

The Other Side of Magik

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The First Tale of The Mirror Worlds

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A mirror is a strange thing.

It seems to show us exactly who, and what, we are. But a mirror can deceive. For one thing, everything in it is back-to-front. For another, no sound escapes from it; its silence is its great secret.

Sometimes, on dark nights, when looked at out of the corner of the eye, a mirror may show images of things that have nothing to do with the room in which it is hung. Flickering shapes. A hint of movement. A suggestion, even, that there is something else beyond the glass.

What if, just for a moment, there *were* something there – a glimpse, maybe, of another place - another world? What would it be like?

Imagination can conjure up many scenarios, but one thing is very certain: some things in the world beyond the mirror would be entirely the opposite of what we know and understand.

So, for example, electricity wouldn't work there - but magik would.

Yet other things would be not too different at all.

Why?

Because mirrors in that other place would also reflect.

And what would they show?

You.

Compendium of the Laws of Magik and Reasoning

The Base Laws

Causality	Causes and their effects
Proximity	Nearness in time, space, and order
Paradox	Contradictions of reality
Probability	The likelihood of things

The Higher Laws

The Yggdrasil Codes	Earth harmony
The Artifice Mechana	Interaction of all devices and constructs
Equilibrium of Calculus	Higher mathematics and harmonics
Zodiacal Harmonies	Astronomy and astrology
The Roman Canticles	Ecclesiastical and religious occultism
The Gnostic Laws	Self, belief, and cant
The Osirian Laws	Parameters of life and death

Prologue

Once...

...long ago, in the frozen, far-off northern lands of Outer Thule

...a dragon told the most amazing secret to a magician. They were playing cards at the time, and the dragon was losing. Dragons and mages have little use for gold and the like; the coin - and purpose - of their game was information. And the mage was winning, not because he used glamours and conjurations of magikal mien to aid him, but because he was a good player of the cards and the dragon wasn't.

Besides, the skeins of magik unravel in the presence of dragon-folk. Spells and such can take on unusual aspects around them - usually with awful consequences. That's why dragons inhabit the cold, northern wastes and men don't - there are no conflicts of interests.

As forfeit for losing, the secret was divulged, thus...

...the world that men knew and were familiar with was the mirror-image of another. And in that other reality, some things were very different indeed.

For one thing, the science of magik did not work, and strange new ideas and forces shaped that world. Oh,

the heavens were still the same, the stars occupied their usual places and the Moon still graced the skies, but this other world was opposite in all things, and mechanical and scientific contraptions ruled the day; there was no knowledge of the wonders and mysteries of the natural power of magik. On that world, man never knew what had been lost - or never gained.

Until...

...until someone found a way to cross over into it - to open up a doorway between them. A doorway that upset the order of things.

Such was the rarity of the disclosure, and so profound the tale, that the mage recorded everything in the runes of his craft and sent what he had learned to the great colleges of magelore for their examination. And for many years great thinkers and magicians wrestled with the tale, seeking to find the moment of access. For then, once knowing the time and place, a formula of power - spell, if you will - could be crafted to delve into this mirror world.

The lore and legend of the craft of magik was sifted for clues and history was searched and dissected for any evidence of something out of place; and slowly, very slowly, over many generations, the little pieces began to add up. There were stories of people who didn't belong - strangers who would appear in the midst of a battle, or at the height of a storm when the lightning was flashing - all of them found near ley-lines or barrows or henges, places of mystery and power. And these strange ones all shared

the same disturbing ability - they were unaffected by magik. Not like dragon-folk were unaffected, but totally indifferent to it! They were impervious to the direct application of constructed magik. More! The structured symbolisms of mathematics, harmonics, philosophical paradigms and mental imperatives that are the building blocks of the entire range of thaumaturgical disciplines that make up the Arts Arcana - known as Magik in the common tongue - would fall apart in the presence of these strange ones! Such power! To be able to nullify magik! Nullify - null. Ahhh. The last clue fell into place. Null.

Legend said there had once been a book so dire and fell that it had been proscribed and damned for all time. A book so dangerous that none could be trusted with its secrets. The Book of Null. Written during the great Druid convocation at Long Meg, in the days when the power of Rome held the land.

The doorway, ancient texts reported, to another world.

From one end of the Angle Isles to the other, the search ran its course. From the Pictish highlands to the Cymric valleys, across the lowlands of Angland and down to the brooding cliffs of Tintagel, throughout the mist-encased realm of Erin's Isle mages sought the book. Dark vaults, in remote colleges and abbeys and seminaries, were searched; the great Druidic establishments and centres of learning scoured their libraries and crypts, and ancient rune-stones were cleaned and examined.

And it was found. Encased in a sealed leaden box and buried with others of its kind at the holy centre of learning at Newgrange, in Erin's Isle.

Now, with the book as a guide, spells could be created that would follow the threads of history back into the past; threads that could be wound back to the moment when the doorway was opened. And at the centre of that moment, where the streams of probabilities met, was - William of Normandy, claimant to the throne of Edward the Confessor.

And in 1066 he set sail to claim what was his.

The Year **1066**

Harold, son of Godwin, Eorl of Wessex, true claimant to the throne of Edward, was a man of renown and courage. Young, brave, well-studied in the arts of life and war, he faced such as no man in Angland had ever faced before. To the north, his venal and vicious brother Tostig had invited the Viking king Hardrada to join with him to unseat Harold and share the spoils of the Isle.

Across the water in Normandy, William readied his long-boats and his barons to invade the southern shore, certain that Harold's citizen militia would prevail not against his seasoned and professional army.

Harold's seers and mages knew the reality of the situation. Dire magik would need be employed if their king was to triumph.

And so it came to pass, that a grimoire of terrible power was used. The Book of Null. This was a secret and hidden book. It was a book of awful consequence and that which it called forth brought doubt and confusion to the Norman mages.

The currents of probability began to swirl and roil; and in the mirror-Earth history began to change...

September **25, 1066**

Harald Hardrada, son of Haakon, grandson of Halfdan the Black, was doomed. His shamans and seers had been blind to Harold's movements, and now, in the cold mist of morning, his great skills and courage were as nothing with his enemy on the high ground and a river at his back. Swords and battleaxes were drawn; shields bought up. Hard eyes stared at death from beneath horned battle-helms.

But Harold, impervious now to the arts and guiles of magik, caused Harald, son of Haakon, to kneel before him in homage. It is known that Harold offered his hand in friendship.

Across the tenuous divide that separated realities, another Harold, ghostly and ephemeral, looked down in triumph on the fallen body of his enemy...

September 28, 1066

Word came that William had landed on the southern shore at Hastings and was deploying his army. With a speed of decision that was breathtaking, Harold led both Saxon and Viking forces south. Destiny loomed before them.

The ghostly Harold, firming now in probability, disbanded his army and, gathering around him his loyal bodyguard, sped south to confront the usurper...

October 14, 1066

There was great doubt in the camp of William. A silence had fallen on the land; a silence so profound that his best mages could not penetrate it. Harold was elusive. No word of his whereabouts came to William's ear.

Then, at seven-of-the-clock in the morning, William, Duke of Normandy gazed up from the beach of Hastings where his army was camped in mailed array, and saw his Saxon foes appear as if by magik through the mist; and behind them...

...behind them came a vast hoard of Viking warriors, resplendent with shield and sword and axe, each one beating his weapon to his shield so that a great drumming resounded across the sands - like the heartbeat of an angry world.

The glint of light on double-axe and greatsword reflected in William's eyes and hid the fear within. Without a word, Harold moved towards him, and by ten-of-the-clock, William knelt at Harold's feet, his aspirations, like the blood of his followers, leaching away into the sands of England.

Harold's new levy of citizen militia was no match for the disciplined Norsemen - and soon the last of the Wessex lords lay dead - an arrow through the eye his final epitaph. The iron fist of William began its relentless grip on his new kingdom.

Yuletide **1066**

With pledge and promise the leaders of all the great clans of the Angle Isles assembled in Winchester and offered Harold kingship over the nation of England. From their secret places came those who had kept the ways and gods of old; Celt and Pict and Norse and Saxon all celebrated the new order. And the laws of nature and earth, of fire and stone, of water and sky, of life and death - of magik - were celebrated and honoured across the length and breadth of England.

In the mirror world- the Second Earth of the dragon's tale - a newly-conquered England firmed in reality...

...and history there began a different path.

The Year **2001**

The Book of Null had been hidden for centuries. Banned and proscribed, it had been forgotten in the mists of time. Then, someone found it again - and used it.

Far away, beneath the icy wastes of the North, a scribe of the dragon-folk gazed into a basalt mirror, saw the ripples there that spoke of the disruption of space-time itself and knew exactly what had happened.

Oh no, it said to itself, it's happening again!

ANGLAND

In the North-east of the country of Angland is the city of York.

Outside its ancient wall and not far from the old, rambling town protected by it, stands a row of stately houses. Each one is separate from its neighbour, each one is constructed from grey stone, and all are of two stories. Leadlight windows endow them and manicured gardens decorate them. Stone arches mark their entries and gravel driveways lead from the road to their porticos and doors. Many of the houses have servant's quarters and all of them have a coach-house.

Theolonia Crabbe owned one of those great houses of York. Owned it and resided in it all alone.

She was a tall woman of gaunt eminence. Her clothes were invariably the corporate fashions of white blouse, grey mid-calf skirt and grey jacket, her hair was grey and pulled back in a tight bun and her house was grey. In high circles, behind her back, she was known as the Grey Lady Crabbe. But she was also a woman of prestige and power, and for sixty-three years that power and prestige were her constant companions and the tools of her trade. And Theolonia Crabbe had the highest trade of all.

Theolonia Crabbe was a wizard.

Night-time rain hammered against the lead-light windows and filled the house with a soft drumming sound.

Inside, gaslights hissed in their brackets and their light struggled to hold back the darkness. Wherever the light did touch, it showed the cold austerity of soul-less wealth. The panelled walls and polished floors, the tiles of exquisite design and paintings of sombre mien, the carpets and silverware, all of them lacked the lustre that love and happiness bring to cherished things. As an anechoic room absorbs sound, so too this house sucked up human warmth-leaving behind a travesty of a home.

Theolonia had a job to do. She didn't particularly want to do it - in fact, she loathed what was going to happen, yet she knew it must be done.

Along the landing, midway between the bedroom doors, was a narrow door with a round brass handle and solid hinges. It was a different door to the others in the house. This door led to the attic. Against the wall next to the door was a small half-round plant stand that sported a large candle-holder and candle, and a box of lucifers. With a sureness her calming spell had induced, Theolonia removed one of the lucifers, struck it against the scratchplate on the base of the candle-holder, and lit the candlewick. A light brighter than

the gas lamps threw back the jumping shadows and anyone with half an ounce of magikal ability would have recognised the candle for what it was, a warded flame, extinguishable only by the one who lit it.

The doorknob turned smoothly at her hand and the door opened outwards on well-oiled hinges. Polished wooden stairs climbed steeply upwards into the night. Her heels boomed solidly as she followed the candle's light.

Banisters guided her upwards and then she stood at one end of a narrow walkway between the rafters and trusses of the high-pitched roof. The beat of rain on the slate was louder here and the gurgle of water in the gutters was melody to the rain. On either side of the walkway the paraphernalia of generations was piled up like so many unwanted memories and the dust of ages lay thick and silent around.

The end of the walkway was occupied. Barely visible in the shadows, a tall oval mirror stood there in its frame, shrouded and silent like a headless man. Before it a small stool stood as if kneeling in homage. Silently Theolonia made her way the length of the attic and, brushing her long skirt to one side, sat down.

Her free hand reached out for the shroud...

...long ago, when she was a child, Theolonia had been told half of a truth - she had a twin! A brother. And he had died at birth. That was the half truth.

Long years later, when she was firmly ensconced in her Magehood and Wizardship, the other half of the truth came out of its hidden place and her dreams began. In them

a soft voice called in loving terms, claiming kinship, asking for peace; a small voice, as that of a child, asking for a home, shelter - protection. A voice asking to come in - just for once - only for a moment.

In her dream state she had acceded, a phantom request in un-warded sleep agreed to by an unconscious mind. *Yes. Come In.*

Then the horror; then the truth - the full truth. *It was him! The dead one! Her other self!*

HER BROTHER!

...his mind fleeing, all those long years ago, within minutes of his birth

...leaping to the darkest corners of her mind as the surgeon recognised him for the evil creature that he was and untied the umbilical cord to bleed him to death.

...hidden, his essence of a mind burrowing its way into her infant sub-conscious, alone and secret.

...waiting, a hidden voyeur following her progress to the peak of her powers; seeking a way to reclaim that so cruelly taken from him - *LIFE!* Yearning across the years for the feel of flesh and blood - *his own flesh and blood! HIS OWN BODY!*

Once he had been allowed in, he could not be removed. She was his sister, they were blood - were-blood! Her powers could not dislodge him, he was too powerful. And in that power, Theolonia recognized her brother for what he truly was - a mandrake.

Mandrake! Natural wizards they were, of fierce and powerful magikal ability that gain their power by feeding

on the sins and pain of the corrupt. Of all the creatures that make up the pantheon of those gifted with the Talent, from the greatest wizard down to the lowly apprentice mage, the mandrake commands the most awe and fear. They are rare, and in the underworld of corrupt magik the arrival of such a one is heralded by portents and omens. Acolytes dare to dream of the day such a great one will lead them to destroy the pillars of civilized magik and return to them the power and conquest of ancient days.

The pages of history are littered with the ruins of the mad ambitions of mandrakes.

Her brother could not take over her mind, she was too powerful; but she could not remove him, he was too deeply embedded in her mind. Theolonia could not seek help from her peers because a mandrake must be put to death - and that meant her own life would be forfeit.

Madness beckoned, so a safety valve was needed. Theolonia would block all access to her thoughts, but she would provide a doorway between their minds; one where she and Horatio could speak to each other. A doorway, via the mirror, where her brother could look out on the world.

Her sibling needed knowledge - needed answers. Theolonia would help him. She would let him take over her body - not often - just once in a while - so he could delve into her realm - and find what he needed to gain a body. Those times she stayed hidden deep within her own mind, alone and reclusive.

They became part of her life and her colleagues grew used to Theolonia's eccentric moments and odd little ways. A society more adept at the psychiatric doctrines may have recognised severe personality disorder and not a little paranoia, but in twenty-first century Angland, those practices were in their infancy.

Theolonia Crabbe desperately needed to be rid of her brother - at any price. Months of research and searching proved fruitless as to a solution. Then, one day, almost by accident, she found a book that showed her exactly what was needed.

Her brother needed a receptacle for his mind - for what passed as his soul. He needed a body - a living body. But it had to be a very special body. A body, the book suggested, that was impervious to magik. A body not of this world.

Thanks to the book, Theolonia had discovered how to get one - and where to get it from. And now she had a plan - a very, very devious plan.

Her bony, sinewy fingers tugged at the shroud and it soughed to the floor like shedding skin.

Within the glass, framed in wood, sat the image of Theolonia. It stared back at her, and she saw how strong her face was for all its pinched looks - fierce eyes slightly sunken and hooded by grey brows - gaunt cheeks high and proud - wide, thin lips below an aquiline nose - a jutting chin.

It was a face of power.

As she gazed at her image, the mirror clouded at the edges and the depth of field vanished; now her image

seemed to be alone in a tunnel that had no end. Her face in the mirror began to change. The nose lengthened and the curve became more of a hook; the eyebrows grew thicker and drew together; her skin wrinkled slightly and drooped and her eyes retreated further into their sockets. Yet they blazed brightly with a cold fire. A trim, short-haired beard of grey grew down the jaw; the cheeks and neck were free of hair and there was no moustache. Yellow irregular teeth were framed within dry lips. The two images, one within the mirror, the other without, gazed at each other.

‘Horatio,’ Theolonia said, by way of greeting.

‘Sister of mine.’ The voice from the mirror was cold and faint, as if it had travelled a long way. ‘What news of our quest?’

‘Progress as always, brother.’

‘Sixty-three years my soul has waited, Theolonia. Since that first burst of post-natal cognition, to my flight from the doctor’s bloody murder of me, I have graced this earth in bodily form for the grand total of one hour and twenty-two minutes.’ Horatio’s voice dropped to a graven hiss, like steel being slowly drawn over stone. ‘For the remainder of that time, sister dear, I have sheltered in your mind with only the briefest of sojourns in your body. I need to be among the living, sister. The world is waiting for my appearance! The faithful yearn for my arrival. Bring me a living body and bring it soon!’

Theolonia closed her eyes and sighed. The world was definitely not waiting for her brother’s arrival. In fact,

the world would quite happily string him up from the nearest tree if it could get its hands on him. Law and order ruled now and the faithful her brother relied on were an underclass of society that hid from that Law. Her brother, she had realized long ago, was blind to reality - deceived by his own desires and powers. And unwilling to listen. That's what made him so dangerous to her.

Putting aside her thoughts, she recalled the maths and logic of the spell she wanted. The image of it appeared in her mind and with a sub-vocal cantrip she set it in motion. In the clear space between her and the mirror a form took shape. A scroll. The outer edges were mere golden lines and the words inside the space were silver runes - the old tongue - the tongue of wood and mountain - of stone monoliths and dragonships. There was no substance to the scroll, no solid surface for the words to appear on. They hung in the very air.

'The Book of Null,' she said. 'The ancient key to a forbidden gate. The door to a different universe. The way, dear brother, to your salvation.'

'A charlatan's ramblings, you mean. Unproven and unexplainable. Mirror universes and anti-realities. Hah! I know of it.'

'No, Horatio, you don't. Listen!' Her voice was angry. 'I have spent years looking for a way to rid you from my mind. Years! I have scoured every avenue known to Magedom to find that way. Now, finally, here in this ancient book, is the answer.'

‘On the very edge of what we know - on the other side of magik - is where I have discovered our salvation from one another. The body you need cannot be a mage nor anyone possessing the Talent. You would be spotted straight away and there would be no place to hide. When you were born they did not expect you to be able to make the transition into my mind; they thought you dead. Next time, brother,’ she smiled sweetly at his image, ‘they’ll make sure that you are.

‘A normal wouldn’t do either. Someone without the Talent could be scryed upon and located with ease. The minute you began your – activities - you would stand out like a beacon. The only option, the only one that would be completely unsuspected and, frankly, disbelieved, is to use a null. Someone that is impervious to the Talent; someone that defies the very laws of magik.’

There was a slight hesitation in Horatio’s voice. ‘It’s only a theory. What if it fails?’

‘No. It’s more than that.’ Her eyes travelled the length of the scroll. ‘Here.’ She pointed to silver runes. ‘And here. Accounts of the strange ones. Rare notation of their very existence. Confirmation of the truth of the book.’ Theolonia leaned forward on the stool and peered at her brother. ‘There is a world that lies as if on top of this one. As close as the far side of this mirror.’ Her fingernail tapped the glass. ‘It mirrors this world save for one tiny, tiny, thing.’

‘What? *WHAT IS IT?*’

‘Magik doesn’t work there. It is an entire world of null.’

In the mirror a pale tongue licked dry lips. ‘How do we reach it?’

‘The Book tells us. The spell is unique and self-serving. And self-promoting. I have spent months checking the maths. I have reassessed the curved-space geometry and I have tested the temporal formulae. It works.’ Her fingernail again rapped sharply against the glass. ‘I have found a way to send a seeker spell across. It involves swapping two compatible people simultaneously, one from here, one from there. Both can be sent involuntarily. The one from beyond will be your new body, brother dear, and his null ability will protect you.

‘Unfortunately, Horatio, that protection will be fleeting. The few practitioners of the Dark Arts that constitute your underworld are not as powerful as they once were.’ She smiled the sweet smile again. ‘The sheer weight of the Law will bring you down.’

A deep moan issued from her brother’s lips and echoed around the attic. ‘You toy with me sister! You play me for a fool!’ Spittle flew from his lips. ‘What good this - this - null - if it will not serve me?’

‘Consider this, brother.’ Now came the wonderful part of her plan. ‘The book tells us that those from the other world are impervious to magik, yet it also tells us that each remains the same. The one from here will be exactly what he was.’

The mandrake’s eyes cleared as he thought through the implications of Theolonia’s words. ‘So - if a mage crossed over he would still be a mage.’

‘Yes. And you would have a whole world at your feet, Horatio. A whole world!’

‘Ah, sister. How devious your mind. I will inhabit this new body you bring me, and then you will swap us back again. Brilliant.’

‘A whole world. Remember that. And it will be all yours.’

‘What of my followers?’

‘A distraction. A smoke screen to cover your leaving.’ She saw doubt in his eyes. ‘Surely a few miserable lives are worth your conquest of a new world?’

‘Yes. Yes. You are, as usual, sister, correct. How do we...?’

‘Go about it? Simple. A seeker spell with find them. I will split the spell and send one part into this strange world and one part here. When they each find a match, the spell will be reconciled, and here, through this very mirror, our victim will arrive.’ She snapped her fingers and the scroll disappeared. ‘And you, Horatio, will then have your new body.’

‘How soon?’

‘All in good time,’ she told the apparition. Theolonia Crabbe picked up the shroud from the floor and walked towards the mirror with it stretched out before her. She tossed the shroud over the mirror and the image of her brother, both in the mirror and in her mind, disappeared.

Entering her ground-floor study, Theolonia went straight to the great desk that was a family heirloom; a thrice-great grandfather had commissioned its manufacture and carving on the profits of some business coup in the east. Scenes of oriental mystery were worked into the wood and mother-of-pearl and onyx were the eyes and talons of the dragons of far Cathay that coiled around the legs.

In a drawer in the desk, warded to high heaven against any hand but hers, was the key to her escape. It was the doorway to her future. Theolonia sat down, and pulled open the drawer. Reaching inside she pulled out two thin, small square packages wrapped in soft white linen and placed them on the desk. One package was twice as thick as the other. The smaller was the true book, and it had been hidden away in the family vaults for generations; hidden under her very nose. Her hands trembled slightly as slowly she turned back the folds of linen of the thicker package one at a time, revealing two identical hard, dark books, each bound with ten silver rings. They were both simulacrums - copies of the true Book of Null.

Theolonia lifted up one of the copies and her fingers idly stroked the cover of the book; there was a faraway look in her eyes. The Book of Null; doorway to her own future. And safety. She was under no illusion whatsoever that she would not be under threat once her brother had his own body.

A small mirror stood on the desk and propped before it was a sheet of clear glass exactly the same size. Theolonia

opened the second book before them and the runes she had shown Horatio moments before were displayed in reverse; but on each page, between the texts, a line of golden runes blazed back at her from the mirror. This was the spell that would bring what she sought.

Very carefully, Theolonia traced the runes on the glass with her fingernail as she softly chanted the words, and as she spoke, the runes of the spell appeared on the surface. Hardly daring to breathe, Theolonia repeated the process with the mirror, but this time the book slowly began to disappear. Rune by rune it faded away and its ghostly outline re-appeared on the glass, the runes within faintly visible.

Now both surfaces held the spell. A drawer produced a small silver tuning fork, one she had crafted to resonate to the very spell itself, and with great deliberation Theolonia tapped first the mirror, then the sheet of glass. They echoed the ringing of the fork. Now the spell was armed.

‘Seek the one,’ she whispered, ‘and seek the match...

‘...leave this world, and find my *catch!*’ Carefully Theolonia rose and crossed the floor of her study, careful to keep her eye on the spell. By the fireplace stood a large brass temple bell and her hand found the wooden striker tethered to it. With one sharp swing she struck the bell and as its deep, resonant peal echoed throughout her house, Theolonia whispered the final word of the spell...

