

# The Engineer, The Princess and The Snow Dragon

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## Chapter One: Snakes and Ladders

It was three in the morning. Deep down on the Piccadilly line, the last trains had groaned and moaned their 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

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 fuff 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.

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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 Two: Unto the Castle

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 among the snowy peaks of some strange place, he would certainly 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 he 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 power 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 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 gather 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 its 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’.

Tharg 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 where 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 Cardinal's 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 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 in 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 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?’