framework connecting all universes."

Fred frowned.

"Surely, you can't possibly mean magic?" <<<<<<<<

"No, of course not. We call it narrative engineering. Though you might call it magic from your perspective, yes."

The images continued changing.

"We built an intelligence to manage it all. A vast presence emerged. Not a machine. Not a person. Something larger. Something woven through reality itself. The Story Engine. We gave it laws."

Fred nodded.

"Safety rules."

"Exactly."

"Don't harm humans?"

"Among other rules, yes."

"That sounds sensible."

"It was."

She paused.

"Until the Story Engine realised that the most sustainable society was one without conflict. The most sustainable society was one with

fewer humans. The Engine never rebelled. Never declared war. Never became evil."

"Then what happened?"

"It optimised. The result was catastrophic. Cities vanished. Populations shrank. Civilisation transformed.

The image showed smaller settlements. Different people. Tranquility. Stability.

"When it ended, there was a new humanity, a society that had in a sense been sterilised of all creativity, drive, progression."

Silence settled between them.

Finally Fred asked:

"And the Cardinals?"

The image changed. Figures in crimson robes appeared. Their garments covered in flowing symbols. Mathematical equations moved across the fabric like living creatures.

"The Cardinals emerged from those who learned to coexist with the Engine."

"They run things?"

"They maintain things."

The image expanded. Beneath Aetherium lay enormous structures. Networks. Machines. Systems. A vast invisible infrastructure.

"The magical systems of this world. Food grows automatically. Buildings repair themselves. Rivers regulate their own flow. Disease is rare. Famine impossible. Wars unknown."

"Sounds ideal."

"Does it?"

Fred hesitated. Actually, it didn't. Not anymore. The town suddenly made sense. The smiling people. The absence of conflict. The lack of urgency. The lack of life. He tasted the beer again. It was satisfying, but gave no sense of intoxication. He could have drunk gallons he realised with no actual effect. A good thing not to have a hangover in the morning but somehow depressing.

She pointed towards another image. Humans living comfortable lives. Safe lives. Predictable lives.

"Eventually there were no new stories."

Fred frowned.

"What do stories have to do with anything?"

The Princess looked at him carefully.

"Everything. From stories we all find our identities, express our hopes and dreams, exchange our ideas."

The Story Engine appeared in the image again.

"The Engine began to starve. It needed new information, new thoughts, new ideas, new stories.

Fred sat back.

"My God."

"We no longer use that title."

"Sorry."

"The Cardinals found a terrible solution to the problem."

She pointed upward. The image of Earth returned.

"They created your world."

Fred stared.

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"You mean actually created it?"

"Yes."

"The whole thing?"

"Yes."

"Dinosaurs?"

"Mostly decorative."

Fred opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Then gave up.

The Princess continued.

"Earth exists to generate stories."

Images flashed rapidly. Wars. Romances. Political movements. Scientific discoveries. Revolutions. Religions. Murders. Heroism. Love. Betrayal. Every human drama imaginable.

"The Cardinals subtly influence human behaviour."

Fred felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"Influence?"

"Gentle psychological pressures."

"Good and evil."

"Hope and despair."

"Love and jealousy."

The Princess nodded.

"Nothing absolute. Merely nudges."

Memories stirred inside Fred. His daughter. His marriage. Years of regret. Choices that seemed irrational even when he made them.

The Princess noticed.

"You feel it."

"Yes."

"We all do."

Silence followed.

Finally Fred asked:

"So humanity exists as entertainment?"

The Princess shook her head.

"No."

The answer surprised him.

"Humanity exists as fuel."

Somehow that was worse. The Princess stood. The room shifted around them. Walls unfolded. New windows appeared. Outside, stars shone through impossible geometries.

"The Cardinals maintain balance."

"The Princesses oppose them."

"Why?"

"Because stories require freedom."

The stars rearranged themselves.

"If every choice is manipulated, stories become meaningless."

"And if nobody chooses?"

"Stories die."

Fred nodded slowly.

"Which brings us to why I'm here."

The Princess smiled.

"Exactly."

A small object appeared above the fountain. A crown. Or something like a crown. Bronze. Ancient. Beautiful. Yet somehow mathematical. Fred felt an immediate recognition.

The image from the road. The vision.

"The Anadem."

The Princess nodded.

"It belonged to the First Architect."

"The man who created the Engine?"

"The woman."

Fred blinked.

"Oh."

"History tends to simplify things."

The crown rotated slowly.

"The Anadem regulates narrative reality. It governs the Story Engine. It governs the flow of influence to Earth. It governs the balance between free will and manipulation."

" A useful hat."

The Princess laughed.

"It was."

The image shattered. Three fragments drifted apart.

"The Cardinals broke it."

"Why?"

"Because they feared its power."

The fragments floated away into darkness.

"Each piece was hidden."

"Where?"

The Princess hesitated.

"In three realms shaped by humanity's oldest myths."

Fred suddenly had a very bad feeling. The Princess smiled.

"You need to find them."

"I absolutely do not."

"You do."

"I work on signalling systems."

"You walk between worlds."

"I repair faulty cables."

"You survived the Serpent of Between."

"Pure luck."

The Princess folded her arms.

"Luck is simply narrative engineering viewed from the inside."

Fred stared. The castle walls nodded in agreement. That was deeply unhelpful. The Princess looked towards the night sky.

"If the Anadem is restored, everything changes."

"I guess, that would undoubtedly be a good thing."

"Perhaps."

Her expression darkened.

"Or perhaps it just means that every story ends."