Begone!

At that word, in the mirror, the ghostly book and the spell in contained faded into the glass, until only a grey

outline remained. In the sheet of glass, the words of the spell fell through, disappearing into the room; rising into the dark, fading as they went.

When the last of the spell had faded, when Theolonia was finally certain that her search in the strange world beyond the mirror was truly underway, she collapsed into her chair, weak and drained of all energy. Slowly she rewrapped the second copy and put it back alongside the original. Theolonia wasn't sure why she had made two copies, but something deep down inside had told her - *it wouldn't hurt - who knows, I might need it again.*

As Theolonia's spell penetrated the mirror, it altered, for a brief moment, the very fabric of space and time that separated the two worlds. A small alteration that caused a small ripple in the harmony of the earth. And far away...

...below the ice of the Arctic wastes of Outer Thule, deep inside the sculptured rock halls of their realm, a young scribe of the dragon-folk peered into a monitor and knew immediately that some-one, somewhere was tampering with reality.

The creature stood six feet tall on raptor-like legs, legs that were long and slim and designed for running. The head was almost like that of a sea-horse, with a long, fine jaw that ended in a prehensile muzzle, and there were two saucer-

shaped eyes that were eerily human-looking. It had two small holes for ears and its rather large head was elongated and smooth. A long graceful neck curved down to a chest that bulged beneath very narrow shoulders and two arms hung from those shoulders. Its skin was formed from fine, tiny scales that glistened in iridescent hues of green. A tabard of yellow material, with pockets at the front, hung around the neck and reached below the knees.

The scribe's providence was the care and keeping of the monitor that measured the heartbeat of the world. That monitor was an enormous circular basalt mirror polished to absolute flatness and blackness, as only the dragon-folk can achieve, and it floated in a bath of mercury. Around the circumference a bronze ring marked out the compass points of the world, and around that a vernier fine-tuned the compass. The surface was resonating as drops of water resonate in a pool and to experienced eyes it told a story.

The creature cast a worried eye at the black mirror, and then went to find someone that would know what to do.

ENGLAND

'Daniel!' his mother shouted up the stairs. 'Hurry up or you'll be late for school!'

The voice was designed to penetrate the pillows that he had carefully placed over his head to drown out the noise of the traffic outside. *That was the first call*, he reasoned. *There'll be at least two more before I have to get up.* Cold, rain-washed light poured through the thin curtains on the window and endowed his room with an unappealing chill.

He snuggled down tighter. 'Daniel Royce! Come down now!' *That's two*, he thought dreamily - *another minute to go.* He sighed in contentment; a minute when you really need one is worth ten minutes any other time, he figured. Amazingly, he managed to drift off, despite the traffic and the time.

'Come down now or I'll send your father up to get you!'

That was it; the final ultimatum. *You'd think*, his woolly thoughts said, *they'd be more understanding of an only child.* With a massive effort of will, Daniel, Danny to everyone except his mother, made his tall, lean body crawl out of bed and stumble to the toilet. Semi-alert, he then directed it into the bathroom and performed the morning ritual of

splashing the minimum amount of tepid water on his face and then brushing his teeth in world record time.

The face in the mirror that looked back at him was now ready to face the world; honest dark green eyes, a gaunt face framed by waves of black hair that defied comb and brush, and a cocky smile were just the tools he needed - he peered closer...

'No spots! That's great,' he told his image. 'You're still too handsome for your own good.' He grinned to himself then went to throw on some clothes.

Downstairs, his mother was busy in the kitchen. 'Did you get your homework done, Daniel?' Gloria Royce was forty-ish, tall-ish, dark-ish, medium build-ish and worked for an accountant. She was meticulous and orderly, traits she had totally failed to pass on to her son.

'Yeah, it's OK,' he lied, as he poured milk over his flakes and started shovelling them into his mouth. *Homework? Damn! I forgot. I'll do it at recess. No-one will know.*

The kitchen table he sat at reflected his mother's passion for *neatness*, as it was always set perfectly, just like the dining table in the other room. Just like their house; a nice, two-storey semi-detached terrace, left hand of the pair, with its own garage on the side and a border of privet hedge on three sides. It was built of red bricks and had a grey slate roof. All the windows front and back were bay windows. There was a brick-paved path and a crushed stone driveway.

His room was upstairs at the rear. He had a double bed, a built-in wardrobe -with mirrored sliding doors - that had

a shelf for his CD player. There was a TV set on a small stand by the foot of the bed. A tall, thin stand held his collection of discs including some *really* old stuff like Pink Floyd, Procul Harem and the Stones. His window was on the left of the bed and ran the length of the wall. And along the ledge of that window was his prized collection of books. Not just any books; Danny Royce was fascinated by fantasy and science fiction. In those stories were his own dreams and fantasies; in them he could escape the drab and the boring. In them he could see visions of his own desires.

The room was his sanctuary; from the world, the drab, the future. With his evening ritual of television on, headphones on and book opened, he could relax back against the pillows and float away to places that weren't like this one; where things were - well - different.

'Isn't it sports day today?' his father asked, as he came in through the kitchen, cup of tea in one hand, his tie in the other. Arthur Royce was an older version of his son, but with enough extra weight that actually made him look trim and fit, and just a shading of grey at the temples. His hair, unlike Danny's, had been shortened and trained to the brush and comb. There was a grin on Arthur's face, because he knew how much his son loathed sports; in fact, his son was misplaced in so many of society's pigeonholes. It was a disarming sort of grin that said he understood Danny's feelings but, hey - don't worry. And it worked, because Arthur Royce was a salesman with that unique gift that salesmen have been trying to fake since selling began -

honesty. It stood out from him like beacon and he was the best motor vehicle salesman in Manchester.

‘Don’t tease,’ Gloria gently admonished her husband. This was a morning ritual between the two of them. Her husband had a pragmatic, practical view of the world, whereas she instinctively knew that their son had a more sensitive side to him. And it needed careful handling. ‘You know he doesn’t like sport, and it’s not as if he’s going to have a career in it, is it, Daniel?’ She ruffled Danny’s hair in that annoying way mothers do. Gloria Royce saw a shining future for her one and only offspring.

Danny cringed inside. *Oh, no! The career thing again!* ‘No Mum,’ he replied, sincerity lighting up his eyes, ‘University next year, then into human resources or management.’ That was the stock, non-specific answer designed to stop further probing. Quickly he shovelled food into his mouth on the theory that you can’t be expected to answer questions with your mouth full, ergo, you won’t be asked any.

His father listened to the exchange with the same benign expression he always used when his wife started on about Danny’s career. But Arthur, “Roller” to his friends, saw through it all. You don’t sell to people without being able to read people, and everyone was an open book to Arthur Royce - it was a special gift he had. *Thank God he’d never told Gloria!* But he would wait and watch, and help where he could. In time, Danny would put his hand out for help or advice and he would be there. His son, Arthur told himself, was a clever lad, who, for some reason, chose to hide his

talents and maturity; who needed something to jolt him out of his lassitude so he could develop into - what? What did Arthur want for his son? What did *Danny* want?

School for Danny Royce was a grey, concrete, post-modern polytechnic that epitomized the worst of all things architectural and seemed to have little to do with the encouragement of learning. His uniform was an uninspiring blue blazer with grey pants and a red and grey striped tie. The school grounds were concrete and bitumen and the playing field was, depending on the weather, either a dustbowl or a quagmire that separated the school from the canal and the railway marshalling yards beyond.

Danny Royce was locked in to a culture where the bland and drab became the mediocre and normal; where fighting against it was not cool. But, deep down, he *could* think and he *could* achieve things - but - by doing so, he would stand out - be different - be a target! And if he survived *that*, he had reasoned, he would be expected to keep it up! To achieve more and more! *No*, he told himself, *just get by, mate. Look after yourself. See which way the wind's blowing. Something will come up. There's plenty of time.*

His new bike was testimony to his new-found ethos. His parents had promised it in return for favourable exam results, yet he had told his friends and schoolmates that

his parents had given it to him in an attempt to buy his affection - and they believed him.

Danny's environment was the English industrial hinterland of twenty-first century Greater Manchester, and that was his whole world.

Everywhere else had to be worse, he'd decided long ago, or else he wouldn't be where he was; he was probably being punished for sins in some past life. Danny Royce was sixteen years old and cynical enough for twice that.

There was one bright light in his life - Emily Coburn. She attended the same school, and they were *sort of* going together - which was perfect for him because the casual indifference of the relationship deflected prying eyes - and questions. Danny Royce was not an easy target. But sports days changed all that.

Four times a month, Danny got to demonstrate how hopeless he was at sport - any sport.

Mr. Chowdhri was tall, dark, lean, fit and taught sport. Danny wondered sometimes if there was a sport his teacher wasn't good at, but he couldn't think of one. Mr. Chowdhri coached the running team, the soccer team, the basketball team, gymnastics, the girls' hockey, and netball. To make matters worse, he was always enthusiastic and upbeat, no matter how bad you were; he believed in you. Danny liked him.

'... and Royce,' Mr. Chowdhri was saying. 'Join Oldham and Culthorpe on the blue team. Right. Let's have a good game.' Danny shuffled across the soccer pitch to where

the two nominated boys waited. He saw the contempt in their eyes from thirty feet away and could almost read their thoughts - *the top players in the school saddled with a dead-beat like Royce*. Doesn't take much, Danny told himself, to read minds that small, anyway.

'Don't get in the way,' Barry Oldham hissed at him as they walked to their side of the pitch. Oldham was the school bully and he was big, blonde, solid and tough. 'Play at right-full-back and stay there!'

The sports field was Oldham's arena; here he played his games of domination and control, here he dispensed misery to those who displeased him or rewarded the faithful. But not everyone fell under his spell - one in particular got under his skin. *And I can do it without confrontation, too*, Danny reminded himself, as he gave Oldham a wide smile and a mock salute. Two years ago they had had a set-to behind the bicycle shed - the outcome had been inconclusive. Doubt obviously reigned in Oldham's mind, but Danny couldn't care less. He certainly wasn't going to revisit the experience - but he certainly wasn't going to pretend he wouldn't.

Grinning despite the wind and the cold, in his uncomfortable boots and floppy shorts, in a shirt way so big that it let the chill wind gust up it, and with his elbows, knees and thin arms and legs seemingly uncontrolled by his brain, Danny sauntered away to obey; he could feel eyes boring into his back.

Basketball was worse. There was nowhere to hide. You had to actually *do* something. Something neat, he'd worked out long ago - like, specialising in fouling by not being able

to get out of the way in time; like missing the hoop no matter how many shots you had at it or how near to it you were. Luckily they saved basketball for the afternoon so that he could clear off for home straight afterwards.

In the evenings he rode his bike around the streets delivering the local paper, his music player belting away through his earphones; and on Saturdays he worked for his Dad at the car-yard he managed. Danny's job was to detail the cars; washing, polishing, vacuuming the interiors. He liked that job. There was something in the shape and feel of the metal. Something tactile. And he didn't have to concentrate too hard while he did it. His mind could wander a little; daydream, even. The jobs paid for the CD's and books he bought, most of them from the half price swap-shop, and left some over for movies and Emily. Actually saving money was an alien concept.

But he needed the books and the music. They offered a calming space in the world he was so uneasy with; they brought solace and refuge. He needed Emily too, otherwise, at sixteen and without a girlfriend, he'd be definitely un-cool. The formula seemed to work both ways.

Above the world that Danny knew, there is an astral plane, a plane visited by very few. Fortune tellers and new-age gurus tell of it in the imprecise way of the ignorant; psychologists and writers of books on the subject treat it as a means to their own gain and clergy and philosophers ignore it entirely - yet true mystics, natural healers and native shamans *know* it's there - they *use* it.

To the true believers, the mind can travel this plane; unseen and unknown, the mind is free to roam the vastness of this astral landscape and seek enlightenment.

Something else now travelled this astral plane, and this something sought not enlightenment...

...it sought a soul.

The spell spiralled out from the hole between realities and with the speed of thought scoured the mindless puddle of auras that patterned the astral plane. Millions upon millions of bland, drab, neutral colours lay below; true colours of bright minds were there, but they were as lilies on the pond, few and thinly spread.

There was only one colour that was right, only one aura that would fit.

Only one - and that one was - was - there!

The spell slowed, hovering over one place - *yes - this one!* Slowly it descended...

...over the sleeping form

...its ghostly message fading into the mirror it found there

...then it collapsed, reverting as it did so to a small, worn book that fell to the floor, its job done.

Rain bled out of the evening sky and seeped down Danny's bedroom window like a continuous slow blink. The world vanished beyond the pane, only the dim outlines of the roofs across the back gardens hinted that there might be more to the universe than his room. But the room was warm and the CD throbbing away was a new one and Emily Coburn was sitting on the end of his bed reading the CD cover and nodding her head in time with the beat. It was late afternoon and this was a normal way for them to get over the day. Sometimes they went to Emily's house, sometimes to Danny's.

Emily was medium height, slim and one month older than he was; she had very short blonde hair and a liking for Gothic make-up and silver ear studs. And diamond nose-studs. She had pale blue eyes, bright blue nails and wore shapeless, baggy jumpers and pants.

Everything she wore hid everything she was.

Danny was lying face down on the bed with his head towards the foot of the bed, reading. His undivided attention was on the story of a world that was shaped like a disc, which rode on the backs of four elephants, which in turn stood on the back of a great turtle.

Part of Danny's mind heard the music, and another part took in everything the book had to offer...

...someone's watching me...

He could feel it, there was definitely someone watching him. Just in front of the bed, slightly to his right was the mirrored slider door. In it he could see the reflection of his bedroom door... it was shut. The hairs on his neck prickled.

...I can feel eyes on me

He looked at Emily, but she was totally focused on the CD. Then, something fanned over him - like a faint breeze - his skin crawled with goose bumps - a shiver ran down his spine - vertigo gripped him for a brief second - and there was a strange itch behind his eyes...

...then it was gone. Everything was normal again. *What caused that?*

Emily tossed the CD cover to one side and twisted around to look at Danny. 'I'm bored,' she announced, with a pretend pout. 'Let's go to a movie.'

'Mmmm mmm,' he replied, still holding his book as he looked around the room. Everything seemed in place.

Emily reached over and took the book from him. 'Movies,' she demanded.

With a deep sigh Danny rolled over and sat up. Everybody, he moaned to himself, always wants to - he caught a glimpse of something in the mirror. Something odd. He twisted his head to look at his door, and then turned back to the mirror.

'Em,' he said quietly, 'look in the mirror.'

His girlfriend lifted her eyes to the wardrobe door and frowned. 'What am I looking at?'

‘The wallpaper. The gas-lamp. See them?’

‘Wallpaper? Gas-lamps?’ What’s he getting at, she asked herself.

Danny looked back at the wall and door of his room and then back into the mirror. The image had gone, his own room was back. ‘What the hell *was* that?’

‘What? What are you doing, Danny?’

He shook his head. ‘I know it sounds weird, but just then, in the mirror, my room was different. There was a floral wall-paper on that wall,’ he pointed to the image of his room, ‘and just along from the door there was a bracket sticking out with a gas-lamp on it

‘Can you see it now?’ There was concern in her voice, because deep down, beyond all the cool and posturing, she really did like Danny - and this wasn’t like him at all.

‘No. It’s gone.’

A thought crossed her mind. ‘Danny. Have you been - you know - taking anything?’

‘Like what?’ Did she mean - ‘You know I don’t *take* anything.’ Emily breathed a sigh of relief. There were so many stories of onset adolescent personality disorders, some triggered by substance abuse. Too many people she knew took medication just to cope. ‘Maybe it’s the books, Danny. You do read an awful lot of that weird stuff.’

‘Yeah.’ His eyes were still fixed on the mirror, but nothing happened. ‘Yeah. You’re right. Let’s go to a movie.’

Danny Royce was developing a twitch.

It wasn't something he particularly wanted, but - the last couple of days - things were starting to appear - suddenly - jumping out at him from unexpected places. They always appeared in mirrors or reflecting surfaces, they always caught him off guard. Images. Flashing seconds of something else - *somewhere else!* Like the bedroom with the gas-lamps. He'd seen that several times. He was getting nervous. He didn't know who to talk to. And he was certain that Emily had noticed - the way she kept looking at him out of the corner of her eye...

'Fancy a lift to school?' his Dad asked as he came in to the garage and broke Danny's reverie.

'What?'

'School. It's raining.' Arthur pointed to the bike his son was holding. 'You'll get wet on that.'

Rain was kind to Danny. It softened some of the hard edges of his world, and muted sound. Lights were reflected and amplified in fractal disharmony - perfect for when you're going mad, he thought.

'Are you OK?' Arthur asked, taking his eyes off the road for a second. 'It's just that you've not been your usual effervescent self lately.'

Beyond the window glass of the passenger's door the world slid by in wet, grey silence. Inside the car Danny felt

safe, although he was careful not to look into the side mirror. 'Yeah. I'm just...' What? What could he tell him? *Hey, Dad! I've just been looking into an alternative universe! Or - Do you know every mirror shows something that's not there! ...off colour. Not feeling well.'*

'That'll soon pass, then,' Arthur said in his jolly, trust-me voice, not believing a word his son had said. 'On a slightly different theme - next year is your final year at school, Danny. Have you made any appointments with the school adviser?'

'For what?' he asked, a sinking feeling in his stomach telling him he already knew.

Arthur peered at the road ahead between the metronomic sweeps of the windscreen wipers. 'Career options. Further training. Apprenticeships. You know, Danny' he smiled, 'the getting-on-with-your-life stuff.'

'We-ell,' he began, slowly, 'I thought to check out the university options...'

'Stop it!' There was a bite to his father's voice, one that instantly commanded his attention. 'This isn't your mother you're talking to. I watch things; I *know* things. It's my job. OK?' The school took shape through the rain. 'I know you hide your smarts. You've done that for a long time - only doing enough to get by.' The car came to a halt and Arthur turned to face his son.

'If you think you mother's picking on you now, wait until you start your last year *without* any plans for the future. And if you can't decide soon, you can come and work with me while we sort something out. Ok?'

‘Yeah. Sure.’ The writing, Danny knew, was well and truly on the wall. He opened the door and stepped out into the rain - into his future.

‘It’s not easy, growing up,’ Arthur said to him before the door closed. ‘But, it’s harder to pretend you don’t want to.’

The images had haunted him for two days. His house didn’t feel safe anymore. The mirrors would show things he didn’t want to see, things that disturbed him. They would appear without warning and only last for a second or two, but they always shocked him. Like the other room that was there sometimes, the one with the wallpaper and gas lamps. And it was always a different time there.

Maybe Emily was right, he argued. If she couldn’t see the things I see, then the chances are they’re not there. And if only I can see them, then I’m going mad. Or I’ve gone mad.

Emily Coburn had left her house with her mother’s negative opinion of her choice of clothes ringing in her ears.

Which pleased Emily a lot. Polished Dr Martins, designer jeans with the knees ripped, grunge tee-shirt and an old scuffed leather jacket were the perfect statement of an individual who spurned crass middle-class values. The nose and ear studs were her statements for the new conformity. Besides, Danny liked her style of clothes.

She felt a lot in common with Danny, because she knew exactly how hard it was to be yourself, to be an individual. Like Danny, Emily came from a comfortable home, but with the added burdens of an older brother and sister, both of whom had gone to grammar school and then on to university. Their selfish sense of achievement and success had placed *expectations* upon her, expectations that were now the focus for her rejection of that sort of life. There was now a *reason* for rebellion and therefore legitimacy in her chosen life-style. She was in the middle - an individual - herself.

A frown crossed her face as she got off the bus near Danny's street and walked the short distance to his door. He'd been keeping to himself these last few days and that worried her. What if he really did see these things he told her about?

She hadn't decided to go out with him because he was handsome and popular; but neither had she thought he was crazy. Emily had decided to go out with him because he was like her and looks weren't an issue. An accessory to her rebellion had been needed; a misfit that accentuated her own individuality. But it hadn't worked out that way, in the end. Grudgingly at first, she had been forced to admit to herself a growing fondness for Danny. Sure, sometimes he was pig-headed and sometimes he was vague; sure he was as casual to her as she was to him. But she was under no illusion as to her own designs in this - it was all an act. A front. A smoke screen. It kept the expectations at bay.

And she knew that Danny was doing exactly the same thing. She *knew* he was smarter than he let on - she *knew* how he had got the new bike. Emily also knew something else was going on, but whatever it was, it eluded her; she couldn't quite put her finger on it, but whatever it was she wanted to know.

Mr. Royce answered her knock on the back door. He was in his Saturday gardening clothes and carried a mug of tea in his hand. 'Aha,' he greeted her. 'Just what the doctor ordered. He's been in his room all morning, moping about.' He nodded towards the staircase. 'Why don't you go up and get him to come down? Tell him there's a cup of tea ready.'

Emily smiled as she climbed the stairs. She liked Danny's father, and she thought that he liked her. Danny's door was shut, so she tapped on it.

'It's me,' she called out. The tinny sound of music on earphones came through and a muffled voice told her to come in. Danny was up and dressed in his normal Sunday attire of faded jeans, badly scuffed track shoes and football training top that desperately needed cleaning or ironing, or both. He was facing his bookshelf, earphones on his head and a frown on his face.

'Hi,' Danny said, over his shoulder.

'Your Dad said there's a cup of tea downstairs,' Emily told him as she sat on the end of the bed.

'What?'

'Your Dad said - oh, take them off!' She pointed to Danny's head and the earphones.

‘Sorry, Em,’ Danny replied with a sheepish grin as he reached to his belt and turned the machine off. ‘I was miles away. I’m trying to find a couple of books that have gone missing.’

Danny had made his bed and the counterpane was rolled down and spread across the foot of the bed. That was what Emily was sitting on. But there was something under the counterpane, something square and hard.

‘Here it is, silly,’ she admonished, reaching under the cover for it. It was indeed a book and she tossed it towards Danny. To her all his books were the same

Danny turned the book over in his hands. The book was surprisingly heavy for something so small; it was no bigger than his two hands and was half an inch thick. The front and back covers were made from leather that had cured to the texture of fine wood and was just as hard, and a brass clasp locked the two covers together. There was no spine to the book, the pages and covers being bound with ten metal rings.

The metal binders looked like silver, and Danny whistled silently to himself. The leather covers were hard and cracked, and any title had long since worn away. There was nothing printed on the front or the back covers.

He couldn’t *quite* make out the title page - the writing looked like - Danny twisted the book to pick up the light - like - runes! He was amazed. This was *old!*

The paper wasn’t paper; it was parchment, brown and fragile with age. The runes, once black, were now faded to grey. His fingers traced the outlines.

‘This isn’t mine,’ he told Emily. ‘I’ve never seen it before. It looks...’

‘What?’ There was a weird look on Danny’s face and Emily didn’t like - light dawned on her. ‘Ah! I get it! First the visions in the mirror, and now a mysterious book.’ She gave him her mock-serious look. ‘You set it up! Admit it! You put that book under the cover so that I would find it. It’s all a set up!’ Emily was actually relieved to think that it might be just that.

‘No, Em. Look.’ Danny sat down next to her. ‘These lines here are called runes. They’re old.’

‘They look like a kid’s stick figures to me,’ she replied. Emily had to admit, though, that the book did look very old and fragile.

Carefully, Danny turned the page. More runes. He flipped through the entire book; there were only about twenty pages, but each one was covered in runes. They made no sense to him. He tossed the open book onto the bed next to Emily.