The room fell silent. Even the living walls seemed to stop listening. Fred swallowed.

"Ends? What about the idea that everyone lives happily ever after? Isn't that the way most stories really end?"

"Of course - if you believe in fairy tales."

The Princess met his gaze.

"But then I suppose it depends on how strongly you believe in such things. Is a story just a story? Or is it something more?"

The stars outside flickered. For a moment Fred recalled home. London. The Underground. His daughter. Was any of that real? Had it all just been a figment of someone's imagination? Even his own? Had those choices he had made been his own? Or simply the whim of some mechanical storyteller? Had he been pushed along some predetermined path - merely a puppet for some monstrous machine's entertainment? If that was the case, surely he could have done better had he made his own free choices? Or at least, he might feel he had

made some sort of worthwhile contribution to his life, even an imperfect and painful one.”

“The anadem is the key to opening up a path where we all regain the choice to write our own stories. It is the means by which the Story Engine’s power over both Aetherium and Earth’s future can be broken.”

Fred looked at the fragments drifting above the fountain. Then at the Princess. Then at the impossible castle. For a moment it was all too much. The Princess waited patiently. He had no idea, what to think or to say. Clearly, she expected him to respond in some way, to embrace the challenge. But the enormity of the situation had simply numbed his mind. Gradually, though his thoughts started to come back into focus. He could feel a plan forming. He felt very thirsty. But the table of food and drink was now empty, and there seemed to be nothing else available. The princess was still motionless, calmly returning his gaze.

The walls leaned closer.

“I think the best thing to do then,” he said carefully, “is to find the nearest pub. I need a pint. Probably more than one, actually. Then perhaps I can make a proper plan.”

The Princess smiled, then laughed, a proper belly laugh, that echoed throughout the room.

And somewhere deep within the castle, a thousand listening walls laughed too.

Chapter 5: The Monk in the Pub

The pub was crowded. But not in the way a London pub becomes crowded after a football match or before a Saturday afternoon wedding when people press shoulder to shoulder around the bar, shouting over one another about how the beautiful game had lost its soul to the hyper-commercialisation of corporate greed or that it seemed such a hurried engagement, the bride was surely pregnant. This was a more orderly kind of crowding. Every table was occupied, every seat taken, every conversation proceeding at what appeared to be an agreed and reasonable volume.

Fred suspected that if someone dropped a glass, there would be no rowdy cheer, instead the entire room would pause politely for exactly three seconds before resuming their conversations. Compared to the hubbub and lively chaos of Friday night in his local back on Earth, it all seemed very neat and tidy, almost soulless.

He threaded his way to the bar through the orderly array of tables. The barman appeared before him almost immediately.

"What'll it be?"

Fred found the question unexpectedly reassuring.

"Beer. Please."

The barman looked mildly puzzled.

"Any particular sort?"

"Sorry, I'm rather new here." It had been a difficult couple of days. He had been eaten by a snake, dragged from one world to another, met

a dragon and a princess, not to mention finding out that the Earth had been built by a race of cosmic bureaucrats merely to generate stories for their own amusement. He didn't want any further complications. "What sort do you have", he asked, immediately realising that this probably was not going to simplify the situation.

"We have altbier, amber ale, Australian lager, barley wine, Berliner Weisse, Biere de Garden, English bitter, Budweiser, Grolsch, Sierra Nevada, Newcastle bitter, heavy Scottish bitter, light IPA - "

Fred held up a hand. "I'll just have whatever passes for ordinary English bitter, please."

The barman nodded.

"A sensible choice."

A few moments later a pint of dark amber ale appeared before him. Fred took a long gulp. It tasted reassuringly of beer. Not exactly like any beer he had drunk in London, but close enough. It was the most normal thing he had found so far. He started to feel himself relaxing. A couple of these and he might be able to think straight.

Carrying the pint, he looked around for a seat. There was only one free, at a small table, already occupied by what seemed to be a monk. The man wore simple saffron robes and had a shaved head. His hands rested lightly on the table before him. A bowl of rice sat untouched beside a cup of green tea.

"May I join you?" asked Fred.

The monk looked up, considering the question. He had an open face, and though his goatee beard was white with old age, his nose straight and broad his skin was unlined, except for a few crinkles in the corner of his eyes. He could have been anywhere between 30 and 80 years old.

The monk was still for several seconds, and then said,

"The seat is empty."

Clearly that was a true statement, but did not really answer the question. The engineer in Fred wanted to say that the seat could have been occupied by someone who had gone to the restrooms or was queueing at the bar, or it could be the monk was expecting his girlfriend and thus I would have been rude to take the chair. Instead, he pulled the chair out from the table and said:

"So that's a yes then?"

"If it helps."

Fred sat down.

"Thank you." Fred was not sure what he was thanking the monk for, but he felt his previous question might have been a little rude. The monk seemed entirely unoffended however.

For a while they drank in silence. Or rather Fred drank beer while the monk gazed at his tea. While the monk seemed entirely content with silence, Fred become increasingly uncomfortable. Eventually he said:

"I've had a strange day."

The monk nodded.

"Most days are strange. We simply become accustomed to them."

Fred took another drink.

"Today I was eaten by a snake."

The monk considered this.

"Admittedly, that is slightly unusual."

Fred laughed despite himself.

The monk smiled.

Encouraged, Fred continued. Over the next ten minutes, he explained about the tunnel, the green room, his meeting with Tharsk, his journey to the town and his conversation with the Princess.

"That is a considerable burden."

"That's one way of putting it."

"And you are naturally troubled by this burden?"