‘I’ve got a book on Celtic history somewhere,’ he told her as he reached to open his sliding cupboard - he stopped before the mirrored door...

...which showed something in the room behind him

...glowing

...something on the bed

...he turned.

The room was normal. The bed was normal. Emily was normal, but looking at him with a strange expression on her face.

He turned back to the mirror - a golden glow covered the book. Quickly, Danny spun around - but the room was as before. In two strides he had reached the bed and looked down at the book. Only dark grey runes greeted him. Slowly he picked up the book and held it open before his chest. With his heart hammering against his ribs, he turned to the mirror. There he saw himself, with his dark floppy hair hiding one eye, then his eyes moved down to the small, dark book his image held...

...slowly, very slowly, he tilted the book

...showing the pages to the mirror

...slowly they came into view

...and golden light burst from the mirror!

There - before his eyes - in the mirror - were runes of living gold.

The two pages each had one line, and with trembling fingers Danny turned to the next page...

...a line of runes glowed on each of those pages. Hurriedly he flicked through the book. Each page contained one line of golden runes.

And they could only be seen in the mirror!

'Emily! Look at this! *Look at this!*' Danny's eyes and mouth were open wide in amazement.

Warily Emily leaned to one side where she could see into the mirror. There was Danny - and the book - and her face peering around the corner of the mirror - yet there was something else there. Something liquid - around the edges of the mirror - a faint sheen like oil on water - shimmering - the hairs on the back of Emily's neck rose.

‘Daniel!’ She only called him Daniel when she was angry - or frightened. Her mouth and lips for some reason were dry. ‘Daniel - something’s not...’

Danny was now leaning towards the mirror, inches away, eyes glued to the golden runes he alone saw. ‘Em - this is fantastic...’

...the mirror rippled

...as the oily sheen filled the entire surface

...framing Danny like a corona

...pulling at him

...enveloping him

...sucking him forwards in horrific slowness

...into the glass

...into oblivion. Then there was nothing but the strange sheen upon the glass.

The door into somewhere else had been opened. Briefly. Microscopically.

The paths of two universes momentarily crossed and were aligned. Spatial and temporal vortices harmonised into one, and the two physical aspects cancelled each other out.

The spell had done its work in this world...

...the mirror filled Emily’s eyes

...and she found her voice

...and *screamed!*

ANGLAND

Alone in her bed, surrounded by the trappings of her power and wealth, Theolonia Crabbe suddenly sat upright and listened to the night. Faintly, as if it were made a long time ago and a long way off, the deep resonant toll of a single bell could be heard. No-one else in the whole of Angland would be able to hear that sound but her, and she had waited on its signal for a long time.

It was the sound of freedom.

The attic was the same, as was the mirror. The stool had gone.

Theolonia Crabbe waited while the mirror's depth of field reconciled itself with wherever it was in her mind that her brother dwelt. There was a calmness within her that grew out of her absolute certainty that events were finally - *finally* - going as planned.

Slowly her brother's countenance took form out of her own - then he was there - as he always was - old and grey and bitter.

There was no greeting. 'It has commenced, Horatio,' Theolonia began. 'The null has been found. The spell will now reconcile with his counterpart here. We must

now make plans to be there at that transfer; to ensure that you claim your new body.' She was very careful to keep any trace of hope or triumph from her voice. Very careful.

Horatio's own voice was dry and hollow; he sounded tired. 'Where will it occur, sister?' His hard, deep-set eyes narrowed above the hooked nose.

'Here. Through this very mirror.' Theolonia spoke quietly and confidently. Gone was the nervousness and fear. Now that the time was rapidly approaching when she would be free of him, her strength was returning.

'I dare to dream again, sister.' Horatio eyes closed in momentary ecstasy; then they snapped open again. 'What is he like? Is he...' the mandrake licked his dry lips, 'is he...?'

'Young and tall and strong, brother.'

'Where is he?'

Theolonia was amused. 'Curiosity, Horatio? Dear me; that's a new trait.' Her hand raised the shroud to cover the mirror.

'Who is he? Tell me!'

Theolonia dropped the shroud, and her brother disappeared. 'He could be anyone,' she whispered to the empty attic. 'Anyone at all.'

On the western side of England, a long way from the city of York lies the pleasant historical town of Chester. And within that town stands an imposing stone building that is the home of The Ancient and Royal Guild of Apprenticed, Indentured and Journeyman Mages. The Guild looked after the well-being and progress of all junior mages throughout every industry, occupation and profession, because good, hard-working practical mages were worth their weight in gold. Without magik and its practitioners, there would be no modern civilisation.

The twenty-first century couldn't run without them.

Inside that building, in an office, a young man was feeling totally miserable.

Guildmaster Beryl Hedgewycke looked down her long, fleshy nose at the young apprentice who stood in abject misery before her, and said, 'You've failed, Master Aldredge.'

Tall and matronly Beryl might be, with a rather imposing bulk to back up her title of office, but she was not without a modicum of concern for the lad. 'How do you expect to succeed in the communications business if you can't control the basics of magik?'

She settled back in her creaky leather chair, surrounded by the panelled walls of her office and looked at the young man across the polished surface of her old, oak desk. She saw a likeable lad with innocent dark green eyes and a shock of red hair that fell across his face in unruly waves; she saw a tall, well-built lad with a face freckled and fair.

And she saw misery.

Garreth Aldredge *felt* every ounce of that misery. This meeting was not exactly unexpected, because he knew there had been problems at work. His employer had concerns about his Talent, and problems with the Talent were Guild matters. So here he was. If only it was one huge mistake...

'Is there...?' his voice faltered between dry lips and he started again, 'Is there any chance...?'

'...of a mistake?' the Guildmaster finished for him, reading the question in his eyes. 'No. I'm afraid not. Failure of the Talent is just that, I'm afraid - failure.'

Beryl Hedgewycke was a kindly, rumped woman who had guided the new apprentices on their way through the difficult early years of commercial magik for more years than she could remember. There was a large leather-bound book on the desk before her, a very large leather-bound book, thick with the pages of the years and heavy with the expectations contained therein.

It was the Book of Rolls and it was open at Garreth's name.

'The modern world, Master Aldredge,' she continued, 'relies on good magicians to make the simplest of things work. Every aspect of our lives is touched by those of us that can adjust and control the natural earth harmonies and harmonics. How many people,' she asked, conversationally, 'do you think are discovered to have the Talent?'

‘Well, er...’ everything inside his head was in slow motion, like a dream. He wished desperately that he would wake up.

‘Ten percent,’ she told him. ‘Ten percent. And how many of those go on to become competent mages and thaumaturges, do you think?’

‘About half, ma’am,’ he replied, gloomily.

‘Correct. And you had a chance to join that elite band. After another five years work and training in the profession of your choice, and with the assistance of this Guild - who knows? Eh? Who knows what you may have become.’

A large wall clock banged out the minutes of the interview one slow, loud, second at a time. At the window, a cold wind demanded attention.

‘It’s all academic now,’ Guildmaster Hedgewycke continued, her index finger tracing his information across the page, ‘although I am rather perplexed. All the signs of your potential ability are there. The scryer’s reports are quite detailed and positive. Your initial assessment showed that you have strong mental receptors to basic natural magik. All the node-buds of magikal determinism are in place within your mind,’ she turned a page, ‘homoeopathic there - sympathetic here,’ and another page, ‘contagious there - just waiting to develop; scrying, prestidigitation, incantation, higher maths and curved-space geometrics. All there. All waiting, ready to germinate.’

‘But they aren’t, Master Aldredge. They aren’t germinating.’ The Guildmaster steepled her fingers and her eyes seemed to Garreth to take on a harder edge - *as if looking through him - as if looking for mistakes!*

‘It appears,’ Beryl Hedgewycke continued, ‘that your Talent became...’ she consulted the report, ‘erratic. Misaligned. Indiscriminate.’ Her eyes pinned him. ‘Would those words describe the problem, do you think?’

There was no shelter from the baleful glare, and he felt naked and alone. A slim folder lay next to the Book of Rolls, and it too was open. And Garreth knew exactly what that was; his mouth went dry at the sight of it. It was the report to the Guild from his employers, The East Angland Communications and Paraphone Company, Chester division. A report of his mistakes.

Images flashed through Garreth’s mind one after the other, images of the truth of the words...

... placing a paraphone call for Mr. Ellisdale the banker - the large, round scrying crystal strangely murky - the mathematics of the customer’s mandala-sign squirming and twisting in his mind - he saw himself trying to will them into shape - then the horrible scene as Mr. Ellisdale gazed out a rather large, florid-faced Pictish fishwife who just happened to be taking a bath in a copper tub before a roaring coal fire; scrubbing brush in one hand - soap in the other - he still heard the screams.

And there were others just as embarrassing.

Garreth's mouth was dry and words struggled to form. His mind tried to get around what was happening, but only floundered in the attempt. His whole world had collapsed before him and he couldn't understand why. He was Talented! He had the rare chance to be a mage! Not to remain normal! His parents - what would they *think?! They'd been over the moon with happiness when the Office of Magikal Determination had confirmed his acceptance as apprentice and trainee mage - the promises - the plans!*

'Despite the best attentions of your employer and of this establishment,' the voice of his doom continued, snapping his thoughts back to the present, 'your Talent has failed to develop. You have even been allowed to continue your studies three months past the cut-off date because - well - quite frankly Master Aldredge, we do not have too many setbacks. We prefer to give everyone a full and proper opportunity to develop their talents of the Arts Arcana. Failure, Master Aldredge, is not good advertising copy.'

The Guildmaster reached across the desk and selected a quill pen. The pen was one of several that lined up along the front of the desk, each one with its own little glass bottle, each one a different colour. With relief Garreth saw her bypass the red one and pick up the yellow. It made a dry scratching sound as she drew the nib across his name.

'One year of suspension, Master Aldredge. In that time you may wish to seek remedial assistance or you may gain employment in a normal occupation. You do have some ability in the basic natural fields, but I'm afraid they are

not sufficient qualifications to allow us to certify you on a probationary level.’ Beryl Hedgewycke slowly replaced the pen and gave Garreth a wan, sympathetic smile.

‘For what it’s worth, Garreth, our surgeon’s opinion is that you’re suffering from a form of hormonal surge, a growth spurt, if you like, that is common in some pubescent males. This seems to cause a chemical imbalance in the hypothalamus; which in turn causes temporary dysfunction in the sympathetic receptor nodes. A clear case of compromise in the Base Laws, I’m afraid; particularly Causality.’

Hope flared in Garreth’s heart. ‘You mean that I could grow out of it? It’s temporary?’

Guildmaster Hedgewycke slowly lifted the cover of the Book of Rolls and let it fall closed. ‘The prognosis,’ Beryl Hedgewycke said with finality, ‘is not good. We know this condition as Onset Cognitive Depression, and scarring of the nodes invariably remains.’

The leather-bound journal shut with the deep thud that old, heavy tomes acquire over the years. It was the dull echo of doom, and it reverberated around the dusty, panelled walls of the Guildmaster’s office before disappearing forever.

Garreth Aldredge knew within his sinking heart that as the echo disappeared, so too did any idea he may have entertained about succeeding in the business of magik. That future was now denied him. He was now condemned to a life among the normal folk.

Sixteen, Garreth's mind told him, is too young to be a failure.

Guildmaster Hedgewycke shook his hand in a gesture of finality and regret, and words of sympathy were expressed. Garreth hardly heard them, nor the heavy, solid click of the door closing firmly behind him.

Misery attracts misery.

Fat, heavy drops of rain made their way slowly to the ground to complete the cycle of precipitation, but some never made it. They expended themselves on the forlorn figure that walked unprotected amongst them, anxious to comfort him.

Garreth Aldredge was alone. Really alone. That fact was made painfully obvious when he had made the long, lonely walk down the gloomy corridor from the Guildmaster's office to the main door; his footsteps had been the only ones to echo on the ancient boards. His last connection with the Guild, a backpack of his books, was slung morosely over one shoulder.

For eight months he had been coming to the Guild one day a week; there were memories here and friends; fellow apprentices and journeymen who shared the same Talent. Friends who would go on and succeed in their professions and careers; some of them might even be good enough to

be selected for pure Thaumaturgical studies. *Some might even make Wizard!!!*

But those friends now looked out at him from behind the portal of the door, their faces in shadow.

Just because some adolescent hormones disagreed with a few budding homoeopathic magikal paradigms, he told himself, was no reason I should suffer this! It just isn't fair!

'IT'S NOT FAIR!' he shouted at the darkened doorway, but the only response to his anguish was - silence.

The doorway. Un-noticed symbol of his aspirations. Once a week he had passed through it with barely a glance at the carvings above it. Now those carvings stood out for him, for chiselled deep into the stone above the arch of the door were the three icons of the Arts Arcana. A circle represented the Art Temporal, the magik of worldly things. The second icon was the ankh of the Art Arcane, the magik of mystery. The final icon represented the Art Ecclesiastic, the magik of religion and faith, and was simply a single eye.

The symbols seemed to mock him; once so near, now remote and unattainable. He tore his eyes away and turned his back on them. Cold rain trickling down his neck brought his mind away from his misery and he looked about him. Here was Chester's Old Town that he knew so well; the old Twdr-style shops; the granite cobblestones underfoot now slippery with rain; the rattle of the iron-tyred wheels of the hansom cabs and delivery carts; the harsh clatter of horse's hooves.

Garreth settled his backpack on his shoulder, and stepped...

...*PAAAARPPP!!!*

...he jumped back in alarm at the piercing call of the steam whistle, and a local omnibus - a red one, his startled mind noted - rumbled over the spot he had vacated. The driver, sitting up front in a half-open cab and not exactly un-damp himself, shook his fist at him before directing his vehicle into the growing gloom. It moved away with an indignant hiss, clank and pop from the steam engine.

Get a grip of yourself! he told himself. Around about the streets the gas-lighters were going about their business and he knew it was time to get to the station - time to go home. Home. Lower Thatching. Fifteen minutes away by train.

The tears had gone, the eyes were dry and the big lump in the throat swallowed.

All done in the privacy of his room; all done alone, safe from prying eyes. Now if only he could swallow his dinner as easily - but it didn't want to go down and his stomach really didn't want to accept it anyway. He put his fork down and pushed his plate away. The usual family dinner had been a sombre affair, with a lot of uncomfortable silences.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ he told the thin, well-dressed woman across the table from him. ‘I’m just not hungry.’ Mary Aldredge ran a neat, tidy household where nothing was left to chance, one where everything had its place and conformity and acceptance were the pillars of life; surprises and deviations from this routine were not to be countenanced. She had passed on to her son her hair and eyes, but not, she had often lamented, her nature. Her own eyes were full of concern and hidden tears, both for Garreth’s predicament and the social dislocation it would cause if it indeed were to be true.

Mary switched her gaze from Garreth and looked to her left, to her husband of twenty-five years. ‘Edgar,’ she said, in a tremulous voice, ‘is there nothing to be done?’ His father’s fork halted halfway to his mouth. ‘In all the world, Edgar, is there nothing that can be *done*?’ Anguish dripped from her voice and a single tear dripped down her cheek.

Slowly, her husband lowered his own fork and let it clatter onto his plate. He was a tall man of ample girth; a man of stature, his business associates told one another. A sandy moustache and thick, luxurious mutton-chop sideburns lent character to that stature and he peered down on the world through a pair of wire-framed spectacles. He *had* hoped to avoid this because, after all, family business was - well - household business, and *that* was his wife’s department. Still, he thought, one must do what one must do. He leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his waistcoat.

'I've given this some thought, Mary. I'm trying to be a little - dispassionate - yes, that's the word - dispassionate - about it; to look at things objectively. And that's not easy when everyone knows what's happened.' He shuddered at the embarrassment of it all.

Here he was a successful grocer of reasonable means, with a nice stone cottage in one of Lower Thatching's better leafy lanes, a steam buggy in the coach-house, and a wife of good family who knew how to keep up appearances. Two talented children had blessed their union; Sandra and then young Garreth.

Edgar Aldredge's eyes clouded a little as he recalled the delight he and Mary had experienced when Sandra was accepted into Hattie Farnsworth's Musikal Conservatory and Garreth had been indentured at East Anglic. Not only that, but Garreth had the Talent! Latent, Edgar Royal agreed, but present none the less. The future had looked a nice comfortable place. Now this!

'People feel a little awkward talking about it; it's hard to bring the subject up.' His spectacles caught the light from the gas lamp, the mantles reflecting like two glowing orbs, and Garreth could see, courtesy of his Talent, the rainbow effect of the magikal corrective field in the plain lenses.

'Dad, Mum. I don't want to be an embarrassment to you. I know you both work hard; I know how much you've sacrificed so I could be apprenticed.' He looked at their faces and he didn't have to use his Talent to see that the blank

stares hid the disappointment within. He looked from one to the other, their misery adding to his own.

‘My talents are still there, you know. They haven’t disappeared.’ *Why does it feel like it’s my fault - that I’ve done something wrong?*

‘They’ve failed to mature, Garreth,’ his father said, sadly. ‘The report from the Guild was quite explicit; you are limited to the levels you have attained at this time. Use and training will not develop them.’ He pushed his plate away. ‘I want - your mother and I want - you to consider coming to work in the shop. Just while you sort things out. Think about it, will you?’

Garreth nodded, but he could feel panic rising; greengrocing? *Selling vegetables?* ‘Could I be excused from the table?’ Garreth inquired, and to the solemn gaze of his parents made his way to his room. Gas lights lit his way and his shadow flickered across the floral-papered walls of the hall and preceded him up the short, narrow set of stairs that led to his attic room.

There, as he opened the door, were all the comforts of his recently departed childhood; a double bunk bed against the wall, a casement window that let in a square of pale moonlight. Below the window, a narrow chest of drawers nestled up to the wall and carried on its cluttered surface his precious things; his first cat’s-whisker audio-phone, his new-fashion wire-framed sunglasses with non-magikal dark lenses, a small-globe para-vision set with a cracked power crystal, a model steam engine that had defied his attempts

to start it up ever since he was given it as a present for his fifteenth birthday and four books of the Art Arcana that he had saved for. Each tome sported various book-marks that were testimony to his efforts to gain his Magehood.

His eyes travelled to the big wooden wardrobe, to the carved curlicues and dangly handles on the two side doors, to the oval mirror that rested between the doors. It was a very tall mirror, nearly as tall as the 'robe itself, and it reflected the room back to him - a room now all the more dark for the disappointment and misery that had entered with him.

Garreth's thoughts churned, as if his mind was trying to find one that made sense...

...magikal ability was a rare and gifted thing that was usually identified prior to puberty in both boys and girls. He *was* a late starter. Still, six years of training in business, engineering, the law, communications, design or any number of everyday practices that relied on the skeins of magik to operate properly, and he'd only be twenty-two. Plenty of time - nobody failed.

Well, he thought miserably, hardly anyone. 'I really should get a job away from here,' he told his room. 'But where? How?' This was a new world to him, and a little corner of his mind knew that he would have to adapt quickly. Have to grow up. His emotions said - *not yet - wait - something might turn up - it's all a bad dream.*

In the semi-dark, Garreth flung himself onto the rumpled sheets of the bottom bunk and let out a deep sigh,

a sigh that expressed every one of the accumulated set-backs and disappointments of the last seventeen years, a sigh that could have circled the world bringing loneliness and despair to all it met.

‘Damn!’ he said softly, his voice husky from the power of his new-found emotions. ‘Damndamndamndamn...’

Want? came a thought he knew. *Need?* Not a thought exactly, but the feeling of a thought, a mind kindred and close, one available to his Talent. *Want?*

‘Come here, Mr. Toast,’ Garreth called out quietly, and a shadow within a shadow detached itself from under a pile of clothes and slowly waddled over to him. With a shower of loose fur, and to the jingle of a small brass bell, an old marmalade cat joined his master on the bed and fell in a heap next to him. Garreth’s right hand absent mindedly dropped on to the cat’s neck and started to stroke, his eyes blankly looked at the springs of the top bunk just above his head.

‘What should I do, Mr. Toast?’ he asked the night. ‘What would you do?’

... images of dark places came to him; wet cobbles that glistened with the murky light of fog-shrouded gas lamps; noises almost beyond hearing that filtered through the night; blood that dripped from fangs onto the still-warm body of the rodent; the scent of enemies offering a challenge to all he was; her tail moving slowly before his eyes, sinuous and tantalising with the promise of...

‘Stop that, Mr. Toast,’ Garreth admonished. A purr as heavy and deep as an old man’s snore rumbled out of the cat and carried both of them off to sleep.

Cold moonlight streamed through the window and illuminated the two figures asleep on the bed. The hour was very late, and the moon very bright - and Mr. Toast's eyes opened. Something wasn't right. The old cat could feel the wrongness in his bones. Slowly his eyes roamed the room, but all seemed as it should be...

...but the shadows moved a certain way

...and the very air seemed more alive than it should.

Mr. Toast knew with absolute certainty that something was watching them.

The Book of Null completed its ancient duty...

...it had found such a one as called for in the spell

...and had found the counterpart in the reality that was but a breath away

...a reality where so much was the same

...yet where so much was terrifyingly different.

The front door woke Garreth.

The distinctive, heavy *thunk* of someone leaving, followed by the rattle of the mail-flap, cut through his post-sleep doze and brought him fully awake. The old brass alarm clock with

the two bells on top told him it was five to ten and - *five to ten!* Garreth dived out of bed rubbing the sleep from his eyes and trying to pick his clothes up at the same time. *Damn! I'm late!* He caught sight of himself in the mirror and halted; the tall, skinny guy with tousled hair and wrinkled pajamas looked back at him and shook his head slowly.

'You've got nowhere to go,' his reflection said. 'No job - nothing.' Sunlight flooded his room, destroying the gloom of the night and bringing a warmth and cheerfulness that he struggled to ignore.

'I'll tell you what,' he said to the mirror, stabbing his finger at his image, 'I'm not giving in. I've got Talent,' he raked his fingers through his hair and squinted at his reflection, 'I'm young, I can get a job...

'You're dreaming,' he answered himself through the mirror. 'You set your heart on being a Mage. As soon as you knew you had the Talent, you couldn't wait to let all your friends know, could you? Eh?' Garreth groaned at himself, at the memory, at the embarrassment; how he told everybody what a big-shot he was going to be. Maybe, he'd told them, he might even become a wizard. And he remembered them telling him where to put his wizardhood!

The kitchen was prim and neat. Polished wooden floorboards and painted walls made it seem bigger than it was, and shiny glass jars sat on the window-sill, reflecting the sunlight. There was a stone sink, a draining board and a table with four wooden chairs set around it. An ice-chest stood next to the door, and the slow, metered drip of

melting ice sounded softly in the room. The kitchen, like the rest of the house, was also empty. So was the house. Garreth pulled a lucifer from a small stone jar that sat next to the gas-stove and scratched it into life; in seconds he had popped the kettle on the ring and the bread under the grill. Five minutes later he was ensconced in the lounge room in front of the para-vision set, his breakfast on the kaffee table.

The PV was a large scrying crystal that sat on a short wooden column in one corner of the room; a smaller version of it graced the kaffee table. This smaller crystal was covered with a heavy, black-beaded cap, and when Garreth lifted that cap...

...the PV burst into life. In the air above the crystal an announcer appeared reading the news. The picture was a hologram that could be made bigger or smaller and it was the same perspective no matter where in the room the viewer stood. Garreth's fingers rotated the small crystal ball sideways to his right - the station changed; this time it was a children's show. He moved the ball again - a gardening show; again - football. *Aha! Exactly what he wanted.* Now he rotated the ball away from him, and the sound level increased. Garreth Aldredge settled back to watch the game and take his mind off things.

But, ten minutes later, his tea was cold, his toast half-eaten and he had no idea who was winning. His mind was elsewhere, going over and over again the events of yesterday. With a sigh Garreth placed the cap back on the control crystal and the PV shut down. He needed company - he needed to be alone. Garreth Aldredge didn't know what he needed.

His bike was outside the back door and with relief he grabbed it and wheeled it down the side of the house. Sunlight bathed him and the smell of fresh-cut grass assailed him; he felt better already. At the front gate he turned left, in the direction of the old mill pond, and pedalled down the lane. The bike wasn't a particularly fast one, wooden micro-laminates could only be lightened so far and the solid, aerated rubber tyres were wide enough to offer significant rolling resistance, but it was his. And the wind felt great blowing through his hair.

The only metal on the machine was in the wheels and brakes. He had seen pictures on the para-vision of full-metal racing bikes, but they were for the rich or sponsored.

Around him were the cottages and the tree-lined lanes of the village of Lower Thatching, the place he had grown up with, the bucolic backwater that had suddenly seemed too small when he had had a future in the world of business and magik. Now, faced with staying here, it all looked frighteningly boring. All the cottages looked the same, and all the gardens were neat and tidy. He passed four horse-drawn family buggies and one steam-buggy heading the other way and nodded to each of them as he recognised

them as neighbours; and three field-workers, scythes slung over shoulders and lunch-pails in hand, cheerily waved at him as he passed by.

The mill-tower came into view and he hurried his pace. Tiny stones flew off his tyres and *pinged* against the underside of the mudguards and the leather drive belt creaked with the extra tension.

The mill was old.

Hundreds of years some said. The lower half had a circular stone base topped by a stocky timber tower, and above the tower a tall column rose into the air. The wind-vane. It was an open cylinder fluted with the twisted helix of twin aerodynamic foils, and as it turned in the light breeze the foils twisted like a giant screw. Like a giant barber pole. Like a giant *blue* barber pole, Garreth corrected. Blue meant that this mill pumped water up to the reservoir on top of the hill. Yellow foils signified mills that ground grain. Hundreds of each type were dotted over the county. Angland sported tens of thousands of them; the Angle Isles contained a hundred thousand of them.

There was a tree-fringed pond, deep and wide; overflow for the mill pumps. There were the obligatory ducks and swans on its surface, paddling around the weeds and lilies, bobbing now and again into the depths for a morsel or two. Across the pond, where the lane curved back to the village, a row of tree-framed cottages bracketed the post office and the mixed-goods shop. The cottages had new thatching on their roofs.

Two horse-buggies were tied to the trough there, and outside the post-office, resplendent in its livery of red and white, stood an open-top omnibus, ticking away the minutes until its timetable began. The faint *chuff-chuff* of the idling steam engine drifted across the pond and now and then a little spurt of steam would pop from the safety valve at the rear; the smell of hot coke followed the sound of the engine. Garreth pushed his bicycle onto the grass by the edge of the pond and lowered it to the ground in the shade of a tree. Of all the places he and his friends had grown up with, this was his favourite. Pirate rafts on the water, mud pie throwing contests, fishing for eels and perch; all memories now, all things of the past. There was a sadness to Garreth's thoughts, as if all this had passed and would never come back; as if this was the end of things.

His eyes travelled to the sky, where silver clouds gathered high and kept out of the way of the sun. He recognised the pattern. He knew of the spell. It was a level six inverter with a thermo-clime modifier and it was designed to keep a moderately high trough over the countryside until nightfall. Then the clouds would return to their preferred state and precipitation would follow. In the trade it was known as the Camelot Effect...

'I thought it was you, Garreth.' The voice that interrupted his reverie came from behind, and as he turned around he had already recognised the soft lilt.

'Hi, Jemma,' he replied, surprised to see her. Normally he would keep his voice casual when he talked with Jemma

Mayhorn just in case she heard some interest in it. She was willowy, with long strawberry tresses and the deepest hazel eyes he had ever seen. The faintest of freckles dusted her cheeks and there was just a hint of gloss on her rather full lips. Garreth had hardly seen her for all the months he had been working and he couldn't help but notice there had been - well - er - changes. Her voice had a deeper resonance than he remembered, she seemed more grown up. *Yes*, his subconscious noted, while his body concentrated on finding out why his pulse had quickened, *definitely more grown up*.

She wore the latest designer blouse, dark green with the logo on the right sleeve that almost succeeded in hiding the new curves underneath. A silver-chased belt at her waist wasn't there just to hold up the calf-length tights that clung to long and shapely legs; it also served to delineate the narrowness of her waist. Open sandals with ankle straps graced her feet. A gold-chained talisman circled her neck and she wore a torc of protection above her right elbow. Jemma was only two months younger than he, yet she was years ahead in poise; and in the fashion stakes. And she was the only one of his friends that hadn't laughed at his dreams of magehood.

In contrast, all he had managed to throw on were clothes his mother had washed and folded, but he hadn't got around to putting away. An open-necked, short-sleeve, dark blue football shirt hung outside knee-length black cargo shorts, the kind with the big external pockets on the

sides. Well-scuffed loafers, the backs broken from months of cramming feet into them without first untying the laces, clad his feet. Consequently, he looked in need of a good ironing. None of which seemed to bother Jemma in the least.

His abashed grin told her he was very pleased to see her, and that in turn pleased Jemma Mayhorn.

In fact, Jemma Mayhorn had been looking out for just such an opportunity to “bump” into Garreth for a while now. He had changed so much from last year’s schoolboy, she acknowledged; now he was taller, more adult-like, more - she couldn’t put into words *exactly* what it was about Garreth that was different - but something was. Suddenly, after all the months of hardly seeing him at all while he had been away working, the prospect of seeing more of him was exciting. And this was her last year at school, too! Next year, university and the world beckoned. And Garreth? Hmmm, she thought

‘I heard. I’m sorry.’ Her eyes were sincere and honest, and he accepted her words.

‘Thanks, Jem. I think Mum and Dad are feeling it worse than me at the moment, but they’ll get over it - and I’ll still feel lousy.’

‘What will you do?’

He drew in a deep breath that was more sigh than inhalation. ‘Don’t know. Dad wants me to work in the shop. I think I’d hate that, Jem, working with Mum and Dad. Besides, it’s too close to home.’

‘So what? You’re among friends, Garreth.’ *The shop would be good and there’s nothing wrong with being close to home*, she told herself.

He shook his head. ‘Am I? I’m neither mage nor normal.’

‘Of course you’re a normal now, Garreth,’ she protested. ‘If you work for your father and...’

The vigorous shaking of his head interrupted her. ‘You don’t understand. I still have knowledge. Ability. Talent. They don’t go away, you know. I can still function at a low level. But the Law doesn’t allow that; I have to be licensed. I can’t work in any industry in any magikal capacity because I would need supervision by a senior mage. I can’t even do leg work for scryers and cantors because my abilities could invalidate the sanctity of their client’s confessionals and I would need to be monitored all the time - *ooooohhh!*’ Jemma placed a comforting hand on his arm and a frown crossed her face - and didn’t detract one bit from her looks, Garreth noted. ‘Look. I can understand if you feel disappointed, but you have to accept the facts.’ Jemma’s folks were both university professors and *facts* were a daily consumption in her household. ‘It’s not the end of the world, you know...’ She saw the crestfallen look on Garreth’s face and her expression softened; her own pulse gave a little lurch. ‘It’s not. Truly.’ An idea struck her.

‘Listen. Uncle Rufus in Chester is looking for someone to help out at the office. It might suit you.’ Eagerness radiated from her. ‘I could ask, if you like; Mum and I are going in there today.’

The last office Garreth had seen had been Guildmaster Hedgewycke's and the thought of actually *working* in one was - 'Ughh! No thanks, Jem. Dull, dry actuarial work isn't exactly the sort of thing I had in mind.'

'What do you have in mind?'

'I don't...' a shadow covered them, blotting out the sun for several seconds before drifting away, '...know.' He tilted his head back and looked up at the big golden dirigible that was silently sailing the sky above them. The gondola underneath was a glitter of crystal windows, and long coloured streamers drifted like dragon's tails from the rear stabilisers. Above the curve of the hull, almost invisible from the ground, three broad cylinders rose into the sky, cousins to the wind-vane that drove the mill. Two huge, ponderous propellers, one each side, converted the power from the wind-vanes into forward motion. The propellers made a deep *luffing* sound. Garreth pointed to the craft.

'There. I want to go wherever that's going. Or maybe...' the ideas filled his head '...across the Atlantik.' There was a vague look in Garreth's eyes as if the faint hopes of outrageous dreams could take away the pain of the present.

'Yeah. Why not? I could go to Vinland. We have relatives there on Mum's side. Or even the Amerika Free States.' His imagination poured out of him, fuelled by recent events. 'Hunting plains bison. Learning native magik in the Indian Nations. Or even prospecting for gold in the Spanish Territories.'

Rubbish, thought Jemma. ‘Rufus Pendragon. Attorney-at-Magik. In Chester. Of the old firm of Halfdan, Athelstane and Pendragon. In the DaneLaw Chambers by the Latin Wall. Specialists in were-debt, were-gild, grimoire copyright protection and property titles.’

‘What?’ Garreth’s mind was drawn back to Jemma as his dreams disappeared faster than the dirigible. ‘What?’

‘My uncle.’ She smiled sweetly at him. ‘You should see him. About a job.’ The focus in his eyes came back. ‘You would still be involved in magik, you know.’

Garreth picked up his bike. ‘Come on. I’ll walk you home.’ With one last look at the peaceful scene around them, Garreth walked back the way he had come, wheeling his bicycle with one hand, Jemma at his side matching his slow steps.

Jemma Mayhorn lived with her parents in a rather fashionable cottage between the station and the mill pond.

It was very large as far as cottages go, with three bedrooms, a small formal lounging room that contained a very expensive *pianogrande* and a large wooden-framed globe of the world. There was a modern gas kitchen that opened up into a family room, and a bathroom tiled with genuine Tuscan tiles. It was a bright, happy home. Her parents, Clarity and Redgrave, were well able to provide the best for their children and themselves as their qualifications in the teaching profession were long and impeccable. They were, so to speak, at the top of their class.

From the back garden there were glimpses through the trees to the mill-pond and beyond, and a carriage house

complete with stable was built against the rear garden wall. It contained the family buckboard and was a home for their grey gelding, Oatley.

Garreth walked Jemma to her door. It was obvious there was no-one at home.

'Mum's not home yet,' Jemma said. 'I suppose...' she let her voice trail off as she looked at Garreth.

'Why don't we go to my place and wait for her there?' Garreth offered. Truth be told he needed the company. He'd known Jemma for ever, it seemed, and she was just the sort of person he needed to talk to. So much was confusing to his mind, and Jemma was so calm and poised.

'Alright,' Jemma agreed, secretly pleased at the turn of events. 'I'll leave a note for Mum. But you have to double me on your bike.'

Garreth and Jemma walked around the side of his home to the back door. It was locked. The steam-buggy was gone so Garreth assumed his parents were out at their usual Saturday market. Good. The key was under a flower pot and with it he unlocked the door.

'Come in,' he invited Jemma.

Mr. Toast wandered across from the garden and stood a few feet away. 'Come on, Mr. Toast,' Garreth called, but the cat stayed where it was. Jemma went to pick it up, but

it backed away. Garreth's Talent picked up the tendrils of feelings of thoughts that Mr. Toast broadcast to him - *Stealth - Hunt - Danger* - they came like static because the day interfered with them. He really needed the half-wake of bedtime to fully receive Mr. Toast's thoughts.

'I think he's killed a rat and wants to show us.' They went inside, but the cat didn't.

Mr. Toast sat outside the door, uncertain what to do. There was certainly something inside the house. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it wasn't *right*.

Garreth's room was a mess; his mother had obviously shut the door on it and left it for him to clean up on the weekend.

Jemma marched in behind him and looked about with mock disgust. 'Garreth! What a pig-sty!'

Happy to be on familiar ground, Garreth smiled agreement. 'I'll clean it up,' he told her, 'right now.' Grabbing a pile of clothes from the bed he tossed them in a pile midway between the door and the wardrobe mirror. Then he picked up the satchel that contained his guild work. Jemma opened the wardrobe and pulled out new bed clothes...

...Garreth was bending over behind her, his back turned

...Jemma closed the door, her arms full of bedding

...and caught sight of the mirror

...and *screamed!*

Garreth leaped up, shocked at her scream

...spinning as he did so - tripping on the clothes

...falling, the satchel held out before him
...in the blink of an eye time slowed and the world
crawled
...he saw every detail in the mirror
...himself with open mouth, falling forwards
...the mirror a big oval around him
...an image inches away, waiting for the impact,
expecting the shatter of glass
...the room behind the image
...*NOT HIS ROOM!*

Jemma staggered back as she saw the image as the door closed. It wasn't Garreth - she knew immediately it wasn't Garreth. And it was against the glass - held there - rigid - with staring eyes - and a frozen look of surprise on its face - or a frozen scream.

In slow motion she saw Garreth fall towards the mirror. The two images slowly met, fingers reaching out to each other. Then they appeared to slide together - blending into each other - disappearing into the glass - arms first - then the head - torso sliding through like a diver into water - thighs - legs - feet.

Her mind slowly unfroze - the mirror was empty, yet the room beyond was not the room she stood in, and she couldn't see her own image!

A ripple crossed the surface of the glass - her image returned to the mirror...

...*and somebody else came pouring out!*

Danny Royce hit the floor solidly, his breath leaving him with a great *whoosh!*

He felt terribly dizzy and there was an itch in his brain. Colours and textures resolved themselves and the world stopped spinning. He was grateful for the polished floorboards that supported his cheek.

‘Wha...? Hunnnh?’ Words fragmented inside his mind. There was something else in his mind, in the back part, something that flickered and rifled through thoughts and images like so many pages of a book that are rapidly flicked with a thumb. There was no focus; he was terribly disoriented and he had a headache.

Slowly, and with every muscle trembling, he climbed to his knees and looked around. Clothes and bedding littered the floor around him; further away a pair of shoes on the end of shapely legs met his eye. He lifted his head. A girl was sitting on the edge of the bed - staring at him - a very frightened girl.

‘Hell’s bells,’ he whispered in panic. ‘Where am I?’ A cold knot of fear cramped his stomach and it became hard to breathe.

The window was there so he staggered over to it and looked out. He saw a long garden, full of shrubs and fruit trees; he saw a vegetable plot by a stone wall at the end of the garden. Beyond the vegetable plot was a row of trees, and through the trees he could see several chimney stacks. They looked like cottages. Everything was drenched in sunshine.

It looked horrific. It was *WRONG!!!*

It wasn’t sinking in - he needed a reference point - something familiar.

‘Home,’ he said, quietly. ‘I’ve got to get home.’ The girl hadn’t moved and he turned his attention to her. Perhaps she could... ‘I’ve got to get back home,’ he pleaded. ‘My folks will hit the roof when they find out. They’ll - they’ll...’ He didn’t know...

...and there were images in his head; images of someone else.

The girl said something. When he didn’t answer, she repeated it. It almost sounded familiar. What sort of language is that? he wondered. She spoke again, several words this time. They didn’t make sense to him. He really wanted to run out of there, to get back home - he looked wildly at the mirror - but which way was it? He had a terrible feeling about the place he had found himself in.

The girl said something again and nodded to the door, a nervous smile on her lips. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of helplessness and her response was to point to him, and point to the door.

Jemma could see it still - the slow way Garreth fell - disappearing into the glass - his mirror image - it was - it was - words failed to find their way to her mouth, and she had felt paralysed with indecision.

Then - then someone had poured from the glass. For the very first time in her life, Jemma Mayhorn felt bewildered and lost; she didn’t like the feeling. It was obviously a trick; someone was playing a magikal trick on Garreth, but the fact it was so blatant completely surprised her. She knew enough about magik to know that using it for frivolous

ends was a serious offence. She also noticed that the lad had the same surprised look in his eyes as her Garreth had. Maybe, she told herself, someone can make some sense out of this - but no-one's home yet. She had to do something, something ordinary while she collected her thoughts...

Ten minutes later Danny and this strange girl were sitting around a little kitchen table, his hands trembling slightly from the emotional drain of his fear, sipping - er - kaffee. Her name was Jemma, and she watched him with worried eyes. She knew he wasn't Garreth.

Aldredge. The name popped into his head, startling him, and he looked over his shoulder to see if someone was there. It was as if there was another him coaching him. *Mayborn.* He knew her surname. That too just popped out. Her words almost made sense to him. Even the kitchen looked slightly familiar, as if - as if he could go to any of the cupboards and know what was in them. Wide eyed, he looked across the table at Jemma. Weird, weird, weird, he thought, but his panic wasn't going away.

A big marmalade cat came in from the garden and jerked to a sudden stop, tawny eyes fixed on him. In Danny's mind his English and another language collided for a moment or two, wrestling with each other. *There were definitely memories of this place in his mind!* He could see it all in his mind's eye! They sat in the back of his mind, waiting to explain themselves. He just had to relax and let them out...

'Mr. Toast,' he said to the cat. But not in English.

'Yes,' Jemma said, and he understood her perfectly.

It was very, very scary, having someone else's memory in your mind.

Not up front like it was always there, but like a total recall pops out when you need it. Danny knew he just had to be patient, which is hard to do when you're a long way from home. In another universe, he surmised. It hadn't, he knew, sunk in yet; but when it did...

He was still trying to figure out what had happened. It didn't make sense! It was all a blur - one minute he was sitting with Emily - the next he was...

...what? Where was he? What is this place? *Where* is this place?

Thank God for Jemma! Without her he'd be a gibbering wreck. She had read the situation perfectly; someone called Gareth had disappeared into the mirror and his alter-ego had popped out from it. Now she was organising some help. She must be terrified, Danny thought.

'My parents can help,' she told him. Conversation was a little slow and halting because he had to stop trying to make sense of the words - Anglic, she called them - and listen to them with his subconscious to let his extra memory make sense of them for him.

'Yours will panic - sorry - Gareth's I mean. Hurry, please. We should leave soon, before they come home.'

There was a strange-looking bike outside the back door, and Jemma insisted on taking it. With Jemma riding side-saddle on the cross-bar, he wobbled his way down the lane following her directions. It dawned on him how quiet everything was.

Thirty minutes later, Clarity and Redgrave Mayhorn arrived home and listened with open-mouthed amazement at the story Jemma and Danny told.

ENGLAND

...Emily screamed!

Footsteps echoed on the stairs and the door was flung open. Arthur burst into the room, followed a few seconds later by Gloria.

'What the...?' he began, and then he saw the look of horror on Emily's face. She was pointing to the mirror, and his eyes followed her arm. Gloria bumped into his back, and her own eyes widened in surprise as she too noticed the strange sheen on the mirror.

'He's gone!' Emily whispered. *'He's gone!'*

Arthur looked for Danny; there was no sign of his son. 'What do you mean, he's gone?' The sheen on the mirror was moving - like sluggish water.

'He fell in! He just - one minute...' panic was rising up in Emily.

'Are you trying to tell me Danny fell into the mirror?' He looked into Emily's frightened eyes and he knew she had seen something. 'Emily, what are you...'

Arthur! Gloria's own scream rent the air and Arthur twisted around

...as the mirror fluxed

...the oily sheen roiled

...a satchel slowly appeared, thrust into the room

...a pair of hands gripped it

...then arms

...head

...torso

...with a liquid sound a young man emerged from the mirror...

...then suddenly catapulted across the room where he collapsed on the bed, face down. Arthur looked on in open-mouthed amazement. Gloria and Emily were both too stunned to scream.

Unnoticed, the mirror cleared.

ENGLAND

Theolonia Crabbe climbed the stairs as fast as her skirt would allow.

Her heart was pounding, not from the exertion, but from the excitement of what she would find in the attic. Seconds before she had been sitting at her desk in the study,

then the temple bell had struck once of its own accord. *The spell was complete!*

With shaking fingers she lit the candle, then flung back the attic door and listened. No sound came to her, so cautiously Theolonia climbed the last few steps. There was the mirror, shrouded and silent. And undisturbed! She ran to it and with a sweep of her hand pulled the shroud to the floor. *Empty!* The mirror was empty; there was no trace on its surface of the spell, only her own horrified eyes staring back at her.

'Where is he?' she shouted to the darkness. *'Where?'* Blindly, Theolonia stumbled back down to the study. Her mind was racing. The spell was completed, that she was certain of. But not where she had planned it. *Why?* What had gone wrong?

She opened a lacquered cabinet and drew forth a very large crystal ball and carried it to the desk. Taking the small tuning fork from a drawer Theolonia rapped it gently against the crystal and peered closely into its depths. The ball was a scrying crystal and was now tuned to the original spell. With it Theolonia could follow the spell's movements.

Slowly, a village swam into view. She was looking down on it from a great height, and then the picture changed as she followed the path of the spell as it spiraled downwards. Down it went, the cottages getting closer and closer, until one particular cottage filled the ball. Closer the image came, and then she was inside, looking into a bedroom. A very untidy bedroom. With a large mirror.

Now Theolonia took control of the crystal. Raising her view back above the cottage, she cast around for some clue as to what might have happened...

...*there!* Just leaving the front gate

...a young man furiously pedaling a bicycle

...and there was a girl sitting on the crossbar.

With a deep sigh of relief, Theolonia settled back and watched them ride to what she assumed was the girl's house. The house, Theolonia noted, was warded; that wouldn't stop her scrying inside, but her presence could be detected. Best not, she reasoned, give the game away. It was enough that she knew exactly where the lad was.

Jemma was very relieved when her parents arrived home.

Even in a world dependent on magik, it's still disconcerting, and not a little frightening, when something so unusual and bizarre happens. Her initial thought that it was obviously a prank by some of Garreth's friends from the guild had evaporated when this - Daniel - had started to speak. She's never heard any language like it! But if it wasn't a prank, what was it? And the tale he told was altogether too weird to believe - another world indeed! Jemma had never heard of such a thing before, but she was certain her parents would sort it out. And if it *was* an elaborate hoax...

Clarity and Redgrave Mayhorn were different to other folks. Maybe it was the university they worked at, with its new ideas and avante-garde life-style, but both of them stood out. They shunned modern vehicles; they were open in their discussions and no subject was taboo; they drank wine not ale, and they dressed - well - oddly.

Redgrave was a thin, tense man with faded blond hair that was thinning on top, and grey eyes. And he had a pony tail. He wore clothes of no discernable taste or style. People excused him because they said that as a professor he was naturally eccentric.

Clarity - well, some people in Lower Thatching thought her to be outrageous because she often wore pants! Not your calf-length, tight-fitting house pants, and not your dressed-up Venetian-styled pantaloons, but real pants! *Trousers!* And she wore a shirt that was actually tucked into them.

Jemma's parents listened to the tale. At first they were openly skeptical; such an idea as a parallel world was so outrageous as to be unbelievable. But as the story unfolded and the lad's distress became more apparent, they became concerned. What if it were true? Daniel was certainly different; his clothing was *so* unusual and he spoke with an accent neither had heard before. Then there was the way he paused before speaking, as if listening to an inner voice. Not to mention his memories of Garreth; or rather, his total memory of Garreth.

The four of them were sitting around the kitchen table; Clarity had a notebook at the ready. Anyone looking at

Clarity Mayhorn could see where Jemma got her looks from; the same hazel eyes, the same strawberry hair, the same deportment. Only the spectacles she wore on a chain around her neck, a couple of extra pounds weight and a few tiny wrinkles around the eyes separated them.