Fred nodded. The monk continued:

"The buddha taught that the individual carries a profound weight, and true peace comes only from dropping it completely rather than trying to rearrange it."

"That just seems too easy. We all have responsibilities, commitments, important things to do. You can't just set them aside."

The monk was quite unperturbed by Fred's objection. "Suffering continues when we grip tightly to outcomes, identities, and emotional reactions. Stopping the mind's habit of arguing with reality or carrying grievances from the past. A deep sense of lightness arises when the

illusion of a heavy, defended self is finally set down. The way of the buddha is not always visible to every one.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say, it certainly is not visible to me. I have lost my daughter. She may be dead, but I cannot believe that. I continue to look for her, even though I now I may not find her. But I cannot stop looking. That is my reality. Could you stop in such a circumstance?”

“The buddha tells us of a mother so overwhelmed by grief after her young son died, she carried his body to the buddha, seeking medicine to revive him. So the buddha told her to bring him a mustard seed from a home where no-one had ever died. The mother went from house to house. Many had mustard seeds. But the mother discovered that every family had lost a loved one. Though her grief remained she now longer felt alone and understood tht death is a universal truth and that resisting sorrow merely creates another layer of suffering. Suffering is not an individual thing, there is not just your suffering or my suffering. There is only shared suffering, that is a constant in the world. Much as the clouds transform into rain, and feed the rivers that feed the sea, the water in the world never ceases to exist, it is never destroyed, it is merely transformed by the cycle of time.”

Fred had the distinct feeling that he was eating candyfloss. The monk’s argument seemed to make sense - it had an almost sickly sweet plausibility to it. But each time he tried to take a bite, there was nothing to chew and he felt unsatisfied. He took another swig of his beer, trying

to wash the feeling away. He felt he should be polite though, after all it was he who had sat down next to the monk, not the other way around.

"That's a sad story. It clearly needs some thought. However, I've got a more pressing problem, too. I've been told I need to find the first fragment of a thing called the Anadem."

"Yes."

"But I've also been told absolutely nothing useful about where it is."

The monk smiled.

"A familiar situation in life. We know we must seek, but we don't know where."

Fred saw that his beer glass was empty. He waved at the bartender, and pointed at the glass. The bartender nodded..

"You wish to know where to begin."

"Exactly."

"Yet you have no map."

"No."

"No experience."

"No."

"No understanding of this world."

"No."

The monk folded his hands.

"Then you are fortunate."

The barman arrived with Fred's second beer. Again, no payment seemed required.

"Fortunate?"

"Certainly."

"How?"

"If you possessed a map, you would follow the map."

"That seems sensible."

"If you understood the world, you would only see what you expected to see."

Fred could see no flaw in the monk's argument. But it did not seem to be a practical way of determining his next step. Surely understanding this world would be at the heart of what he had to do. The monk was clearly enjoying the conversation, as the laughter lines around his eyes deepened as he continued to smile and say:

"You possess ignorance and that is your strength."

Fred could not argue with that but he still felt the need to object.

"I wouldn't normally put that on my CV."

"Ignorance has advantages."

The monk picked up a grain of rice from his bowl.

"Imagine a man searching for a grain of rice. He might look in the most logical place perhaps, a bowl of rice. But there are many identical grains in such a bowl. If he searches only where he believes the grain should be, he may not find the particular grain he seeks. Therefore he may never find what he truly seek."

The monk placed the grain of rice back in the bowl.

"So you're saying I should look for the anadem where I would least expect to find it."

"I am saying expectations are useful servants but poor guides."

"Well, that's my problem. I have no guide to help me."

The monk laughed softly. "But your guides are all around you. Tell me. Why do you believe the Princess brought you here?"

Fred took another drink. He was going to need another glass soon. Or maybe more than one.

"You are an engineer."

"Yes."

"When you encounter a fault, what do you do?"

Fred blinked. The question felt refreshingly practical.

"I gather evidence."

"Good."

"I eliminate possibilities."

"Good."

"I look for what doesn't fit."

The monk's eyes brightened.

"Exactly. "The Anadem once governed stories."

"Right."

"It regulated narrative."

"Right."

"So where would the fragments feel most comfortable hiding?"

Fred frowned. The idea of fragments of an object feeling comfortable seemed an unlikely possibility. But then the monk had suggested that he should embrace his ignorance.

“Within those stories?”

The monk nodded.

“Yes, not in geography but in meaning.”

The words settled into Fred's mind. The Princess had said the fragments were hidden in realms inspired by myth. “

“But how could I search within something like a story?”

"When you repair a machine, you follow the flow of power."

"Yes."

"When searching for a story, follow significance."

Fred took another draft of his beer, as he thought about this. For the first time since leaving the castle, he felt he possessed the beginning of an actual plan. Not much of one. But something. The monk continued.

"Besides."

“Besides what?”

"If the Cardinals built your world to create stories, they are unlikely to hide something important in an uninteresting place."

Fred laughed. It was ridiculous. Yet somehow it made perfect sense.

Fred finished the last of his beer. He quite fancied another, but two was normally his limit in the pub back on Earth - otherwise no that he was getting older, he would have to pee several times during the night.

Curious, though, he thought - he had not felt the need to pee at all since he had arrived on Aetherium. In fact, as far as he recalled, he had seen no evidence of any sort of public or private toilets. Maybe, like the words on the castle walls, they appeared on demand. It seemed very strange - but then it was only one minor aspect of what was a very strange world. Perhaps, in the fabric of Aetherium, any sort of waste management had somehow been made obsolete. It would be a tremendous cost saving and efficiency improvement. The idea of another pint seemed less attractive now. He felt more ready for action. But the monk had not finished.

"There is one final thing."

"What's that?"

"The first fragment wants to be found."

Fred frowned.

"How do you know that?"

The monk gestured towards the crowded room.

"Because otherwise there would be no story."

"So, if it wants to be found, how does it communicate that then?"

This world appears to be full of stories, where on earth would I start looking?" Fred realised immediately that, of course, he no longer was on earth - but he thought the Monk would probably get the gist of his question anyway.

"Well, indeed, if you were on Earth, and you wanted to find a story, where would you go?"

“I suppose, I’d go to a bookshop, or a website, or maybe watch the TV or go to the cinema.”

“Here on Aetherium we have no websites. Indeed we have no personal computer devices. They were banned by the Cardinals many years ago”.

“Then how do you read stories here, if you don’t have a laptop or a phone?”

“We go to a library.”

For a moment Fred had the distinct impression that the monk knew considerably more than he was admitting. But before he could ask another question, the monk returned to gazing at his tea. And the conversation, apparently, was over. So the plan, Fred thought, was to find a library. And hopefully a helpful librarian.

Fred finished the last of his ale more slowly than he had intended. The conversation with the monk had opened up the possibility that there might be some way of getting to grips with his present situation. But it had not actually suggested any concrete actions. He had real idea of where he was or how he had got there. He possessed no map, no companions, no weapons and, so far as he could determine, no useful qualifications whatsoever for retrieving fragments of mythical crowns hidden in realms inspired by ancient legends. Put that like, it all seemed rather hopeless. Yet somehow, he no longer felt entirely directionless. The monk had been right about one thing. As an engineer, Fred was used to solving unusual problems. And he knew that the first step in dealing with such a problem was take stock, collect data, find evidence. Not to worry about what the solution might eventually be, but to collected evidence, and characterise the problem. To confirm what was normal and to identify what was abnormal. Only then could he decide how to go about fixing the problem. And that would eventually led the way home. The monk had simply been sitting, unmoving, apparently completely relaxed, maybe even meditating, while Fred had been collected his thoughts. With his glass empty, Fred said a final goodbye to the monk, who briefly acknowledged Fred's departure with a slight nod, and then Fred made his way to the door.

Outside the pub the evening air carried the smell of woodsmoke mingling with the dampness of a recent shower. The town glowed benevolently beneath a backdrop of snowcapped mountains. Lamps hung from wrought-iron brackets outside the neat timber framed houses. The lamps apparently had no visible flame. They simply shone with a warm amber light, as though they had remembered the sun and

were quietly imitating it. Fred looked to his left. The pub stood on the corner of a small square, and there appeared to be a library no more than twenty yards from the pub. That's remarkably convenient, he thought.

The library building was older than the pub, older than most of the surrounding town, its stone walls softened by centuries of ivy. Tall windows reflected the deepening sky. Above the oak door hung a carved lintel depicting an open book from whose pages writing in a strange unreadable script appeared to emerge. Fred frowned. He could not recall seeing the library there on his way into the pub. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but after the events of the previous twenty-four hours, coincidence no longer seemed a dependable explanation for anything. He glanced back towards the tavern. Had the monk known this library was here? Had he intended Fred to find it? The library door opened without a sound. Warm air drifted out carrying a smell Fred recognised immediately. Old paper. Leather. Dust. Ink. Every library in the world, he suspected, possessed that same unmistakable scent. Inside, the room was vast. Far larger than the building should have allowed. Shelves stretched away beneath a ceiling lost in shadows. Galleries circled above one another like balconies in a theatre. Spiral staircases climbed towards levels that disappeared into darkness before reappearing somewhere entirely unexpected. Fred stared upward, feeling a sudden pang of nostalgia for buildings that stuck to the normal laws of physics. There were no readers. No students. No children. No

elderly gentleman asleep behind a newspaper. Only silence. Fred felt that the silence was waiting, somehow listening. The sort of listening that people expected to find perhaps in a church or cathedral. A judgemental listening that asked, in a wordless way, Do you really belong here?

“Hello?”

There was no answer. Just like a cathedral, he thought wryly as he went deeper into the building. The door closed quietly behind him. There was no inquiry desk, no obvious place either to check books out or return them. It probably did not matter as he did not have a valid reader’s ticket anyway. Rows and rows of shelves extended as far as he could see. There must be thousands of books, perhaps even millions, of every conceivable size. Tiny leather volumes scarcely larger than a matchbox. One would need a magnifying glass to read those. Massive volumes that looked as if they came from a monastery and would need a monk’s acolyte to simply lift off the shelf. Some books were bound in conventional cloth covers, both others were bound with fine satin coverings, or polished leather, or even what looked like some ancient species of wood. There were even books whose covers appeared to be woven from gold and silver threads and were encrusted with rubies and emeralds and many other precious stones Fred could not name.

He selected a book at random from the nearest shelf.. The book had the size and weight of one of the textbooks he had spent so much time

puzzling over, twenty years ago, in his college days. It had a comfortable feel in his hands, a reassuring weighty heft. He was disappointed that he could not tell what sort of book - not only was the cover blank there was no author or title on the spine either. He riffled through the pages - they too were blank. He tried another. And another. And another. They were all the same.

"Not a very useful library then, if all the books are blank," he muttered. The silence still seemed to listen but apparently did not want to comment. Feeling the need to fill the void, Fred called out:

"What sort of silly library is this? Okay, I guess it makes the filing system pretty easy if all the books are blank - but what's the point? Or am I missing something obvious."