‘I think,’ Redgrave informed everyone, ‘that we need some help here.’ He looked at his wife. ‘What about Garreth’s parents? They need to know.’

Clarity considered this for a moment. ‘They’re not exactly - how shall I put this - open to new ideas, Redgrave. I don’t know how they would react.’

‘We can’t *not* tell them. That would...’

‘Uncle Rufus,’ Jemma interjected. ‘He could help. I was just saying to - Garreth - before, that Uncle Rufus needed someone in the office.’

‘Your brother would know what to do, Clarity,’ Redgrave acknowledged. ‘He’s an attorney-at-magik; he’s bound to know someone high in the Art that could make sense of this.’

‘Let’s call him,’ Jemma enthused. ‘Before the Aldredge’s get back.’ She’d been keeping one eye on Daniel and noticed that he’d lapsed into silence, his face a picture of misery.

Clarity opened the note book and put her glasses on. ‘I’ll just - oh dear,’ she exclaimed, pulling her glasses off and peering at them. ‘They were perfectly fine this morning.’

‘What’s happened, Mum?’

‘The spell’s gone!’ She waved the spectacles in front of Redgrave. ‘They’re supposed to last for months.’

Danny jerked his head up. ‘Spell?’ he asked. ‘What do you mean, spell?’

Jemma’s father took the glasses from Clarity and held them up in front of Danny. ‘Spell as in a magikal corrective field in the plain lenses. Simple constructed magik, Daniel.’

‘Magic?’ The word had a different ring to it. ‘As in hocus-pocus?’ All the bits of Garreth’s memory were floating in his head, but there were gaps in the order they arrived in.

‘No,’ Redgrave said. ‘Magik, as in the science of thaumaturgy.’ He saw the bewilderment in the lad’s eyes. ‘Here, I’ll show you.’ He rose and went into the lounge room, returning seconds later with a small, coloured box. ‘This is a house ward. It is created to protect the house...’ he neared Daniel to show him

...Danny reached a hand towards it

...and, in total silence

...in slow motion

...the box exploded! Points of light poured from it, sparkling and dancing across the room; fizzing then fading into nothingness. Then it was nothing but an empty box.

Silence gripped the room. Three faces stared at him in amazement. Finally, Redgrave spoke in a very quiet and deliberate manner.

‘Jemma, if you and Daniel get the buckboard ready, we’ll head into the village and place a paraphone call to your uncle.’

Danny watched with amusement as Jemma hitched the horse to the buckboard.

The vehicle looked like an antique to his eyes, an open four-seater with small rear loading tray, black lacquered with white pin-stripes, red cushion squabs on the seats and the wheels were wooden-spoked with metal tyres. The spokes had roses painted on them. He shook his head in wonder - he'd never been this close to a horse before. The smell of leather and dubbin and horse droppings was all new to him.

The Saturday market was crowded.

Seventy or eighty gaily-coloured, canvas-topped stalls ringed a cobbled square that was bound on three sides by roads, and on the fourth by the red-brick market hall. A flag-draped clock-tower rose from the side of the hall, tall enough that the four faces of the clock were seen clear across the village, and inside that hall were all the produce and meat stalls; those outside catered for every type of commodity under the sun that wasn't animal or vegetable. People thronged, many more than the village would appear to house, and the noise was one continual drone with spruikers raising their voices above it to attract recalcitrant shoppers. That noise was the sound of people. There were no mechanical noises Danny's ear could detect; no background drone of man-made artifacts - this new world was *quiet!*

Horse-drawn carts and buggies lined the streets, with the odd steam-buggy scattered amongst them, and Jemma's father skillfully weaved his way between and around them. There appeared to be no hard and fast rules about which side of the road one parked on.

Danny was taking it all in, piece by piece - his eyes travelled across the clock tower then on to - his eyes snapped back to the clock - his jaw dropped, but no words came out. Jemma looked at him askance.

'Daniel! What's wrong?' Her father turned around at the tone of her voice

'The clock!' Danny managed to say, pointing at it. *'The clock!'*

'What's wrong with the clock?' Jemma looked up at the tower, but everything looked normal to her.

'It's backwards!!'

Redgrave Mayhorn slowed the horse and faced Danny. 'What do you mean - backwards?'

'It's numbered anti-clockwise! The numbers go around to the left.'

'But that's clockwise, Daniel. If they went to the right *that* would be anti-clockwise.'

There was something else on the clock tower that he had seen. A huge, red, white and green banner with an emblem on it. An emblem that looked like...

'What's that?' he pointed to the fluttering banner.

'The dragon flag of Cymru,' Jemma replied.

'Cymru? What's Cymru?'

‘The land of the Celts, of course.’

Danny’s mind was reeling. Celts? Chester? Wales? ‘Wales!’ he shouted. ‘And that’s the Welsh flag!’ He peered harder at the fluttering banner. ‘That’s not a dragon,’ he told Jemma. ‘It’s all wrong.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘Well, it looks like a snake with four wings...’ he squinted at it, ‘four dragonfly wings. That’s not a dragon, it’s a giant dragonfly.’

‘And what,’ Jemma asked, icily, ‘do your dragons look like?’

Images flashed through Danny’s mind. ‘Huge, flying, fire-breathing things they are. All scales and teeth and great leathery wings. That’s what real dragons look like.’

‘They sound *awful*,’ Jemma whispered. ‘Your people must live in fear of them.’

‘What? What - nono - you don’t understand, Jemma. Dragons aren’t *real*. They’re symbols.’

Jemma’s eyes travelled to the flag, and something in them caused Danny to ask...

‘What?’

‘Those,’ she inclined her head towards the flag, ‘those are real.’

‘This place is weird, folks. Seriously weird.’

Mr. Mayhorn navigated their way through the crowded streets and turned off behind the market building. Across the road from the market loading docks was a row of shops with hitching rails outside. He headed there.

One of the shops sported a large bold sign that hung over the pavement from a bracket on the first floor. Danny squinted to make the words on it understood. He relaxed and let Garreth's memory float to the surface:

GATES & BYTES, he read. MAGES TO THE COMMUNITY – COMMUNICATIONS, SCRYING, PARA-PHONY. COMPETITIVE RATES.

In the window a coloured shield with a license and registration number on it slowly changed through a range of colours; Danny thought it looked a bit like a neon sign.

'This way,' Redgrave Mayhorn said, holding the door open for everyone. As Danny passed through, the sign flickered and went out. He was on the point of saying something, but when Danny had walked a few yards into the shop, the sign came back on.

Open booths filled two walls of the shop and each booth contained a large crystal ball that was mounted knee-high on a stand. Redgrave was shown to one of them as he gave the mage the name to be contacted, and he waited while the connection was made. But...

...the paraphone wouldn't work. The mage was a young man covering the Saturday shift and he was getting flustered. The scrying crystal was as lifeless as a decoy duck and no way was he going to be able to raise the target without it. A register of connections and networks lay open on his desk and Rufus Pendragon's name was highlighted in the appropriate colour for an attorney-at-magik - black and white. It should work. But it didn't.

‘Just a moment, if you don’t mind,’ Redgrave said, interrupting the young mage’s deliberations. He turned to Danny and Jemma. ‘Jem, take Daniel here outside and check the horse, would you? You might also go over to the market hall and get one of those big raisin and honey cakes for tonight.’

‘Dad...’

Redgrave Mayhorn bent low to his daughter’s ear. ‘It’s Daniel,’ he whispered. ‘Magik doesn’t seem to work near him. Best go outside.’

The mage looked up in surprise as his crystal ball lit up in just the manner it was supposed to and the connection was made.

‘Static?’ Mr. Mayhorn inquired of him, with a disarming smile, as the image of Rufus formed in the air above the ball. With a curious look at him, the mage retired to the back of the store where he could monitor the connection, but not the conversation.

‘Sorry to interrupt your Saturday, Rufus,’ Redgrave began, ‘but there’s something very odd happening here...’

Once outside, Jemma turned to Daniel. ‘Do you think Garreth will be all right in your place?’

‘What? Garreth?’ Jemma’s question threw him, the coldness in his stomach returned. ‘Oh. Yeah. Fine.’ Visions of sport day danced across his mind. ‘He’ll be fine.’ Jemma’s eyes held his for long enough for him to blush at the obvious lie. ‘Well,’ he amended, ‘my Dad’s a bit like your Dad. He’s pretty tuned in to things, you know?’

She shook her head. ‘Tuned in?’ This - Daniel - was so similar to Garreth. Yet, he seemed older, somehow. *I want Garreth back.*

He sighed. ‘Look, Jemma. I honestly don’t know how Garreth will go. If he’s like me he’ll be fighting like mad to hold down the panic. I mean, this magik stuff is pretty mind-blowing; I imagine Garreth will find the same thing. But,’ he pointed to his temple, ‘if he has some of me in there the way I have his memory - then - yeah...’ He gave his thoughts a few seconds to coalesce. ‘Look, Jemma. Having Garreth’s recall is like completing the set. Do you know what I mean?’

‘No.’ She looked into his dark eyes and saw more than the Garreth she remembered.

‘Ok, then. Do you know how twins seem to be a complete personality when they’re together? Yeah? Well, it feels like that to me. I know more than I knew before. As if he and I make up the set.’

‘Ah. Yes!’ She smiled in relief. ‘I know exactly what you mean.’

‘Phew!’ Danny blew his cheeks out in mock exasperation. ‘Good. So. If Garreth trusts my Dad, he’ll be fine.’ He grinned suddenly, and Jemma’s heart gave little lurch because it was *almost* the same cheeky grin that Garreth had. ‘He’d have a heart attack if he heard me say it - but my Dad’s pretty cool.’

‘Cool?’ Jemma asked, her eyebrows knitting together in a frown, and Danny groaned.

‘I’ll explain later. And by the way. It’s Danny,’ he told her. ‘I don’t like Daniel.’

Rufus Pendragon drove into Lower Thatching as the afternoon was fading.

Jemma’s uncle was a tall, middle-aged, gangly, affable man with a long, clean-shaven face and large teeth. He had pale grey eyes and thinning sandy hair and looked nothing like Jemma’s mum - at least not to Danny’s eyes. He wore a driving coat and a tie-down cap with a pair of goggles perched on top.

He arrived in an open-topped steam buggy; one of the new types with the piezo-quartz ignited flash burner and two-speed leather belt transmission. It had a low-slung beech wood body that gleamed with lacquer, and two rows of red leather seats with horse-hair stuffing. A large steering wheel dominated the right front seat and glass-fronted brass gauges lined the dashboard. There were four wooden-spoked wheels with white pneumatic tyres and external drum brakes, and two spare wheels were carried on a frame at the rear. Brass and nickel-plated gas-powered driving lights pointed the way forward.

Danny couldn’t believe his eyes. *This* was the peak of technology?

The Attorney wasted no time. He sat Danny down in the lounge room and had him tell his story, which he

listened to without a flicker of expression. Every now and then he made notes in a small book, but said nothing until Danny had finished. Jemma and her parents were present, but just sat and listened. When Danny had finished, Jemma told her tale.

‘Well,’ Rufus said at last, ‘I’ve never heard the like of this. A strange tale indeed.’ He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘Tell me, this book you say you found. Can you remember any of the characters in it?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Very well.’ He consulted his notes. ‘This memory you have of Garreth. How detailed is it? Do you have his full memory?’

Out of the corner of his eye Danny saw Jemma blush. ‘No - I don’t think so,’ he said slowly. ‘I know things, but only when they pop up - as if the knowledge is there when I need it.’ He concentrated. ‘I don’t know if it makes any sense, but they feel like my own memories, only they’re fragmented. I don’t feel like Garreth - but I know things he knows.’

Rufus picked up the little box that had carried the house-ward and turned it over in his hands. ‘And you say there is no magik in your world at all? Nothing that could account for this - anomaly?’

Danny Royce was starting to wake up to the reality of his situation. And it made no sense whatsoever. It could have been a story from one of his books, but it wasn’t. It was real!

This new world he found himself in was one of contrast and contradiction; no electricity, but magik instead; horses

and steam-buggies instead of cars and trucks; windmills instead of pumps and airships instead of aero planes.

Like electricity. They didn't have it; more - they'd never heard of it! Trying to describe it to Jemma and her folks and Mr. Pendragon had been, well, difficult.

'It's power,' he'd told them. 'It comes from a power station through power lines and into your home. You plug things into it to make them work.'

'So these "power lines" are hollow, then?' Rufus had asked. His skepticism at the tale had lasted seconds only, as it was quite clear that the young man was not Garreth. For one, although similar in appearance, there were obvious differences. His hair, and the way his speech was slow as if he was listening offstage for prompts. And the way his own language sounded convoluted and soft - like the way of the southern Frenche.

'Nonono. They're solid copper or something like that. Electricity flows through it.' He saw the quizzical looks on their faces, and thought, I'm in trouble here. 'Electricity's a bit like - well - lightning. Yeah. Lightning. We use it to make television sets and fridges and radios work. Even watches.' He rolled his sleeve up to show them his digital watch, and they peered closely to see.

'Liquid crystal diodes,' he said, before he noticed his watch was blank and the cursor didn't blink. He pressed the reset button, but nothing happened. 'That was a brand new battery,' he said, awe in his voice as the truth crept up on him - *electricity didn't work here!*

‘So it’s run out of lightning, then?’ Jemma asked, keeping a wary eye on the glass-covered amulet on Danny’s wrist.

‘Yeah. No! It’s not lightning. Electricity is...’ he screwed his eyes tight as he tried to remember, wishing he’d paid more attention at school when he hadn’t had too, ‘...like a flow of positive and negative - things. Ions. No. Charged particles. That’s it!’ he said triumphantly. ‘Charged particles. But you can’t see them.’ Messy, he knew, though he felt he’d acquitted himself well.

‘So, something I can’t see flows out of solid wire and imparts the power of lightning to certain forms of machinery.’ Rufus was struggling with this concept, but determined not to let it show. ‘This machinery cooks food, preserves food, warms or cools the house, tells the time and operates entertainment screens. In return, “electricity” isn’t lightning, is invisible, but can kill you if you touch it; oh, and it consumes enormous quantities of coal and oil. Am I right so far?’

It was starting to sound odd to his own ears, but he went on with it anyway. ‘It can also be generated by - er - do the words “nuclear fission” mean anything to you?’ He’d lost them there, he knew, as four blank faces stared at him.

But by the same token, he had been completely floored by the concept that magic was the chief operating system in this world. Magik, his Garreth-memory corrected. Then Rufus had shown him the globe. All those weird countries and different borders. Where had Russia gone? It looked a quarter the size he was used to. And America! Now it was

just a collection of territories and federations. And what was this “Thule” that seemed to compromise most of the Arctic Circle? And what were the “Mongol Territories”? And what the hell was “New Holland” doing where Australia should be? It was all too much; his brain ached.

Rufus Pendragon was puzzled. The lad was obviously familiar with the globe of the world, but not the countries as it showed them. Was he really from a different world, or was he a fake? But why would anyone fake such an improbable tale? What was to be gained? He turned to the globe again.

‘Show me,’ he asked Danny, ‘what sort of world you say you’re familiar with.’ Then he watched as Danny retraced borders and renamed places. Amazing! What an imagination! Or was it? ‘Tell me, Danny, this - England - is that what it’s called? How is it governed?’

This was easier. ‘Well, it’s called a democratic monarchy,’ he began. ‘We...’

‘Aha!’ Rufus interrupted. ‘Monarchy. Who sits on the throne?’

Danny wasn’t sure where this was going. ‘Elizabeth. Elizabeth the Second.’

Rufus’ grey eyes took on a harder edge. ‘What year was it when you left this England?’

‘First year of the new millennium,’ he answered. There was expectancy on all four faces. ‘Two thousand and one.’ He saw confusion in Jemma’s eyes.

‘Two thousand and one counted from when?’

‘The birth of Christ, of course. Is there anything wrong?’

‘I’m not sure, lad. We have the same year here. And the same birth of Christ.’

‘Really? But everything here is so - so - old fashioned!’ Danny Royce had only been in this new, strange place for a few hours, yet everything he had seen looked as if it had come straight out of an antique shop.

‘So you say,’ Rufus said, rubbing his chin in thought. ‘So you say. Tell me. This monarchy of yours. How far back does it go?’

History wasn’t one of Danny’s strong points, but he shut his eyes and concentrated. Eventually - ‘I think it started after the Romans left.’

Rufus sat upright. ‘Rome? You know of Rome?’

Danny nodded. ‘Yes. They left about - oh, I guess - the fourth century. I think.’

‘What came next? Can you remember?’

‘Saxons? Yeah. It was the Saxons. That’s when the kings of the different tribes started trying to unite the country.’

Rufus nodded to himself. ‘Yes, yes. Excellent. Then tell me, how was the country united?’

Danny grinned. ‘That’s easy. William the Conqueror did that.’ He saw the stunned looks on all four faces. ‘What? What’s wrong?’

‘William? The *Conqueror? From Normandy?*’ It was Clarity that interjected in an incredulous tone of voice.

‘When did this take place?’

Something was wrong, Danny knew. Then Garreth's memory kicked in. '*Oh, bugger!*' he whispered to himself. He knew what was wrong. 'The Battle of Hastings. Ten sixty-six.' He looked at Jemma. 'In my world William won.' Now that the initial memory was out, the rest came flooding in. Alfred VIII, Lord High Chieftain and King of The Angle Isles and her Domains could trace direct descent back to King Harold. The same Harold who had destroyed the Normans and their duke on the beachfront at Hastings.

Rufus Pendragon sank back into his seat and rubbed his eyes. The story was almost too strange to be true. Yet - here was a lad whose very presence caused magik to break down; who was absolutely convinced of another timeline. Was the lad genuine - or was he something else? Rufus knew he was out of his depth - he needed help. Serious help. Luckily, he knew where to get it. But first things first...

'We need to talk to Garreth's parents,' he decided. 'They should be made aware of events.'

Jemma knew just how Garreth's parents would react. 'They wouldn't understand, Uncle Rufus,' she said. 'I don't think they have the imagination.' Danny nodded his head in agreement.

'Still and all, they must be told. And Danny must stay there until things are sorted out. After that...'

The memory of Garreth's parents popped into Danny's mind. 'Er,' he looked at everyone around the table, 'do I have to?'

‘Yes, you do,’ Clarity informed him. ‘The only other place would be here,’ she looked at Redgrave out of the corner of her eye, ‘and that wouldn’t be – ahem - proper.’

‘Why not?’ Danny noticed Jemma’s sudden look of embarrassment.

Clarity too was flustered. ‘Why not? Well - ahhh - in your world, Daniel, are young people allowed to mix unsupervised? At home, I mean.’

‘Why not? Emily’s often at my place after school. I’ve got a great CD player in my room and we’re always playing music.’ A stillness descended on the others and Danny could sense something wasn’t right.

‘Are you telling us,’ Clarity said, with some precision, ‘that your parents allow a young lady to visit your - er,’ she was clearly embarrassed at what she was asking him, ‘your room?’

‘Sure.’

Alone? Everybody was looking at a different part of the room, trying not to make eye contact.

‘Yes. We sometimes do homework together as well as listen to music.’

Clarity looked at her husband and brother in amazement. Everyone avoided looking at Jemma. ‘I think, Daniel,’ Clarity eventually said, with some finality, ‘it would be best if you did stay at your parents - at Garreth’s house.’

Rufus put his notebook away and picked up his driving hat and gloves. ‘I’m off,’ he announced. ‘When I return to Chester I’ll contact an old friend in London.’ He half smiled at the thought. ‘He should know what to do.’

Theolonia Crabbe retreated from the scrying crystal and closed it down.

Even though she dared not risk discovery by listening in, now that her quarry was located, it would only be a simple process of conditioning him for the take-over of his body. And to do that, she didn't have to go anywhere near him.

Later that evening, Edgar and Mary Aldredge sat in open-mouthed amazement as they listened to Redgrave and Clarity relate the strange events of the day to them. As the tale unfolded their eyes travelled to the lad who sat with them - and Edgar tried to understand what exactly was happening. But really, he thought, the tale was too preposterous for words. One day Garreth's moping around because he's lost his Talent, the next, someone shows up from another world beyond the mirror pretending to be their son's alter-ego! This, he rationalized, has all the hallmarks of a hoax. Or - it was a way of getting attention. Yes - that's what this is - a way of getting attention. And this Daniel is in on it. Well, two can play at that game...

'Amazing,' Edgar announced when the tale was told, 'absolutely amazing!' He chuckled to himself and the Mayhorns looked on with some concern. 'Another world, eh? That's perfect for Garreth; a nice holiday where there's no magik to remind him of his own failure. That will do him a power of

good, that will.' He gave Daniel a meaningful look. 'You can stay as long as you like, Daniel. And when you two have had enough and Garreth wants to come back, there's always the fruit shop for him to work in.' He patted Mary's hand as he beamed at Clarity and Redgrave. 'You can tell him that.'

Outside, when the front door had been closed behind them, an astonished Redgrave Mayhorn turned to his wife and said, 'That went rather badly, I think.'

Garreth memory tugged at Danny. 'Actually, I thought it went quite well.' He grinned at Jemma's parents. 'Terrific, in fact.'

In his dreams that night Edgar Aldredge wrote a very strong letter to the Office of Magikal Malfeasance - a very strong letter indeed.

The fog from the Thames River was particularly thick and damp, not usual for London this time of year, and there was a pungency to its aroma that carried memories of coal-fired ships, wet mud, fish and horses.

Harley Street was a long foggy tunnel interspersed with feeble pools of orange gas-light that diminished into the distance, and was dotted with the moving points of carbide-fuelled coach lamps that suddenly appeared out of the gloom. Sounds were muffled for once, which was a blessing in normally noisy London. It was obvious that

the Camelot Effect had been turned off. Number thirty-four was the middle house in a long street of similar houses. It was a rather imposing terrace-house built in the classic design that was beloved of most professional, and successful, people.

Attached to the front door and just visible through the fog was a very small, and highly polished, brass plaque with onyx inlaid lettering that proclaimed:

Salamander Erasmus Ord
Wizard Emeritus
By Appointment to the Crown

Wizards, as a rule, are intelligent, detached, insular, old, short tempered and rude. They can afford to be whatever they want because they are immensely powerful. They are also, to the very last man and very last woman, deeply obligated to serve The Law. Because wizards have to spend so much time in the study and application of their craft, such things as exercise, good diet and regular hours are foreign concepts to them; actually, they *do* know what they are, it is the very *idea* of implementing them that is foreign. Most wizards, therefore, are out of shape; mental giants in soft, rotund bodies.

Salamander Ord was no exception; rather, he was the proof that made the pudding, with the exception of the temper and the rudeness. Salamander Ord was affable to a serious degree. Short and rotund he might be, but he had ruddy cheeks and a wide smile, white hair that was short and

thick and neatly trimmed, long sideburns and a booming laugh. His eyes were of the deepest, deepest blue.

All mages were expected to show sobriety in manner and dress, and the dark colours were the norm. Short top hats, tailed frock-coats, even cuff-less trousers and shoes were usually black or charcoal grey. Only waistcoats offered delivery from the self-imposed sartorial monotony. And the higher up the rankings a mage was, the more refined his, or her, appearance was expected to be.