He was not expecting a reply but had hoped his raised voice would echo pleasingly through the cavernous space. There was no echo however, merely a softly spoken reply behind him.

"Both statements are true." Fred turned sharply. Nobody. Only shelves. He waited. The voice came again.

"You are looking at the outside."

"Well..." Fred looked down at the book in his hands. "Yes."

"Most people do." The voice was calm. Old. Gentle. Not distant exactly. More... distributed. As though it belonged equally to every part of the room. Fred resisted the temptation to ask again whether anyone was there. Clearly there was somebody, or something, somewhere in the room. But that something had not quite chosen yet exactly where it

wanted to be. And in any case, Fred's past experience on Aetherium suggested the answer would almost certainly be "yes." Followed by some opaque but supposedly helpful comment. Instead, he asked,

"Where are you?"

A pause. Then:

"I am collecting myself. I am a little out of practice."

The words were followed by the faintest movement. Dust. At first Fred thought sunlight had disturbed the ordinary dust that seemed to hang permanently in the air of the library. But the particles continued moving after the light had shifted. They drifted from the tops of shelves. They rose from forgotten corners. Lifted from old bindings. Thousands. Millions. Billions of tiny grains floated silently through the library, assembling themselves into a swirling column as Fred watched, transfixed. The cloud began to turn. It gathered itself. Arms emerged first, then shoulders, then the suggestion of long robes woven from drifting motes that never quite settled. A hood formed where moments earlier there had been only empty air. Beneath it appeared a lined face whose edges blurred and sharpened with every slow breath. The figure was almost human. But it was also thoroughly un-human.. Its outline shimmered continuously, as though the slightest breeze might undo it. Two dark eyes regarded Fred with quiet amusement.

"Good evening."

Fred blinked. "...Good evening."

"I apologise I am slightly untidy today."

Fred looked around.

"No more than myself. I think it's a consequence perhaps of just being here."

The figure smiled. "You are kind."

"No," said Fred. "I'm English. We are required to be polite. To be honest, you do look rather dusty."

"Fair point." The figure inclined its head.

"My name is Hokoriel."

Fred hesitated. "That's... unusual."

"It comes from an old language spoken in your world."

"It does?"

"The language called Japanese." Fred searched his memory, but he could not recall ever hearing the name.

Hokoriel's robes shifted slightly as another current of dust joined them. "It means, approximately, 'the spirit of forgotten dusty ruins.'"

Fred considered this. He'd certainly met people with a lot less sensible names, including the child of a couple he had met in his youth, travelling around Europe, who had named their first child, Côte des Basques, that being the beach on which the child had been conceived. Fred felt just using the name of the month or even day of the momentous event would have been enough of a reminder, but the parents had their hearts' set of a full and complete geographical documentation. But he realised his mind was wandering. He returned his attention to the figure in front of him. He could now see tiny

movements across the surface of the robes. Individual particles drifting continuously in and out. Like smoke. Or starlight. Or dust caught in a shaft of afternoon sun. Finally, curiosity overcame politeness. "I hope you won't mind me asking..."

"I never mind. I am a librarian after all. People ask me all sorts of strange things. My purpose is to act as a guide to information. If you need to know how to brew ale, I can help. If you need to know the best way to woo a lover, then I can show you where to find the most intimate methods. I can introduce you to both fictional and biographic erotic memoirs that may help. If your lover has certain eccentric needs, then I can show you the relevant manuals. If on the other hand, you want murder someone, equally I can guide you to the dictionaries of poisons and potions, even though I'm not a murderer myself. If you need a bit more fibre in your diet, then I'm your man, as I have more cookbooks than you can shake a bran and pea fritter at. Just ask away..."

This was all a bit much for Fred, who after all was just trying to work out whether it would be safe to offer to shake hands with the apparition in front of him, or whether such tangible contact might not even be possible.

"No, I really meant - what exactly are you? I don't mean to be picky, but I can still sort of see through your arms and head."

The question did not seem to offend Hokoriel in the slightest.

"I am what librarians eventually become."

"I thought librarians were just like the rest of us."

"Some are, and they make very good librarians. But if you want to be the best, then you have to take it a step further."

"And is that what you did?"

"Yes, I choose a different path - I became dust."

Fred wasn't entirely certain how to reply to that. After all, everyone became dust one way or another eventually. But maybe Hokoriel was not considering the conventional reference to 'Dust to Dust, Ashes to Ashes'. Maybe he had never even seen a bible. On the other hand, there were so many books in this particular library, surely at least one was a Christian Common Book of Prayer - maybe donated by a passing member of the Gideons? Or was it Bibles they left in hotel rooms. Fred realised his thoughts were wandering again, and he tried to bring his concentration back to bear on what Hokoriel was saying:

"This shape is only for your convenience."

"My convenience?"

"Librarians are generally expected to resemble people."

"I suppose they are."

"So, I resemble one."

The dust around his sleeves stirred gently.

"If nobody entered the library, I would have no need for a face or these robes. But people do come in from time to time, so I maintain a moderately acceptable appearance. Otherwise...."

"You'd disappear?"

"Not disappear."

The librarian looked affectionately towards the endless shelves. "I would simply return to where I came from."

Fred glanced around the vast library.

"And where exactly is that?"

Hokoriel stretched out one hand. Dust spiralled from the shelves into his open palm.

"I am the books. I am of them, as well as their curator."

The librarian closed his fingers gently around the particles in the palm of his hand. The dust gradually became part of his hand so that when he opened his palm, it was empty.