Yet it was a quirk of high mages everywhere to affect a little eccentricity in an area unimportant to the craft, but important to their personas - signatures as it were. There were the absent-minded, the quixotic, reclusive and flamboyant. Salamander Ord had a thing about stiff collars and braces. His shirts always had stiff cellulose collars held on with golden studs, and he always wore wide, brightly coloured braces. His eccentricity flowed on to his shirts, they were the faintest of blue or pink. And his ties were of the Spanish affectation, thin and dramatically tied into a large, drooping bow. Salamander Erasmus Ord cared not a fig for convention, he was so high in the listings of the Arts Arcana that his quirks and foibles were to be tolerated and even applauded - but never, ever, copied.

Salamander Ord was just sitting down to dinner all alone.

Gwendolyn, his wife of forty years was spending a week or two down in Winchester with her sister and he

was very happy about that because it meant he got the cook to make the dinners *he* wanted. This night's repast was lamb stew with dumplings and he was also going to eat it *in his study!*

BONG BONG BONG... the soft tones of the parafone receiver came from the hallway and old Martynsyde his manservant put his head around the door.

'Sir,' he whispered in a dry, sepulcher voice, 'Attorney Pendragon apologises the lateness of the hour, but...'

'Rufus!' boomed Salamander. 'Bring him in, man.' He gestured with his hands. 'Bring him in.'

Martynsyde shuffled through the doorway towing a small-wheeled trolley that carried several large crystals and placed it in the centre of the room. One of the crystals was glowing and Salamander brought it to life with a snap of his fingers. Immediately a hologram took shape next to the trolley and resolved itself into the shape of Rufus Pendragon.

'Hello Salamander,' Rufus began, eyeing the desk, 'I'm sorry to interrupt your meal.'

The wizard waved away the apology. 'Don't worry about that, old friend. What are you up to these days? Ah? How long has it been since we sorted out that little football-tampering scandal, eh - six months?'

'Fourteen months, Sal. All of that.'

'Oh.' The wizard scratched his head. 'Time seems to have a different speed these days, Rufus. Well, well. Fourteen months.' He brightened. 'How's your good lady wife? How's Phoebe?'

Rufus smiled a toothy smile. 'She's fine, Sal. Gwen?'

Rufus was the only person his wife allowed to contract her name. 'At her sister's.' Rufus' eyes travelled to the desk and the meal on it. They also noticed the bottle of red wine and the box of cigars. He nodded in understanding.

'Ah, well,' said Rufus' old friend. 'So - I assume, by the fact you're wearing a driving coat and look rather dusty, that this is a business call. Ah?'

'Well, if you consider a young man who disappears into a mirror - and another who falls out of the same mirror, claims to be from another world and is impervious to magik - to be business...' he shrugged his shoulders, '... then business it is.'

Rufus Pendragon now had the total and undivided attention of one of the country's most powerful wizards. Salamander leaned forward in his chair. 'Have you seen this lad?'

'And interviewed him, Sal. My niece found him.'

'Right. Go home, Rufus; I'll call you there in one hour.'

One and a half hours later, Salamander Ord had the whole story.

He had spent the time researching his extensive library, but there was nothing in it that would yield a clue. Nothing. His friend looked at him expectantly from the comfort of his own lounge room in Chester.

'I'll have to come up there and examine the lad,' he said. 'There may be some residual memory of the book I could trace. We need to check Garreth's background; his movements, contacts.' The dinner was still sitting on the

desk untouched, but the wine was open and half finished and a cigar burned between his fingers. 'I'll book a train seat tomorrow and we will all meet at your offices, I think.

'See if you can get old Afferton around, will you. If there is any malignancy involved, he'll smell it.'

Rufus nodded. Afferton Smythe was eighty-three years old and he had the best nose in the north. Which was quite normal because Afferton Smythe was a werewolf. His age, and the fact that he was on anti-lycanthropic medication had kept him safe from harm; especially from the occasional posse of angry farmers who thought that any missing livestock was obviously the work of a werewolf.

'He's not very well, Salamander,' Rufus replied, 'but I'll try. Do you think dark arts are involved?'

The wizard blew a perfect smoke ring towards the ceiling. 'I don't know. There have been some odd happenings these last few months. Portents in the skies; people reporting faces and names written in clouds; weather spells gone a'glimmer; two-headed lambs born. Oddities, but nothing dramatic.'

To an attorney's ear they sounded like interference in the laws of magik; and interference meant the dark arts. The underworld. Literally. He said so.

'Not necessarily, Rufus. But on that note, I have to tell you that I'm bound by my office to report this tale of yours to the Office of Magikal Malfesance.' The OMM was the most feared office in the Arts Arcana. It was the watchdog

of the law. Any diversion from the true path of thaumaturgy was investigated. Thoroughly.

‘What would you like me to do, Sal?’

‘Can you keep the lad close to you? Maybe he could help around the office.’

Rufus reached out of crystal range, his hand disappearing momentarily. When it returned it held a pipe that Rufus puffed back into life. ‘That’s a good idea. The clerks could use a runner around the place. Is that alright?’

‘Perfect.’ He raised his glass. ‘Here’s to adventure, eh?’

‘Ah, Salamander. I think we’re too old for that.’

After Rufus had gone, Salamander sat for long minutes in the quiet. His study was large and mostly empty save for the desk, several heavy leather wing chairs and a few small, but also heavy, wooden side-tables. All were strategically placed before the hearth; and beyond the hearth, a fire burned hot with the combustion of anthracite coal.

Gas lamps dotted the walls and between the lamps, in half shadows, bookcases filled the walls on three sides. Above the fireplace, memographs and pictures, paintings and photographs gazed down on the room.

And one of those paintings began to move.

And speak.

‘Adventure indeed!’ it said. The painting turned an imperious eye towards him.

It was a painting of himself, enthusiastically daubed by an eager amateur. The face in the painting was his own, as of that

very moment; the voice from the painting was also his own. Together, they constituted his ego-savant; here he could talk to himself and get a chance to *listen* to himself. It was a wonderful and powerful mental tool - and he'd had it a long time.

'A parallel universe,' the painting said. 'What a splendid adventure that would be, eh, Ord?'

'Well...' Salamander swirled the wine around in his glass, his eyes fixed on the play of light in the wine. '...if it's not a hoax...'

'That little knot in your belly tells you it's no hoax. An alien lad - anti-magik - ah, yes. I see adventure and danger ahead.'

'Danger?'

'Oh, yes, Ord. Danger. Gwendolyn expects you down in Winchester next week.'

Salamander woke from his introspection. 'Stop being melodramatic, you fraud.'

'Of course I'm melodramatic,' the painting responded, 'given the nature of my artist.' There was a disdainful sniff. 'And it's not "fraud," Ord - the word is "forgery".' The face in the painting de-animated and became a portrait once again.

'Always the last word, eh?' Salamander saluted his picture with the glass and took a sip.

In her dark room, lying in her bed of dark counterpane, the Grey Lady Crabbe composed herself for a special journey.

No spells or incantations were needed, for this journey was of her mind. She would travel the astral plane and see their intended victim for herself; she would read his hidden thoughts.

There was no light in her room save one, and that one could not be seen in this world. On a side table, burning with a black flame stood a beacon-candle. This was the anchor for her mind, with its mind-bright light she could not get lost among the planes of the ether.

With her head framed by a crisp, white pillow, the body of Theolonia Crabbe fell into sleep. Her disembodied mind rose up and saw every detail as she looked down on herself, but now the room was flooded with the candle's spectral light, a light that created no shadows. With a smile on her imaginary lips, Theolonia rose up to the ceiling - and beyond. Through the physical world she climbed, the artifices and constructions of men mere clouds to be passed through. Higher, through rain she couldn't feel, to the clear air above, she sought the distance from earthly bounds.

Now! Where the physical world lay below, and night spread across the Angle Isles like a deep, dreamless sleep, thick and dark; now she could enter the astral realm. With a mental *squirm*, akin to crossing the eyes of the mind, the molecules of the physical world separated - moved away from each other - allowed her to glide - *between*.

And there before her, arrayed in colours of glory and magik, lay the natural world. The air was a pale,

translucent blue that moved slowly and languorously like an ethereal tide. The ground spread away all around, natural and pure, the greys and blacks of rock, the umbers of the soil, the greenish hues of woodlands, and the bright shards of water that were brilliant as diamonds. There was no presence of man on this place. But she could see the marks of where they were.

Across the land, for as far as the astral eye could see, was the wonder of the natural world, the fabulous Pool of Dreams. Every soul, every mind, every thought was a drop of incandescence and colour. Like drops in a pool they radiated out from the person they belonged to, spreading and blending until they joined together in one amorphous blanket.

Currents within told of powerful thoughts, eddies of colour were hallmarks of trained minds - here the cobalt blue of an ecclesiastic mage - there the soft rose of a lady surgeon - the scarlet whirlpool of an angry temporal mage spun furiously - all bound together like a living quilt.

The astral sky suddenly lit up as, far off, a golden column shot upwards out of the Pool like a glittering fountain, spreading light all around before subsiding. Theolonia knew that somewhere a high wizard had crafted a great spell.

There were dark holes in the Pool; vacant, still holes in the riot of colour that told her where other mages were, each one protected from the astral realm and those who might travel it. It was fatal to try to enter those dark holes.

The mind's eye of the wizard Theolonia Crabbe saw all this and more. Rising upwards from the dark hole of her

own presence was a thin, bright column of spectral light; a column that only she could see. Her beacon-light. Now she could orient herself - scan towards the west - ignore the thicker pools of dreams that were the cities - concentrate on the direction she knew - and go there. Like a gossamer wisp of thought, her astral mind sped across the multi-hued land, towards the dark wall of the coast that lined the far horizon.

In moments that coastline approached, and the dark horizon became a deep, dark ocean sparkling with the shifting phosphorescence of its denizen's life forces.

She halted, and looked around. *This way*, her mind said, *down there, through the colours of the Pool. Back down to the real world...*

...and she was there. A cottage rested below her, its roof shiny with rain, its windows dark and closed. Trees and bushes were mere phantoms against the night. An attic window beckoned, and she entered.

Her victim slept in his bed like a rag-doll that had been dropped on to it. Elbows and knees made the eiderdown look like a collapsed tent and the pillow had slipped to the floor where it rested among his discarded clothes. A shadow next to his sleeping form moved, startling the astral mind of the wizard with its unexpected appearance, and Mr. Toast's tawny eyes looked above the recumbent form and saw what no human eyes could - a phantom mind and - behind it - hidden in the shadows - another mind - a mind with a face of evil. He knew the look; he'd seen it many times in the strange, dark places he'd hunted in.

Watch if you will, my feline witness. I have business with your master came the thoughts of Theolonia.

The tendrils of Theolonia's mind descended and probed the mind of the sleeping Garreth. All was as it should be. Deeper she went, and the thoughts and emotions came tumbling out like fish from a barrel - fast and slippery - each one going its own way...

...but she knew those she wanted and the passing thoughts merely confirmed what she knew about Garreth. Deeper yet she penetrated his mind, to a place where only another wizard's magikal scrutiny would detect her presence, and there, deep within the soul of Danny Royce, she found the shape and colour of his mandala - his psychic nexus. By this she could identify him anywhere, across oceans if need be. Patiently, she memorised him, for when the moment came for Horatio to inhabit this body, she wanted no nasty surprises.

Slowly, Theolonia Crabbe retreated, her task completed. With a last, contemptuous glance towards the cat, she drifted back up through the cottage, into the night sky, *squirring* her astral mind into the natural plane of the world. There, far away, the thin, glowing column of light beckoned her and she sped towards it

Towards home.

Safe and unseen, she gloated. The job is done.

Theolonia Crabbe was wrong. She had been seen. And understood. By a mind that instinctively knew the wrongness of her deeds; that could smell the foulness of the

corruption that dwelt within her mind. A mind that would recognise her and her evil companion anywhere; that would never forget.

Mr. Toast curled back down next to the strange person that carried his master within, confident that the *bad thing* would not return. But he knew, deep in his instinctive heart, he would meet it again...

...he would meet *both of them* again.

OUTER THULE

Under the Artic lands, the dragon-scribe re-entered the chamber that held the basalt mirror. It held the arm of another and this one was old and frail. It was bent at the waist and walked with the aid of a cane. Its colouring was faded and its muzzle grey. Ancient eyes saw the pattern on the mirror...

Interesting, it said. *Very interesting*. Dragons have no voice box; they communicate their words with their minds. They are not telepathic; they just sort of speak their minds, as it were. *History repeats, youngster. Lessons of old forgotten, it appears.*

What does it mean, elder?

Mean? The old dragon shook its head. *Since when do men seek meaning? Someone dabbles with things beyond them. Hmmm. Yes. Beyond them, I fear. Where is the disruption centred?*

The scribe consulted the compass. *The Angle Isles, elder.*

The old one nodded to itself. *Keep watch. Send to the trading station for a communications mage; I would know the cause of this.*

ENGLAND

Garreth Aldredge had a splitting headache. And to make matters worse, there were words in his head; strange words. Words that almost made sense. And there were memories there too; lots and lots of memories - *and they weren't his!*

Luckily for Garreth, the small amount of the Talent he possessed was able to sort through this sudden input into his mind. Receptor nodes did the job they had been trained for and this second memory was placed where it should be - at the back of his mind, ready to call on.

The voices were something else. They weren't actually in his mind, he realized; they came from outside and seemed to filter through this new memory before registering with his brain. A kind of mental time delay.

Carefully, Garreth opened his eyes. There was a soft fabric under him and his face was buried in what appeared to be a pillow. He groaned at the headache and rolled over. He was lying on a bed and around the bed three people stood in disbelief. Three people he had never seen before - yet - new memory tugged - yet he knew them! Panic caused his heart to race and his mouth made open and closing movements as he searched for the right words. Finally...

‘Ah - ah - er.’ He gave up. He couldn’t think! The new things in his mind weren’t quite settled down - they flickered and shoved - all trying to get out at once. Then one did.

‘Daniel!’ he blurted. Yes, the word felt right. The name was right. Only it wasn’t his name - it was the name of the other memory. ‘Daniel...’ he said again, slowly, as the three others watched his mouth. Then another. ‘Emily!’ He looked at the girl, who seemed to cower from his gaze. He pointed to her. ‘Emily - yes - yes.’ He shifted his eyes to the two adults, and the words of this Daniel started clicking together in his mind.

‘Arthur - Gloria...’ His eyes continued their travel around the strange room. Odd-looking equipment stood in one corner, all switches and dials. A box with a dark screen sat on a table at the end of the bed; and a piercing bright light shone down from the ceiling and hurt his eyes. Then there was the mirror - and everything came crashing back.

The one he knew as Arthur bent down and looked into his eyes. Slowly, as if he knew there was a barrier to speech, he asked. ‘Who are you? What happened to Daniel?’

Garreth put his hand on his chest. ‘Garreth. Me - I - am - Garreth.’ He pointed to the mirror. ‘Daniel - there.’

‘What do you mean? Where is he?’ There was panic in Gloria’s voice, panic that was very close to the surface. Arthur placed his arm around her.

Emily stirred. ‘I saw a face.’ She pointed. ‘There. In the mirror. It was a girl.’ Emily had been staring at Garreth not in fear or fright, but in amazement. Apart from the red hair

and slightly heavier build, they could be brothers! 'She was there when - when - Daniel - you know. I saw her.'

'Jemma,' Garreth said. 'Daniel is - at my home. There is Jemma. My - friend.' He blew a sigh of relief. Jemma would help Daniel; he knew that. Her parents would find some way of getting help.

Gloria was struggling to take it all in; it was all too fantastic for words. Her whole life had been order and tidiness and such a story flew in the face of everything she knew and believed in. 'We have to tell someone. Arthur! We have to *tell* someone! The police! The...'

Emily saw the folly of that immediately, before Arthur could react. 'You can't.' She grabbed Gloria's arm. 'You would never be believed. You saw Garreth come out of the mirror, but how do you think that would sound to someone else?'

'*What's going on?*' There was a look of fear in Gloria's eyes. '*Arthur! Do something! Call some-one!*' Arthur put his arm around his wife and hugged her close to him.

'Sssh. I will. Just - I don't know.' Arthur was completely at a loss as to what to say or do, which was very unusual for Arthur Royce. 'Garreth. Listen. Is there any way that you know of to do something?'

Garreth was struggling with his own feelings, and the sight of these two distraught people was making him feel terrible. *But it isn't my fault!* he wanted to say. He could only shake his head.

A sob escaped Gloria's lips as she sat down abruptly on the end of the bed. As she did so, she disturbed something lying there, something that hit the floor with a dull thud.

‘That’s it!’ Emily shouted, as she picked up the little hard book with the silver binder. ‘This is what caused the whole thing!’ She held it out to Arthur as proof, but Garreth sprang up from the bed and reached for it instead. His fingers pried open the book at random...

...and runes met his eye. His heart hammered. This was *old!* He’d studied elementary rune-script in school and guild and knew some of the basics. He flipped back to the title page - it seemed stuck with another - if he could just make out the faded runes...

The paper wasn’t paper; it was parchment, brown and fragile with age. The runes, once black, were now faded to grey. His fingers traced the outlines and his lips moved in slow, silent pronunciation. The Book of Null, he read.

‘Who’s Null?’ he asked aloud, but got no answer. Everyone was looking at him, their eyes bored into him. They wanted answers; they wanted hope.

Carefully, Garreth turned the page. The first two pages revealed - more runes. He flipped through the entire book; there were only about twenty pages, but each one was covered in runes. Deciphering the book, he knew, would be hard work; and all the time the three strangers were watching him. He knew they wanted him to make some sort of sense out of things. Then the book surprised him again. He separated the title page from the one it was stuck to - and there was a script there he could read. This was Olde Anglic, and he’d studied that! His eyes scanned the

words, and as the meaning of the old words formed in his mind, the hairs on the back of his neck started to rise.

“I, Oderic of York,” he read, slowly pronouncing each word, **“sage and magician to Eorl Wulfrum Black Axe, Warden of the Northern Marches, do in this year of grace 1132 issue warning of the dire and fell incantations contained within this most ancient and dread work.**

The orderly monuments of this world are as naught before the heresy contained within and the powers of Law and Magik can prevail not.

This ancient book, cursed in all time, is a doorway to another realm, one in which the soul of man is duplicate and familiar, but one where the deeds of man are different and strange.

Around this world lies but another world. Unseen. Unfelt. It is without and it is within.

Here the boundaries of what we know alter. It is a place familiar and kindred. It is as far away as a breath; as close as a star. It is within all of us, waiting to be reached.

Waiting to be entered.

The road is difficult, with only myths and legends to guide the traveller. There are no books or auguries to it, save one, because they are forbidden. This place is dangerous; dangerous because it is so familiar, so easy to recognise. So much the same.

It is close, as the other side of this page is close, as the image in a mirror is close.

But beware!

Dreams and phantasies can take us to this other place, tales and lore can bring it to us. But it is not just in the mind that we can find it, it is too close and real for that. It actually does exist and you can cross over.

If you know how.

If desperation drives you.

The mirror is the key, where the world is opposite to this one, where things we take for granted do not work and those things of wonder and legend do.

This book is the door and the spell.

Beware!”

Everyone was silent for a moment. Then Arthur said, ‘Magic. It mentioned magic doorways. And spells. That’s stuff that doesn’t exist.’ He looked at the mirror and four people looked back at him; one of them was a stranger. ‘No. No. It’s too ridiculous to believe.’

Garreth recognized the book. Not for what it contained, but for what it was. This was an artifact of his world. The druid-metal rings; the runes. It even felt right. A slight prickling of the Talent, a sureness of what he thought.

‘This came from my world,’ he told them, as a weight lifted from his chest. ‘Maybe some-one...’ Could it be a *trick*? Had someone set him up for a prank? ‘It could be a trick,’ he told them. ‘Some-one back...’ he nodded to the mirror, ‘there - home - did this. It *has* to be a trick.’ Thankfully the language was getting easier to speak and think in.

Relief flooded through Arthur and Gloria; tricks they could understand. Tricks could be undone!

'I think,' Garreth continued as he turned the book in his hands, 'it's a formula of power - but I've never heard of it. The Book of Null.' He thought for a moment. 'No. I've never heard of it. It's definitely not on the study lists. Well - not the ones I've seen.'

'Dani - Garreth,' Emily stuttered, 'what study lists? What's it all about?'

'Magik, of course.' The word collided with another in his new mind and he used it. 'You know; magic. As in constructed paradigms...' Daniel's memory nudged its way forward, and the truth hit him. 'You don't have magic at all, do you?'

Arthur felt tightness around his temples. 'Right,' he said, 'enough of this. My mind aches from it. Let's go downstairs, get a cup of tea and - well - try and see what's to be done.'

It took two pots of tea and a packet of biscuits before the whole story was laid bare.

Afternoon was sliding towards evening when Arthur finally accepted what was happening. He didn't like it one bit and having to trust that someone in Garreth's world would be able to unravel the mystery and bring Danny back was seriously pushing the boundaries of belief. But Emily was right; if he told anyone their son had disappeared and another lad from a parallel world had taken his place he'd be locked up in the funny farm and the garden would be dug over in search of a body. So, what could he do? What could anyone do? Well, they could get organized for one thing; as little as it would be, they had to try.

‘Garreth,’ he asked, ‘how long to you think it would take someone to help?’

Garreth had been mulling over that problem also. ‘I don’t know. Days, maybe.’ He gave a wan smile and Emily was again reminded of how much he resembled Danny. ‘Our system of law doesn’t take too kindly with interference in magik. Or using it for things like this. I’m certain some serious wizard-power will be employed in solving it.’

‘Days,’ Arthur repeated. ‘We can’t tell anyone. Gloria,’ he saw the worry and anguish in her eyes, ‘we have to keep this quiet.’

‘If,’ Emily offered, in a quiet voice, ‘I dyed Garreth’s hair black he would look just like Danny.’

‘A few days off school *could* be arranged,’ Gloria said, hesitantly agreeing. Her own mind was numb and she had no idea how she could go to work on Monday and still be normal.

Garreth turned the Book of Null over in his hands. ‘I’d like to study this. There may be clues. There may be a way to use it.’ He looked worried. ‘But - I’m not sensing any real vibrations here. Nothing fits the patterns.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Emily asked.

‘Magic. Look,’ he spread his hands on the table. ‘Everyone with the Talent senses the fields of natural energy that comes from the earth. That’s what magic is, a way of controlling and using that power. Wizards are supposed to be able to see those fields. They call them the Skeins of Magik.’

‘But I don’t sense them here. I need to test a few things.’
He sighed. ‘I need time.’

Emily saw with amazing clarity that she would have to help him. On his own there was no way he could sort out this new world where everything was so different to what he was used to.

‘I’m going to help,’ she announced.

ENGLAND

On the following morning Jemma Mayhorn rose early and got dressed. The modern, casual clothes of yesterday were inappropriate for a Sunday, so she chose a modest skirt that was modern enough to show her calves, and a voluminous blouse that showed nothing at all. She had made up her mind to help Danny.

She found him sitting under a tree in Garreth’s back garden. Mr. Toast was lying on his lap like a fat, furry sack, purring his head off. Danny’s eyes lit up when he saw her and she saw relief in them.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hi.’

‘High?’ She looked up.

‘No. Hi as in...’ Danny made a circular motion with his palm, ‘...hi. Hello.’

‘Hi,’ she grinned. ‘I thought we - that is, you might like to walk down to the shop and take the bus into Chester. With me.’

‘Perfect,’ he replied, casting an eye towards the house. ‘I’ll just tell Garreth’s folks.’ Carefully he lifted Mr. Toast from his lap and placed him on the grass. The purring never missed a beat.