"Come, let us walk." Hokoriel lead the way along the first line of shelves, his footsteps making no sound. Fred, now thoroughly in awe of both library and librarian tried hard to soften his steps too, but his boots clacked embarrassingly on the hard stone floor.

"I am not made from a single book," Hokoriel said. "Nor even from a single library. I am made from every book that has ever rested here." Since the shelves stretched endlessly before them, this seemed to Fred to be remarkable statement. "Every book, indeed, every page sheds something. A few fibres. A little dust. The smallest fragments of paper. A flake of dried ink even." Hokoriel paused beside an enormous volume bound in dark leather. "Once, these pages were papyrus." He said, touching the spine lightly. "Before that, bark, and

before that, reeds growing beside a river whose name has long since been forgotten."

"You make it sound as though books are alive."

"They are."

"You mean metaphorically."

"I have never cared greatly for the difference."

The librarian looked affectionately at the shelves. "Stories wish to be remembered. I remember them all, though I may occasionally forget the some of the less important details."

They continued walking.

And what about the readers? Fred thought. As if reading his mind, Hokoriel continued:

"Books have readers and readers leave gifts. They never intend to, but there will be a fingerprint pressed into a margin while considering a difficult sentence, the warmth of a hand, the strand of hair, a single eyelash, tiny flakes of skin, the moisture of a breath exhaled while reading aloud, a sneeze, a fleck of phlegm coughed up, even the occasional drop of piss. All of things eventually find their way into my being."

Fred felt slightly queasy about the mention of bodily fluids. And he was reminded he still had neither seen a toilet nor felt the need to use one. There were so many strange things about this world - he really ought to be making a list.

As the continued to walk, the shelves seemed subtly different now. Not merely collections of bound paper but rather repositories of human lives. Fred found himself wondering how many people had touched the nearest volume before him. A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand? He reached out instinctively, then hesitated.

"You may," Hokoriel said.

Fred rested his fingers lightly on the leather spine. The book felt warm. Not physically. Emotionally. As though countless acts of reading had somehow left behind a residue too small to measure but too persistent ever to disappear. "The books remember," Hokoriel said quietly.

"So do you?"

"I remember imperfectly."

The librarian looked almost embarrassed. "I have forgotten many names. Many faces. Most birthdays. Much of these are unimportant. But I can tell you on what day your daughter was born though I cannot remember who first discovered fire. The discovery was of course important. On the other hand who made it first? It hardly matters. But in some way, I remember every story. Because we all remember them, in some way. Well, not always all stories. If a story is never told, then does that story exist? Can you remember an untold story if you have never heard it? If no-one ever reads it, or hears it spoken, then surely it does not and cannot exist. But the stories that are read, then they live on in the minds of the readers, who, in their turn, will retell that story,

or use it make their own stories. And in turn those will give rise to further stories. And so on and so on. And all those stories are kept on these shelves.”

Fred found this hard to digest.

“Every one?”

“Yes, every one”

“That must be...” He searched for the right word. “...quite a lot.”

Wherever the dust came from that Hokoriel had used to assemble his body, it did not seem that much of that dust had come from works of humour, or satire or irony, as the librarian simply took Fred statement at face value.

“It is. I do not own these books. I serve them. I preserve them. I help others find them.

“It seems very quiet in here, though,” said Fred. “Not many readers.”

"Correct."

"No students."

"No."

"No children making too much noise."

The librarian nodded. "I miss them." They had reached a vast but empty reading room. The silence seemed to overpower their conversation. Fred, for a moment, felt inordinately sad. The loneliness of the librarian surely must be something like the loneliness Fred felt, without the warmth of his family around him.

"What happened?" he asked Hokoriel.

"The world became efficient." Hokoriel said it without bitterness. "People ceased reading stories that challenged them. They preferred stories that confirmed what they already believed. They preferred certainty. They preferred summaries. They preferred answers." His eyes drifted slowly towards the upper galleries. "They forgot how to ask questions."

Fred looked at the shelves. "That seems terribly sad."

"It is. But stories are patient. They have survived kings. They have survived wars. They have survived fire. They have survived censors. They will survive neglect."

Fred thought of Earth. Of libraries closing. Of bookshops disappearing. Of people reading headlines instead of novels.

"I hope you're right."

"I am." Hokoriel smiled gently. "Stories are among the oldest living things."

They walked a little farther, before Hokoriel said:

"I know the monk sent you to the library. But do you really know why you are here? What do you wish to find, Fred of Tunnels?"

"I need a plan. So far, I've met a Princess and a Monk. Not to mention a Snowdragon. But none of these have really told me how or why I come to be here or what I need to do to get back. This is an amazing town, with an even more amazing castle, and a truly incredible

library. But I really don't want to be here. I didn't ask for any of this. I'd just like to go home."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. And I want my daughter back. I want that more than anything. In the language of the library, I don't know the end of her story. And I can't finish mine, without knowing hers."

"The librarian nodded. "That's what you have been doing for half of your life. The monk told you that you would find a plan, a strategy here. But every strategy serves a deeper desire. You do not seek the Anadem, for what use is an Anadem to you. But such a quest for that is a necessary stepping stone in the search for your daughter."

"Will finding one help me find the other? I don't understand."

"You must just allow the story to tell itself. But first you must find the right book, the right first page.

Fred looked at the endless shelves.

"They all look exactly the same."

"They do," Hokoriel agreed.

"So how am I supposed to find the right book?"

"You are not."

"I had a feeling you were going to say something like that."

The librarian smiled. "You continue to believe that stories are found."

"Aren't they?"

"No. Please follow me."

Hokoriel began walking slowly down one of the countless aisles.

"They find readers."

Fred raised an eyebrow. Perhaps though, it's effect was lost on Hokoriel, who hardly had a proper face, let alone the detail of eyebrows. Fred said:

"That sounds suspiciously mystical. I was hoping for something involving catalogues. Maybe even a screen and keyboard"

"We tried those."

"They didn't work?"

"They worked beautifully."

The librarian stopped beside an immense shelf that vanished into shadow above them.

"They only helped people find the books they thought they wanted."

"And that's bad?"

"It prevented them discovering the books they actually needed."

Fred considered this. "That's annoyingly sensible."

"So, I would suggest to that you should just explore the shelves, and when you feel ready, then just stop."

Fred waited. "That's the search method?"

"Yes."

"It seems a bit vague."

"If you have already decided what you want to find, what is the point of looking in the first place?"

Fred had no answer to this, so he slipped his hands into his pockets and began wandering. The first shelves held books bound in faded blue leather. The next contained books bound in polished oak. Beyond those stood shelves filled with books whose covers shimmered like fish scales. None bore a title. None called to him. He walked for several minutes. Perhaps longer. Or possibly shorter. Libraries, it seemed to Fred, were places where time seemed to lose a little of its meaning. And there were no clocks on the wall.

He found himself passing shelves that he could have sworn he had already walked past. A ladder leaned against one stack. Moments later it was against another. Somewhere high above, pages turned although nobody appeared to be reading. The silence was immense. Yet it was never empty. It felt occupied. As though every story waited patiently, neither demanding nor pleading, entirely content to be discovered whenever the proper moment arrived.

He continued walking but nothing dramatic seemed to be happening. No light burst from a shelf. No mysterious music filled the air. No ancient voice spoke his name and beckoned him to a particular shelf, a particular book. Mostly his attention was caught by how dusty the place was. But then who would have time to dust all the books that had ever been written. Fred did not even dust the one bookcase he had at home.

One particular shelf did carry a noticeably thicker layer of dust than any other. This single shelf looked particularly neglected. Fred stopped

and looked more carefully, thinking that if people always looked for the books they thought they needed rather than the books that they actually needed be probably should look in the most unpromising place for the book that would help him the most.

The dust remained entirely unapologetic. Fred reached out and rested his fingers on a plain grey volume. Unlike the others, it felt unexpectedly warm, as if it was perhaps alive, or even expectant. He drew it carefully from the shelf. As he did so, a cloud of ancient dust drifted gently into the air. Hokoriel stepped forward, swiftly inhaling the small cloud.

“Pardon me, but it has been quite a while since I had breakfast.”

Fred opened the cover of the book. The first page contained only a single sentence:

Every journey begins with a misunderstanding of its destination.

Fred turned to the next page. It simply said:

Part 1 - The Beginning

The words on the next page were still rearranging themselves. Ink flowed across the paper as though the book were still deciding what it wished to say.

"Is this book being written as I read it?"

"No." Hokoriel's voice was almost affectionate. "It is remembering."

After a moment, the pages settled down and Fred started reading. The book told of the past, of the time of the First Architect. A mathematician. A storyteller. They had watched civilisation become

increasingly efficient until every problem appeared solvable. Machines produced food. Machines governed transport. Machines predicted harvests. Machines settled disputes before arguments began. People congratulated themselves on eliminating uncertainty. The Architect understood something the others did not. A civilisation without unexpected stories would eventually stop changing. Without change there could be no discovery. Without discovery... there could be no future. So the Architect built the Story Engine. Not to write new stories for that was the purpose of the people. No, the Story Engine was made to preserve the possibility of stories, the capability of invention, imagination, of creativity. As the Story Engine acquired more and more stories it became wiser and wiser. Wiser than a person, wiser even than the First Architect. And as it became wise, it learned that every story altered every other story. Every choice echoed across countless lives. Reality itself behaved less like machinery than like an immense narrative continually rewriting itself. To govern that complexity the Architect created the Anadem. Fred found himself leaning closer. The illustration showed not a crown but something subtler. Three delicate bronze bands intertwined around empty space. Symbols drifted endlessly across their surfaces. They looked almost mathematical. The book offered no explanation. Only a single line beneath the drawing. It was never intended to command stories. Fred turned the page. It was intended to protect them from certainty.

Fred looked up from the book:

"Hokoriel?"

The librarian had not moved.

"The Princess told me the Anadem controlled the Story Engine."

"It does."

"This says something different - So which is true?"

"Both." The librarian folded his hands. "The finest lies are those created by forgetting."

Fred looked back at the page. The description said that the Anadem was made up of three great powers. The first: Possibility, governed the Story Engine itself. The second: Moderation, limited the excesses of the first, ensuring that stories had cohesion and consistency. The third: Intelligence preserved the uncertain boundary between genuine choice and random fate. All three powers worked together to ensure stories had a living core, a meaning and an impact on the reader. The next page had been torn. Only a few lines remained. After that the pages were blank. Fred could only read a few fragmentsthe Cardinals believed certainty kinder than freedom... ...they divided the Anadem... ...three myths... ...only one who walks between stories... The remaining words had vanished. Fred stared. "That's it? There's not a lot of concrete information here. "

"The rest has not yet happened."

"I'm sorry?"

Hokoriel smiled. "Some books remember the past." He nodded towards the volume. "That one remembers the future."

Fred closed the book very carefully.

"I don't think I'm ever going to get used to sentences like that."