The sun was beginning to impart some warmth to the morning when they arrived at the mill pond. The foils of the mill were turning in a leisurely fashion and the little red bus was waiting before the shop,

‘We’re early,’ Jemma said. ‘They give a little toot two minutes before the bus leaves.’ There was a tree that shaded the horse trough outside the post office, a very large tree with a white circular seat around it. Danny walked towards it and sat on the bench. Jemma stood on the path, eyeing the tree warily.

‘Come on, sit down,’ Danny cajoled, patting the seat. Almost reluctantly Jemma sat down.

‘What’s wrong,’ Danny asked. He’d noticed Jemma’s hesitation.

‘Nothing.’

HUMMMPHHHUMMMPHH

Danny leapt to his feet; the sound had come from all around and above. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘It’s the tree.’ She saw his eyes go blank, and knew he was accessing Garreth’s memory.

‘Semi-sapient sycamore. The Sniggering Tree.’ He smiled. ‘I’d love one these back home.’ Most plants modified by magik rarely breed true, but the sycamore did. It reacted to a psychic energy condition that people exhibit when they ready their minds to prevaricate and it does this by twisting and expanding its core wood. Sap pressure differentials make the noise.

‘Would you really?’ Mischief rose up in Jemma’s mind; she was not exactly unfamiliar with the games that were played under the tree.

‘Oh, yeah. These would be *sooo* cool.’

‘Do you miss your home?’

‘Of course.’

SSNNKKK SSNNKKK That was a smaller one, Jemma noted.

‘Are you worried about Garreth?’ Jemma smiled sweetly at him.

Danny felt he was starting to tread on shifting sand; maybe it was time to be a bit clever. ‘Maybe I am,’ he said.

SNNG SNNG

‘No! I am!’ he protested.

SNNORKKSNNORKKSNNORKK

‘Do you worry that Emily will like him?’ Jemma had a killer instinct and knew just when to use it. Danny’s eyes were watching the tree in alarm. Panic gripped him and the earth seemed to open up beneath his feet. Masterfully he tried to avoid the inevitable. ‘That,’ he said deliberately, ‘is her business.’

**THHNNGGTHHNNGGTHHNNGG HONN
KKHONNKK**

‘Aaargh!’ Danny groaned.

‘Answer the question.’ Jemma’s face was all sweetness and light. Butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

‘I did!’

HUMMPHHUMMPH

‘Answer the question.’

Danny Royce knew when he was beaten. All he could do was surrender with dignity. ‘Yes. I think she will.’ The tree stayed quiet.

‘Does that bother you?’ Danny asked, in a blinding bit of insight.

‘A little,’ Jemma replied in a small voice.

SNNG SNNG

‘Ah ha!’ Danny shouted with glee. ‘I was right!’

SNORTSNORTSNORT the tree chortled, ***SNORRRRT
SNORRRRT***

The bus ride was sunny, bumpy and slow. And silent. There was no noise at all from the steam engine, just a faint hiss and pop of valves and the gentle smell of hot coke wafting over them.

The route wound into the market square of Lower Thatching, where they picked up a dozen or more passengers, then headed down a narrow leafy lane in the direction of Chester as indicated by a small wooden signpost. The lane

dipped and twisted; it crossed canals over narrow stone bridges and burrowed through brick-lined tunnels under the railway line. Small, hedged-bordered fields filled the landscape wherever he looked. There were no telegraph poles, no electricity pylons, no wide paved highways and no other traffic.

Danny thought it was a little bit eerie. Quiet and eerie. The bus was frustratingly slow and Garreth's memory told him that this was the way it was; but being told something, or remembering someone else's memory of it wasn't the same as experiencing it. Until he saw things for himself, Garreth's memories were just so much unconfirmed data; like *déjà vu*.

Chester was much more interesting. What Jemma called the Old Town was a kaleidoscope of noise and colour and was rich in the aromas of its trade and there was a hustle and vibrancy that was palpable.

The busiest appeared to be the couriers who delivered the recharged crystal globes for the PV sets and the paraphones and the advertising spells. Scurrying through the crowds with their short shoulder poles, a big round crystal dangling from each end in a heavy rope net, they each one wore a bright jerkin that carried his - or her - employer's name or business on the back; usually an emporium of magikal accessories where they made and recharged the globes. Black was charged, clear was spent.

Then came the ice-men and their horse-drawn insulated vans; their gelid blocks they carried with

great two-handed pincers slung over their oilskin-clad shoulders. There was always an insatiable demand to keep the ice chests stocked.

And noise too, from the throng of people; shopkeepers in their aprons, suits and dresses, ice-cream sellers with their flat straw hats and musical entertainments and customers with their parasols, perambulators and partners.

Colours came from the bunting and flags festooning the barrows and shops that wanted the customer's attention, and from the striped awnings of those same barrows and shops that competed for space over the pavements, and they came from the windows themselves. In fact, *most* of the colour came from the windows, because most of them carried a magikal field that showed whatever advertisement the owners had cared to provide.

As they walked through the streets, Jemma played tourist guide and pointed out things to him. Like the wall the legions had built when the place was once an outpost of an empire now long-dead. Scrupulously maintained over the centuries, its top parapet was a walkway where people could take the air and the sun. The old houses inside the Latin Wall, she told him, were protected by law from development, so each one was kept in its original splendour. Wooden buttresses, carved eaves, shingled roofs, pebble-glass windows, pottery chimneys, plastered walls, brick walls, stained glass and exposed beams; all kept exactly as they were when first built. Stone pavements lined both sides of the narrow streets and the roads between them were of

hard, granite cobbles. Cabs, black and private, horse-drawn vehicles of varied styles, bicycles, pedestrians, shoppers and hawkers, all crowded those streets.

Danny's eyes drank it all in; he was determined to remember everything.

Danny and Jemma joined the throng. They ate crusty bread rolls and ice-creams that Jemma paid for and just mingled in. But every time they passed a shop window that had an advertising sign, Jemma would make sure Danny didn't get too close to it because when he did the signs started to flicker. Eventually they found a bench under a tree and sat down in its shade. Danny cast a wary eye at the tree.

'Is this one of those...?'

'No.' Jemma was enjoying herself. Danny was good company, even if he had an odd way of looking at people as they walked by. Well, she admitted, not odd, exactly, more critical. 'What's wrong?'

'Everybody is dressed so old-fashioned. I mean; the sun's out, but everyone's wearing suits.' Most of the men, he'd noted, wore suits and waistcoats; while the women were dressed in flowing skirts that showed little above the ankle and blouses that billowed. Danny was no fashion expert, but he was certain he had seen this sort of fashion in old photographs; black and white photographs.

'The women aren't.'

'You know what I mean.'

Jemma sighed. 'It's Sunday best. Everybody dresses up when they take a stroll in town.'

'I'm struggling with this,' Danny admitted. He raked the hair back from his face and his green eyes locked with hers. 'What was wrong with the stuff you had on yesterday. Very modern. You looked terrific.'

Jemma blushed slightly. 'Shhh. Not so loud. There are clothes for public, and there are clothes for - well - not for public. If you know what I mean.'

'Amazing.' Danny's eyes were back watching the crowd. 'So what do you wear when you - say - go swimming? Sacks?'

'Swimming costumes of course. What do *you* wear?'

'Same.' He turned back to face her, a wide grin on his face. 'I'm getting a sense of fashion direction here, and I almost hate to ask this - what do your costumes look like?'

'Well, they're usually a single piece body suit that covers from here...' she indicated her mid-thigh with the edge of her hand, '...to here.' Her hand moved to mid upper arm.

'Loose or tight?'

'Loose of course!' Again the blush invaded her cheeks.

There was an ill-suppressed smirk on Danny's lips. 'What about the men. What do they swim in?'

'The same. They...' She got no further because Danny burst out in laughter. He held his sides and rocked forwards on the bench. People cast eyes their way and Jemma felt terribly exposed. Eventually the laughter diminished to giggles, then, mercifully for Jemma, stopped.

'That,' said Danny as he wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve, 'is the best laugh I've had for ages.'

'If it's so funny,' there was an angry hiss to Jemma's voice, 'what do *you* wear?'

'Guys swim in briefs.' He traced the outline of his swimmers. 'What's up?' Jemma had gone bright red and turned her head away. 'Hey! Jemma. What's up?'

'That's disgusting!' she hissed.

'Rubbish! Everybody wears them.' He thought about that statement. 'Well. Not everybody. Women don't.'

'I'm going to hate myself for asking this, Danny Royce,' Jemma took a deep breath, 'but what do women swim in?'

'Ok. There are two costumes. Right? On is a tight one-piece. It usually just covers the - er,' he was suddenly on that shifting sand again, '...er - middle bits.' His two hands indicated the two parameters of a one piece costum and he thought Jemma would die! Her face was positively flaming! Recklessly he plunged on.

'A two piece is called a bikini. One piece covers - here,' he indicated, 'the other - there.' Then he stopped. Jemma had gone white and her eyes were staring at him as if he was...

'*That's awful!*' she gasped. Then she stood up and stamped away.

Danny groaned, and stood up and followed her. 'Jemma! Wait!' But Jemma didn't stop. Walking quickly she disappeared down a small pedestrian alleyway between two rows of shops.

'Bugger!' Danny ran after her. He didn't know why, but he felt he had to apologise. Quickly he dodged around the

corner of the alley, bumping into a man carrying a pole across his shoulder.

‘Sorry mate!’ Danny shouted as he steadied himself. Then he saw what the man was carrying and turned and ran. Fast. Reaching a startled Jemma he grabbed her hand and pulled. ‘Come on! Run!’

‘What for?’

The courier staggered from the alley, pirouetting from the collision. He became aware that his spinning couldn’t stop; in fact, it was getting faster

...noiseless lights burst over his head

...fragmented noises echoed from the walls around him

...a cascade of sparkling power poured out of each crystal globe that he carried

...pouring into the air in two intertwined columns

...as he spun faster and faster

‘That!’ Danny shouted, pointing over his shoulder.

Jemma took one quick look at the sparkling columns of light that shot up in the air above the rooftops...

...then she sprinted after the rapidly diminishing figure of Danny.

Theolonia Crabbe had made her plans and preparations with meticulous detail. A case containing the equipment she would need and a few clothes were sent by the mail train

to Chester to be collected later. She would make a more circuitous journey by the passenger train in the unlikely event that she was recognised by another wizard. She wore a mild aversion ward that would make her all but unseen by the common folk unless she addressed them directly, but not powerful enough that a mage would be fooled. Absolute secrecy was a rare thing amongst the practitioners of the Art Arcana.

She knew where the lad was. All that was needed now was to lure him into her trap.

The pride of the Great Western Railway's fleet, the express locomotive *Star of Dundee*, thundered through the night with the arrogance of one that owned it. A dragon's breath of sparks and soot streamed from the funnel and a train of ten coaches fanned out behind. Light from the glowing windows fell on the dark countryside bringing square snapshots of bright surprise to field and lane and river and town.

Salamander Ord settled back with a foaming ale in one hand and a salmon and lettuce sandwich in the other, enjoying his favourite mode of travel. Airships might be quicker, but there was a certain absence of solidity beneath them that Salamander preferred not to dwell on. Height can affect wizards as much as the common man. Besides,

the carriages of the express service were good places to relax, he mused. Deep green leather seats, polished wooden walls with the lustre of years upon them, gleaming brass fittings and sparkling crystal lamps. The aromas of leather, polish and coal smoke combined in that satisfying way of all things railway.

The bellow of steel on steel rang out from its passing and Chester lay ahead, somewhere in the darkness, connected to him by twin ribbons of steel. Salamander Ord let the sway lull him as he ate and supped.

ENGLAND

The last of the Sunday afternoon light was rapidly disappearing over the rooftops when Garreth finally put down the Book of Null.

He was wearing a plastic bag over his hair and little beads of black hair dye had dried on his neck. Emily sat opposite him across his bed, a bed that had become more or less a work bench, surrounded by sheets of paper. The sheets contained what Garreth hoped were translations of the runes from the book. They had been working for hours and it had been very, very hard work. Garreth's satchel was also on the table and his guild books were strewn about. Two of them, a grimoire, or book of power schematics, and a runic reader were opened.

To Emily one looked like a book of geometry with lots of pentagrams and such, and the other was definitely a book of chicken scratchings!

Perplexed, Garreth reviewed his work. The book didn't make sense. It talked about seeking a compatible soul. It mentioned left and right-hand helixes. It even described how the transfer was made. But no spell. Maybe, he thought, I've missed something in the translation. Better read it again, he decided.

‘The mirror,’ he said to Emily, ‘that’s the doorway. Right?’ He shuffled the pages of translation about. ‘Through it the spell seeks the mate to the one here. OK. I’ve got that. When the spell has found the one, the calling begins. That’s the scrying formula. Now. Ah - when the two are attracted and opposite the field is expanded and changes the helix. What helix?’ He threw a helpless look at Emily, who returned it with a shrug.

‘Never mind, we’ll keep going. The mirror of one becomes the mirror of both, passage is affected when the helixes realign.’ Garreth rubbed his eyes. ‘*Think! Think!* Helix. Mirror. Mirror. Helix. What...’ Understanding broke like dawn - slowly. ‘Mirror images! Opposite helixes! The spell unwinds! Yes!’ He read on.

‘Values the same remain. That of the corpus and the soul of dissimilar mien are retained and returned. Memory suffices both sides of the helix. Wow!’ He thought hard, and it was as if his mind soared to grasp the implications. ‘You retain your own memory as well as that of the other! You keep your physical aspect apart. The same applies to the other you.’ Garreth sat back with a slump, the enormity of it totally swamping him.

‘That’s why I remember Danny.’ He tapped his head. ‘That’s why he’s here!’

Emily thought for a moment. Now that they had put everything together, piece by piece, she was beginning to get a feel for things. ‘Now that we have the spell...’ she didn’t even feel stupid saying words like “spell” anymore, ‘... what can we actually *do* with it?’

Garreth didn't know. That was the hard part; he didn't know. A wizard would know. A senior thaumaturgist would know. A half-baked journeyman mage would probably have half a idea. But *he* didn't. He caught sight of himself in the mirror; plastic bag, black dribbles and all. He turned away in exasperation...

...something caught his eye. There! On the periphery of vision. *Something in the mirror.* Slowly, Garreth turned his head one way then the other, looking at the mirror out of the corner of his eye.

'What are you doing?' Emily followed his eyes.

Now he blinked rapidly; now he squinted. Always looking at the mirror from an angle.

'Is there something in the mirror?' Emily asked, moving closer to look.

'Not in the mirror, no.' He squinted some more. 'In the glass.'

'What? What's there?'

Garreth held his breath. 'Runes.'

'From the spell? Is that what you think?' Emily was really getting the hang of magic now.

'Yes. They're still there. Residual pathways that haven't completely faded.' He looked back to the mirror. 'Yet.'

'The trail will be cold, surely? You can hardly see the runes and I can't see them at all!'

Garreth leapt up and grabbed Emily in a bear hug. 'That's it!' he shouted in her ear. 'Cold!' He held her back at arms length and stared into her eyes. 'You're a genius. Cold! That's what we'll do.'

‘What?’

‘We’ll warm it up!’ He frantically looked about the room. ‘Here!’ He grabbed some of the sheets of paper and his book of schematics and thrust them into Emily’s hands. Next, he grabbed the edge of his bed and turned it up on its side, clearing the floor underneath. There was carpet there. Plain, beige carpet. Without patterns.

He took the book back and started flipping through the pages. ‘I need to draw on the floor.’

Emily did a quick mental assessment of the carpet versus the predicament they were in and the carpet lost. ‘Marker pen,’ Emily said, producing one from Danny’s drawer in the cupboard. ‘What can I do?’

Garreth found what he was looking for. ‘Here. Overlapping pyramids - six points - circle in the middle.’ He reached into his satchel and withdrew a fine cord with tiny knots evenly spaced along it, and a compass. Counting the knots against the book’s data he held it between his outstretched arms.

‘Radius,’ he said. He placed one end on the carpet and Emily followed his other with the marker as he scribed a circle. In minutes they had copied the schematic, lining it up with the compass direction Garreth had set out. A pentacle now adorned his bedroom carpet. He took the marker, squatted down over the inner circle, and began to draw.

Emily peered over his shoulder. ‘What’s that?’ It looked to her like a small maze.

‘That’s my own mandala.’ He noted her quizzical expression. ‘All those with the Talent have a - an inner signature, if you like. That’s mine.’ He stood in the centre and took a deep breath. This was the tricky bit. Because he couldn’t access the natural power of this world, he needed something else. The mandala boosted his own natural power; he would use his own energy to warm the spell. But in every causal paradigm there’s a price to pay; as in “what goes up must come down”, or “for each action there’s an equal and opposite reaction”

When Garreth awoke it was to three concerned faces peering over him. Peering down at him. Gently they lifted him to his feet.

‘How long was I out?’ he asked faintly. He felt weak and disoriented.

‘Half an hour,’ Arthur told him. ‘Emily called us the second you hit the floor; you didn’t want to wake up, that’s for sure!’

‘Take a look,’ said Emily. And there...

...on the mirror

...in pale grey runes

...was the spell.

‘What do we do now?’ Arthur asked, and Garreth noticed the “we”. He grinned wearily.

‘I’ll show you. Have you got any copper pipe?’

ANGLAND

The DaneLaw Chambers building was an old converted moot-hall that had been built against the Latin wall in the Old Quarter of Chester. It was three stories high, with an imposing Saxon arch at the entrance and narrow, pointed windows on three sides. The offices of Halfdan, Athelstane and Pendragon occupied most of the second floor, high enough to be insulated from the incessant clatter of horseshoes on the cobbled streets and the rumble of hard coach tyres.

Jemma's uncle had a liking for the pipe, and his office reeked of tobacco; it seemed to match the patina of age that covered everything from the leather chairs to the etched glass of the gas lamps. Quill pens, each one a different colour for the different protocols of magikal determination and courtesy, stood like flagpoles across the front of Rufus' highly polished desk; and there were photographs of wife and family in leather holders arraigned along the left side. On the wall behind his seat, diplomas of Law and Magik were arrayed in serious presentation, each one positioned according to the requirements, and power, of the issuing schools and colleges. The room, to Danny's nose, had an olde-worlde lived-in kind of smell.

Scrolls, contracts and books littered the floor about the desk and the floor underneath them was covered by a rather faded carpet. Danny's other memory wasn't fooled by that carpet. Faded or not, it was a powerful mandala, its weave containing the schematic representations of the mathematics of the spells of truth, honesty and justice. It was a very big carpet. And very, very expensive.

Danny Royce was getting used to the bizarre; here he was on the morning of his third day since falling through the mirror sitting with Jemma in the waiting room of an attorney-at-magik waiting for a wizard to arrive! Nowhere, not in his wildest dreams, nor in his most lurid fantasy books would such a scenario be believable. He was on overload, and what made it so weird was how normal everything felt. He caught Jemma's eye and gave her a wan smile. Secretly Danny was pleased that Jemma had insisted on coming along...

...voices sounded from the outer hall and the office door opened. Jemma's uncle stepped through followed by two men. One was a rather portly man wearing a black frock-coat and a very bright crimson waistcoat. He was carrying a large leather traveling bag.

The second man was odd; odd like an eccentric is odd. To Danny, he reminded him of one of those tramps he often saw shuffling along the main roads of Manchester, dressed in a tattered great coat, rummaging through the rubbish bins, gratefully sipping on a cup of tea donated by a sympathetic shopkeeper, disappearing to God-knows-where in the night.

‘Salamander Ord,’ the first man said by way of introduction. He dropped the bag and walked over to Jemma and shook her hand. ‘I’d recognise you as Rufus’ niece anywhere, young lady.’ Then he switched to Danny and his face grew serious. ‘Young man, welcome to your alter-dimension. I bet it’s not what you imaged such a place to be. Eh?’

Danny took the offered hand, and smiled sheepishly. ‘No, sir. Definitely not.’ *So this was Jemma’s uncle’s wizard friend!* He noted the absence of any wizardish paraphernalia or regalia; the old man sitting there could have been anybody - the word “Dickens” popped into mind - *that’s it! The clothes! He looks like uncle whatsisname out of Dickens.* No, definitely not what he expected at all!

‘To business,’ Salamander said as he pulled forth the bag and removing from it a grey leather box as big as a spectacle case. He gave them both a smile. Opening the small grey case, he took out a pair of spectacles and put them on. For some reason, the familiarity of the act delighted Danny; we’re not that different after all, he thought. He did notice, though, that the wizard’s spectacles contained ground lenses.

‘I have made this trip under some haste, young man, so that I might make your acquaintance and ascertain your threat to our world.’

Danny started. ‘Threat? How can I be a threat?’ He looked at Jemma and saw the same confusion in her eyes. Rufus sat behind his desk and just watched.

‘Suppose, young man that a powerful exponent of my craft was to visit your world. This person could, with nothing more than simple earth-magik and glamour’s, control the way people acted and believed. And in doing so would be all but invisible to any regulatory authority you have.

‘Now. Turn that around. One such as yourself, who appears to be impervious to constructed magik, would also be invisible to us. Do you see? If magik fails in your presence, what mayhem may be wrought? Hmmm?’

Danny nodded, slowly. ‘I think I do, Mister Ord,’ he said with some hesitation; but Jemma was nodding her head with some certainty, so she knew exactly what could happen.

‘Good. On, then,’ said Salamander Ord rubbing his hands together. From his coat pocket he produced a wooden pencil and held it up before Danny’s eyes.

‘A simple pencil. Here.’ The wizard offered it over and Danny took it. ‘Does it feel normal to you?’

Danny rolled it between his fingers. It was wood. It was a pencil. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘That, lad, is because that’s all it is. However,’ Salamander said, reaching into his pocket again, ‘I have another.’ His hand appeared holding another pencil, exactly the same as the first. ‘Now, this one...’

...something happened

...the pencil started to come apart!

Like a dandelion in the wind, small particles of matter leapt away from contact with him - tiny shards of energy pulsed like miniature forked lightning - filling the room

with actinic flashes - a sharp crackling sound filled the air - then there was no more pencil. It had completely dissolved, leaving behind the tangy smell of ozone.

Jemma boggled at what she'd seen; Salamander, sweat pouring down his cheeks, leaned back and gasped for air. 'Well, well,' he said, to no-one in particular. 'Well, well, indeed.' His eyes were far away and unfocused; as if he were listening to something far, far away and he scratched the top of his head. Then, with a start, he returned to face Danny.

'I am, as you may have been informed, young man, a mage of some considerable ability.' Danny nodded absently; but the wizard looked to him like a man who was badly rattled by what he had seen. 'That...' he held up his now empty hand, '...was a very sophisticated and difficult replication. It is the hardest thing to achieve in magik, and requires the highest - no matter - no matter, eh?

'That simple pencil,' Salamander Ord continued, returning the subject to its original course, 'was made by me this morning. It's a rather elegant molecular confidence trick utilising a complex replication with a disparate energy bonding matrix against a true template - plus - randomly accumulated matter that produced, young man, a real pencil. A replication in which two presumptions are made. The pencil will appear like a pencil, and, while I concentrate on it, it will act like a pencil. That's how constructed magik works, young man. The fact that my creation had the physical aspects of its master-form satisfied the former; its failure at the latter is the proof of the pudding - so to speak.

‘However, try as I might - I couldn’t - hold - the process together.’ Again the wizard’s eyes grew vague, and his voice was far away. ‘In my mind - all the imperatives - hardened formulae of constructed power - just - dissolved.’ He barked a laugh. ‘Poof! Just like that!’ The wizard shook his head. ‘Let’s try something else, lad. That last was constructed power; let’s try some raw focused energy.’ He removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

‘Stand over by the door, if you will.’ The wizard held both hands out before him, his fists closed, and Danny saw Rufus and Jemma back away. The old man just stood there and watched. ‘This is Elphyck’s Coil,’ he said. ‘Designed to restrain and hold.’ His hands opened...