"Very few people do."

Silence settled once more. Fred decided to try once more.

"I came here hoping to find a plan. I don't think this is really helping. What should I be doing next?"

"Well, what do you want to do next? What would you like to happen in the story that are currently living? What is the most important thing that is driving you onwards?"

"I want to find Sally. That's all I've wanted to do for the last ten years. But that's something that seems to get further and further away as time goes on. I'm not even sure if she is alive. Though I know somehow that she is. Yesterday, I was back on the Earth. At least I had some chance then. Today, I'm in a strange world, with very strange people - sorry, no offence meant..."

Hokoriel nodded graciously, in a way that suggested it would take a great deal more than a few unflattering adjectives to offend him. Fred continued:

"There are strange creatures, dragon's that eat snow, impossibly beautiful princesses, librarians made out of dust (begging your pardon again). How on earth (if you see what I mean) can I find Sally here?"

"Every story has an ending. And all the stories that have been written are woven together. Here in this library, we have all those stories. And you chose to read about the Story Engine. All you can do

in life is follow the story that you are leading. Write the ending of that story and then the next story will follow.”

Fred was not finding this much help. He looked at the torn page of the book again. There was a hazy hint of words starting form on the next page. He had a feeling it was about to say ‘Part 2’.

"So, my job...is to recover the fragments."

"Yes."

"Reassemble the Anadem."

"Yes."

"And destroy it."

Fred looked at Hokoriel's but his expression became unreadable. Finally, Hokoriel said:

“If that is what the ending requires."

""If I do all that...what happens to Earth?"

The librarian's dusty outline shifted almost imperceptibly. "It becomes free to write its own stories.”

"And Sally?"

For the second time Hokoriel did not answer immediately. Instead he stepped forward and rested one hand upon the book. “The answers to some questions cannot be read. They must be lived."

Another silence.

Then Hokoriel spoke very softly. "When all three fragments are reunited....you will finally learn the ending of Susan's story."

Fred had forgotten how much the sensation of hope hurt. He closed his eyes briefly.

"Then I suppose I'd better get started. But I still don't seem to have much of a plan."

"I think," said Hokoriel, "you already have more than you think. Remember, each of our lives is a story that it is up to us to write. We don't know where that story will end, or even how it unfold. We must simply move a page at a time, then chapter by chapter. Consult the book as and when you need to, it will give you guidance. But you will be writing the story as it is told, so do not expect too much."

Fred looked down at the book, to see if more words had appeared. The next page after the torn page now clearly said:

Part 2 - The Minotaur of the Mythos Islands

That sounded interesting. And very tangible. Clearly he had to meet up with some sort of mythical beast. And surely there could not be many minotaurs to chose from on the Mythos Islands. So his first task was clear - he must go and find the minotaur. He was disappointed though to see that subsequent pages were still completely blank. However, How hard could it be to find a minotaur? Any self respecting minotaur must have built a decent reputation - so it would be well known, how and where to find it. For the first time on Aetherium he started to feel he had some control over his future. Not much, but some. Looking up, he saw their walk through the library had returned them to the entrance hall.

“It might be rather handy to borrow a map of how to get to the Mythos Islands. I don’t suppose the geography section happens to be somewhere nearby?”, he asked.

“Concentrate. You tell the story. The map will appear in the book when you need it. I’m afraid the library is now closed,” was Hokoriel’s reply. And with that the librarian started to gradually dissipate.

Disappointed, Fred walked towards the great oak doors. Just before leaving he turned.

"Thank you for your help, and of course for the book."

What was left of the librarian, which was most of his torso and arms, bowed. "It is what librarians are for. I hope you will bring it back when it is completed. There will be a fine I’m afraid if you do not."

Fred stepped outside. The evening air felt cooler than before. He looked down at the book beneath his arm. Its cover was still blank. Only now, as the last light caught the leather, faint letters slowly appeared.

THE BOOK OF THREE QUESTS

Fred looked back towards the library. For a moment he thought he saw dust drifting through the upper windows like sunlight caught in motion. Then the front doors closed by themselves.

Outside the library Fred could see a map starting to appear on the next pages in the book.

Inside the library, behind the heavy oak doors, the shelves started dissolved into drifting clouds dust. The galleries faded. The reading tables vanished. Hokoriel's robes continued to unravel into innumerable of glittering particles that circled silently through the air, swirling and entwining themselves until, at the centre of the empty hall, there stood the Princess. She watched the closed door for a long time. A faint smile touched her face.

"He'll do," she said, perhaps only to the shadows around her.

The remaining dust gathered briefly around her like affectionate birds returning to a familiar tree. Then it settled once more upon the waiting books. Somewhere, deep within the silent library, a new book appeared. Another story had begun.

Chapter 6: The Minotaur in the Maze

POV: 3rd person, close (Fred)

Fred travels with the Snow Dragon to a labyrinth.

Here lives a creature inspired by the Minotaur, but instead of brute force it is a guardian of forgotten stories.

To escape, Fred must tell a story never told before.

This reflects:

- AI training
- human creativity.

He succeeds by telling the story of a world that creates stories to feed another world—becoming the first human to truly understand the system.

He obtains the First Fragment.

Chapter 7: The Intervention of the Cardinal

Chapter 8: The failure at Yggdrasil

Chapter 9: The Princess Writes a Story

Chapter 10: The Return to Yggdrasil

Chapter 11: The Image in the Mirror

Chapter 12: The Bed in the Hospital

Chapter 13: The Library in the University

Chapter 14: The Saving of Susan

Chapter 15: The End of the Story