...Jemma saw the power flow

...saw the brilliant blue coils of writhing energy leap from the wizard’s hands and encircle Danny

...saw sweat bead the wizard’s face

...then saw the coils splutter and die.

Danny saw Salamander Ord straining mightily with his empty hands outstretched. It was obvious that everyone in the room could see something, but he had no idea what. There was, however, a very slight blue haze around the wizard’s hands. Then that too was gone. It had been the same with the pencil. One second it was in the wizard’s hand, the next second it had faded away.

The only sound in the office was the wizard panting.

Jemma had never seen anything like it in her life. Such fierce and applied magik was not exactly used every day, but

she had no doubt that that was what the wizard had used.
And it had fallen apart!

‘Dear me,’ Salamander said. ‘Well Rufus, you were right. I have learned something today that no mage in living memory has known; and I would seek further, if...’ he turned to Danny and gave him his full attention, ‘if you will allow me a courtesy. A small concession. A reading of your mind. Painless, I assure you.’

Danny nodded assent, his lips too dry to speak. For some reason he didn’t want to lick them for fear of appearing nervous. ‘Excellent!’ boomed the wizard. ‘That’s the spirit, young man. Now. Sit down here,’ he used the two visitor chairs in front of Rufus’ desk, ‘opposite me. Good. Now, just lean forward towards me - good - close your eyes...’

Jemma saw the wizard bend his own head to almost touch Danny’s; then, almost on the point of being unseen, a faint violet glow came into being between them. She couldn’t look at it for too long, because it made her eyes begin to itch. Then - minutes only - it was over, and Salamander Ord sagged back in his seat, perspiration again dripping down his cheeks.

‘Well, well, well.’ He pulled a small notebook and pencil from his pocket and quickly began to write. ‘Amazing...’ he muttered away to himself, still writing. ‘Utterly amazing. There!’ He slammed the book shut and put it away with a flourish.

‘My initial analysis suggests that while you may accept the *benefits* of magik -things you can see and touch that

were crafted with some original magikal input - the *direct* application of magik has no affect on you. There is definitely a degree of separation within your mind that is distinct and quantifiable, and I suspect we'll find a sliding scale of it in there somewhere, a way of measuring cause and effect. But that's for later.' He pulled his spectacles off and put them away also.

'Something else you should know. You too, Miss Mayhorn.' He eyed them each in turn. 'There are two of you in there...' he pointed to Danny's head, '... almost identical in aura and aspect - but very different in content. It seems that our misplaced Master Aldredge is still with us in a fashion. Hmmm?'

'I - I have memories of things. I *know* things that - Garreth knows - feel things,' he avoided looking at Jemma, who had reddened considerably.

'Don't fear those memories. Their energy quotient is significantly less than your own...' he stopped at the perplexed look on the lad's face. 'You are the stronger personality; the other is more of a symbiot. I suspect that Master Aldredge is experiencing the very same thing.'

'That's a relief,' Danny enthused. 'I was beginning to think I was going crazy.'

'Oh, you may, lad. You may.'

'Eh?'

'Or you may profit - it's up to you. Basically, you are more than what you were before. With the additional experience and knowledge you now possess, you will have

an accelerated learning curve in your development and growth. Axiomatic, really.'

It made sense; Danny knew it made sense. 'What will happen to me, Mr. Ord?'

'Happen?' The wizard seemed surprised at the question. 'Why, we will have to return you home, Mr. Royce. You're too much of a risk here. Just as I'm sure that Garreth Aldredge is a risk to your world.' The wizard's face grew serious and his kindly eyes hardened. 'Yet, there is more to this than meets the eye, I'm afraid. This was no accident. However, at this very moment I am unable to identify the spell that brought you here and thus unable to offer any theory as to "why".' He gestured to the third man, who shuffled over.

'Meet Afferton Smythe,' he said, by way of introduction. Afferton Smythe was a small, wrinkled man with yellow weeping eyes, and a fringe of grey hair from which the dome of his bald head protruded. The skin of his face sagged in white-stubbled folds and his nose was a huge red cherry. He looked old and frail inside his moth-eaten greatcoat. Well-worn boots shod his feet and he wore gloves with the fingers cut off; the skin on his fingers was rough and red.

Yet there was something about the old man that kept drawing Danny's eyes to him - something that flickered in the old man's weepy orbs - something on the border of the unseen - something hard and sharp - something golden. And his handshake was surprisingly firm.

Rufus said from his chair, 'Afferton has a very special talent, Danny.' He grinned his toothy grin. 'Proceed, Afferton.'

'Are we safe, Salamander? No chance of being scryed on?' Afferton's voice was in complete contrast to his looks; there was the feeling of power in the old man's deep rumble.

The wizard gave a mirthless smile. 'Anything that can get through my wards hasn't been devised yet.' With a nod, Afferton turned back to Danny.

The old man walked around the young man, sniffing. 'I smell things, lad,' he told Danny. 'Things that are wrong; things that don't belong.' He peered into Danny's eyes, examining him. The stare from the yellow eyes was unblinking and very disconcerting. Danny felt he was being pulled apart bit by bit.

'What sort of wrong?' he asked, unable to move his eyes away.

'Sorcery. Sins.' He blinked. 'Evil things.' He lifted his rheumy eyes to Salamander. 'Could I have a word, Sal? Outside?'

Jemma was unable to contain herself. 'How can you do that, Mister Smythe? Is it the same thing a witch-smeller does?'

'Ah. Well,' the old man said, 'you see - it's not exactly the same - it's more of a side effect of my condition.'

Both Jemma and Danny felt sorry for him, and Danny just *had* to ask. 'Condition?'

Afferton gave an apologetic smile. 'Didn't they tell you, lad? I'm a were-wolf.' The old man saw the disbelief

and astonishment in the lad's eyes and patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, though,' he assured Danny, with a small smile on his face, 'I'm on medication for it.'

Danny struggled to stop himself from bursting out in laughter. Myth and reality collided head-on in his mind and the result was only more weirdness. Backward clocks - not-quite dragons - and werewolves on the pension. From now on he had better start taking everything at face value.

Outside of the office, Salamander peered into his friends eyes. 'What did you find?'

'There's something there, Sal,' Afferton replied, doubt in his voice, 'but it's very faint.' He rubbed his nose with his sleeve. 'It's something that's attached to him.'

'Attached, eh?' Salamander Ord rubbed his chin. 'Possibly at the house where he first appeared. Would you go there with Rufus and myself tonight and sniff it out?'

'Pleasure.'

Salamander Ord sadly watched his old friend shuffle off down the stairs. He was dismayed at his friend's condition. *Surely it hadn't been that long ago?* But it had - the years had skipped away, stranding them both.

On the first floor, in an office of Gryphon and Arrowsmith, contract attorneys in the dramatic arts, Theolonia Crabbe was taking her leave. Not as herself, of course, she wore

another name; her demeanour was stooped and there was a slight tremble to her frail hands. The weak guise-spell she wore made it very easy for someone without the Talent to believe that she was indeed who she claimed to be and as frail and delicate as she looked.

‘I really do hope the bequest fulfils someone’s dreams,’ she said in a quiet, small voice. ‘So much of my late friend’s works were never catalogued properly, you know. All that history. All those long-gone actors. The fabulous set designs and – oh – don’t forget the costumes, Mr. Rundle. Never forget the costumes.’

‘My dear lady,’ Forrester Rundle demurred, ‘the great works of this unknown genius shall not be forgotten. I will personally handle the allocation of the manuscripts and books and seek the best repository for such a collection.’ Forrester Rundle was senior partner and nearing the end of his working life. His passion for the theatre would sustain his intellect in the years remaining to him. The lady who had brought such a bequest clearly satisfied the cursory inspection Rundle had made, given that it was made on his own carpet. And she certainly had manners and breeding.

‘I will have the runner collect the catalogue directly.’ He hovered over her hand, before bringing it to his rather wet, fleshy lips. Then she was gone, her perfume trailing out of the door.

‘What a delightful lady,’ he told his receptionist, who had missed the whole thing. ‘Quality shows in the breeding, Miss Clarke. In the breeding.’ He closed the door on her.

ENGLAND

Anybody looking into the back garden of Arthur and Gloria Royce bright and early in the morning would have seen four people wandering about with lengths of copper pipe and tape measures. Their quest was simple; they were going to build a pyramid. Not a real one, of course, but the outline of one. Actually, it wasn't really the outline of one either; more the suggestion of an outline of a pyramid.

Four pipes were stuck into the ground in the positions Garreth had marked and oriented. The pipes were bent at ground level and pointed to an imaginary point somewhere above the roof, which was the theoretical apex of the pyramid. It had to be in perfect ratio to the Great Pyramid, and the details came from one of Garreth's books. It took most of the morning to get it right.

Arthur had flung himself into the task because his own particular little talent had recognized the truth; he believed Garreth. Now all he had to do was to stop Gloria from panicking - and that wasn't easy. They had no way of knowing how their son was faring; but Emily *had* seen someone else in the mirror, and Garreth *did* seem to know what he was

doing - *or maybe*, Arthur Royce told himself, *I'm dreaming this because they've already put us in the funny farm.*

In Danny's bedroom, when everything was in place, Emily ran a critical eye over proceedings. Garreth had placed the Book of Null on the pentacle on a table before the mirror and the grey runes of the spell were just visible in the glass. Whatever he had done with the pyramid obviously worked because he was quite happy, she thought. Now what?

'Now what?' she asked. Garreth was very excited. The aerials he had placed focused the earth's energy just as they were designed to do and he could feel that energy tingle through his body; his Talent was still there!

'Ah?' he said, as Emily's words filtered through his thoughts. 'Oh. Right. I'm going to use the energy that's under the pyramid to charge the pentacle. *That* will energise the book and keep the spell visible in the mirror. Understand?' Garreth picked up the marker pen and his book of schematics and laboriously drew a series of symbols on each of the points of the pentacle.

This was the bit Emily was struggling with. 'No. What does it matter if you can see the spell?'

'Because the spell is also on the mirror over there! *On my mirror!*'

'Ah. Yes! Someone will see it.' An idea popped into Emily's head. She rummaged through Danny's drawer. 'Garreth,' she said in a small voice, 'if the words on the mirror are coming from the book...'

‘Hmmm?’ Garreth was concentrating on his work. He put the pen away and stepped back. He licked his thumb ready to imprint each point. ‘Now to activate it - sorry - what did you say?’

‘If the words in the mirror come from the book, would they change if you blanked out some of the letters?’

Garreth stared at her while his mind grappled with what she had said. Finally, ‘Emily - you are a genius! A message! I could send a message!’ He picked up the Book of Null. ‘How? How do we...?’

Emily smiled sweetly at him. ‘Whiteout,’ she told him, showing him the small white bottle in her hand.

When Arthur and Gloria came into the room at Emily’s urging, the spell on the mirror was pulsing slightly with a pearly light. And there were lengthy gaps in the rows of runes.

‘What does it say?’ Arthur asked.

“‘Help”.’

ANGLAND

Mary Aldredge carried a set of fresh sheets up the stairs to Garreth’s room.

Her mind was busy. Mr. Pendragon had paraphoned a little while ago to say that his wizard friend would like

to inspect the room and she thought the least she could do was to clean it up and make the bed properly. Just in case they thought she was a sloppy housekeeper. This - Danny - she mentally stumbled over the name - was just as untidy as her Garreth. Thoughts of Garreth didn't upset her so much now that she wore a calming amulet. Besides, Jemma's uncle had assured them that his friend was one of the country's most senior wizards and he would sort out...

...something caught her eye

...something in the mirror

...pulsing. Mary turned her head and looked.

Three minutes later an out of breath and terribly excited Mary Aldredge was gasping her story to Clarity Redgrave and forty minutes after that Rufus Pendragon, Afferton Smythe and Salamander Ord were speeding to Lower Thatching.

In the rooms that had been leased by a lady of impeccable charm and breeding, all the curtains were drawn tightly closed and all the doors were sealed. A gentle guise warded the rooms, one where a casual scrying would find a little old lady quietly reading the works of a benefactor of the theatre.

Theolonia Crabbe had set a very small mirror on the heavy oaken table that dominated the room, and proceeded

to will her brother forth. Slowly, reluctantly, his features displaced hers in the glass, his mouth sullen and thin, and his eyes glittering and bright.

‘Why do you keep me waiting, sister? I burn to taste the breath of life. Why delay?’ His voice was a rasp.

‘All is ready, Horatio. All is in place. Your body-to-be is nearby. No-one suspects.’

‘Is he aware of being null? If so - who else?’ The bright eyes peered hard at her from the mirror.

‘He does not suspect. Unless magik is used on him, no-one will suspect. So far it is a mystery and only a few people know. It will take them days to even get close to the truth.’ So nearly finished, she thrilled to herself. *So nearly free!* ‘I have devised a simple lure that will bring him to me. What of your preparations?’

His voice came thin and distant from the glass. ‘I need use of your body one last time, sister dear. One last excursion to organise the ranks of my followers.’

Horatio had accepted his sister’s plan with enthusiasm. A whole world to feast on! What might he accomplish with no-one to hunt him down? Oh, yes; he knew his sister was right about his chances of survival in this world and he had no hesitation in abandoning the plans he had made. Yet, they could still serve a purpose; the followers he had built up over the years could still be of some use to him.

Ah, yes; Horatio Crabbe had *his own* plan.

The thought of letting Horatio take over her body filled Theolonia with dread, as it always did. The loathing and disgust she always felt afterwards was physically and

emotionally draining, and she imagined that she could *smell* him on her. A week of bathing never quite removed the psychic stain. But she would do it one last time - just to make *absolutely* certain that nothing - nothing - *nothing* - went wrong.

Absent-mindedly she drummed her fingers on the table, blissfully unaware that, as with the word “electricity”, there was no local word for “paranoia”.

The mirror told Salamander Ord exactly what was going on.

Runes were no mystery to one so high in the Arts and he needed no reader or dictionary to help him. In Garreth’s crowded bedroom he sat before the mirror and scribbled the message into his notebook. Rufus and Afferton crowded around, looking over his shoulder. Mary and Clarity sat on the bed, watching. The only sound was the scratching of the wizard’s pencil. Mr. Toast watched proceedings from under the bed.

‘Very clever, young lad,’ he muttered to himself, ‘very clever indeed.’

‘What’s he done, Salamander?’ Rufus asked, peering at the mirror.

Salamander tapped his pencil against the glass. ‘He’s used the book to send a message back.’

Mary jumped to her feet. 'Is he alright, Master Ord? Is he...?'

'Yes. Apparently he's in good hands.' There was a faraway set to the wizard's face, as if he was deep in thought.

'What is this book you mention?' Clarity knew a lot about magik and the books that were written about it from her research at the university. She was certain that she had never heard of any book that could do this.

But Salamander Ord only shook his head. 'I'm sorry ladies; the name of this book is not to be known by any but me. I'm sorry. Perhaps,' he asked, with a disarming smile, 'if you would leave us alone for a few minutes...?' He didn't like sending them away, but he had no choice.

'Tea, then,' Mary offered. She felt surprisingly relieved at the wizard's news. 'We'll go and make some tea.'

When the door was closed behind them, Salamander fished around in his bag and pulled out a small bell. When he rang it, it rang not with a tinkle, but with a solid *boom* that filled the room.

'Warded,' he told his two friends. 'Now we have privacy.' He referred to his notes. 'This is the message - "*Garreth - safe - Danny family - Book of Null here - spell swap us.*" That's all.'

'What exactly is a Book of Null?' Rufus asked. 'I've never heard of it.'

Salamander Ord loosened his tie and removed his coat. 'I only know of the name, Rufus. It's very old and it's proscribed.' He scratched his head absent-mindedly. 'Or rather, it's on the

list of proscribed books. I don't know anyone that's studied it; in fact, I didn't know it actually existed.'

'Can we get a copy?'

'Ha! Where do you start? Where's it kept? When was it written? Who wrote it? What's it about? No, gentlemen, whoever used this book had spent a long time searching for it. And I'm certain they would have covered their tracks. Damn!

'Listen to me. The proscribed list is only known to thau six and above. And they were proscribed by order of the Crown.'

Rufus Pendragon knew he had just heard a state secret. The breath caught in his throat at the implication. T6 was very high in the science of thaumaturgy; wizardship began at T5 - and only went up to T9. His friend Salamander was a Thau nine. Someone very high in the Arts had done this. And the Crown had proscribed the book! Heads, literally, would roll.

But Salamander had moved on. The lad had changed not the spell, but the path the spell took. Therefore the route was still open. Therefore...

'Rufus. Get me some of Garreth's possessions. Something natural - worn next to the skin. Same for Danny. There must be something here.' While the search went on, Salamander drew something on the mirror, something that only he could see. He drew it with a blood-pen and what he drew was his own mandala. But this was no ordinary psychic prompt, this was written in binary, and to someone

of education in the world he wished to access it would look amazingly like a DNA strand.

Rufus returned with a leather thong that carried a silver ward and Danny's now-dark wrist amulet was found. He also saw the blood-pen and knew exactly what his friend was going to do. He was going to open a doorway through the mirror using his own body as a conduit, and to do that blood was needed. And that was necromancy - and illegal. *I hope you know what you're doing, Sal.*

Salamander held one of the lad's possessions in each hand and then rested both hands against the mirror. His mind moved to the plateau state where the most powerful mages can see the very skeins of magik themselves and call them in - can focus them - command them.

Afferton backed into a corner of the room; already he could feel the currents of energy spiraling in on the figure of Salamander. His skin began to itch and his body vibrated as the increasingly powerful currents poured past him - and he wanted to change. Ancient urges rose up in him and another shadow stood behind him - a shadow of the beast within. Afferton trembled and tried to hang on.

The power coursed around Rufus and mostly ignored him. He was aware of it, but the ability he had that made him attorney acted like the prow of a ship and the power

flowed seamlessly by. But he could see the corona that enveloped Salamander, and the sparkling motes of light that coalesced around him.

The mirror vibrated under Salamander's hands as his mind forced the raw energy into shape and fed it into the mirror. With sweat pouring down his face the wizard teased the power into the runes, into the conduits. He could feel the room humming behind his back. He could see the runes getting brighter. Now the edges of the mirror turned opaque - now they started to shimmer. The mirror turned black, and the runes became clear - now they were openings to somewhere else. The runes grew; they expanded and flowed together - then the mirror itself was clear and whole...

...and showed another room!

The power around Salamander steadied to a dull throb as the conduit stabilized. Now he could see into the room. Shadows filled the corners, but he could see, directly in front of the mirror, a small table with a small brown book lying on it. That was it! The Book of Null! If only he could reach out! If only he could turn the pages!

'GARRETH!' he called in a Summoning voice. **'GARRETH, ATTEND!'** The sound carried through and the words vibrated from the mirror and echoed around the bedroom beyond the mirror. **'GARRETH! GARRETH, ATTEND ME NOW!'**

The door was flung open and light spilled into the room. A young man stood there in round-eyed amazement, his mouth open. Salamander blinked at the sight and

nearly lost the connection; *this lad was just the same as the other! Ahhh*, he realized, *he's dyed his hair*. Suddenly, a young woman pushed past him and walked to the mirror. She said something to Garreth in a language that Salamander couldn't understand and Garreth finally moved.

'GARRETH, I NEED...' the two figures clapped their hands over their ears and staggered back. 'Garreth,' Salamander said in his normal voice, 'my name is Salamander Ord and I am a wizard. Danny is safe and well. I need your help. Time is of the essence. I need the book. Do you understand?' The lad in the mirror nodded and the girl spoke to him again. He answered her in her own language, then...

'Yes, Master Ord.' Relief flooded his voice. 'What can I do?'

'Show me the book, lad. Hold it open for me.' He shook sweat out of his eyes. 'Rufus! Copy down what you see.' The young lady reached somewhere out of his view and brought forth a sheaf of papers. Quickly sorting them, she held them before the mirror. Behind her a man and a woman appeared at the doorway; their eyes were wide in disbelief.

'We copied the book, sir,' Garreth explained. 'We had to alter the original to get the message out. The runes in red are the spell; they're the ones that glowed in the mirror.'

'Show me,' Salamander said, and page by page the young lady presented the text of the Book of Null to the mirror where Rufus copied it down. The only sound for a

long, long time was the furious scribbling of Rufus' pencil. Then, as Salamander's strength began to fade; the job was finished. Which was just as well because Salamander was finding it hard to channel the power correctly; already the mirror was distorting.

'Keep the power into the mirror, lad. I'll be back...' the mirror clouded as his strength gave out. In a heartbeat it was just a plain mirror that showed a sweat-drenched wizard on his knees.

Tea and scones are wonderful remedies for flagging spirits. Tea with brandy is much better, as Salamander knew. Soon he was back to his old self, the notes Rufus had made spread out before him on the dining table.

'Listen to this...' he told Rufus and Afferton.

...in the old Roman days of Angland, the story ran, following the rebellion of the Iceni tribe and the death of their queen, Boudicea, there was a meeting of the sages and seers of the Britons and Celts at the northern holy place called Long Meg. All the tribes were represented. Great magicians combined their arts to determine the future way of the land, and a great spell of seeking was crafted.

Within the circle of stones all men and women of power linked their hands and commenced the crafting. Ethereal

fire, blue and flickering, began to leap from stone to stone; clouds darkened the sky; faerie lights drifted among the throng within the circle and a keening wind blew down from the cold north. The stones now glowed with the fire and the blue tongues of flame speared straight up into the black sky...

...but something was amiss and the spell went awry

...all magik collapsed and the land returned to normal. But not quite normal. In the midst of the seers and sages, two strangers lay as dead on the ground, and two of the seers were missing.

The two men spoke no known tongue. Magik was employed to seek the truth and the fate of the two missing seers; it failed. The highest minds were sent for and three great mages came together. Orin Halfblood journeyed across the northern sea from the Norse lands, Enan of Holy Island left his isolated retreat, and the Lady Deidre Blackthorn sailed from Baile Atha Cliath in Erin's Isle.

They found the two strangers impervious to the art of magik. More - their very presence disrupted the magik in others. No direct spell or incantation affected them, and the two men were said not to even see the effects of magik. Small magik was tried; guises and glamours and the like. Simple earth-magik. And they worked. Through such simple conjurations the mages were able to converse with the two men; and the mages were afraid of that which they found. The two were beyond normal folk - and they were dangerous. Many wanted them killed, but the three mages

refused. Cloistered in the northern lands, the two were studied and they recounted every aspect of the world they knew. Then the three mages carefully wrote down the spell of Long Meg and ensorcelled it in a book.

Centuries passed. Then a powerful mage sought that book. He was confidant and adviser to the chieftain of the Britons, Ambrosius Aurelianus, who was fighting to keep out the Saxon hordes. The power of other worlds was needed if the man popularly known as Arthur was to succeed, and the great mage Merlin delved for the mystery of The Book of Null.

No more was heard of the mage nor the fate of his master.

Four hundred years crawled over the land, and the fortunes of its peoples changed yet again. The usurper William of Normandy sought the power of the book to help his invasion of the southern shores. Bishops and wise men were sent from Rome to assist him, yet they too failed, and his cause was lost. The wild Celts and Britons threw their lot in with the Saxons and Danes, and Harold was proclaimed king of the Angle Isle.

A later king, Alfred II, built a College of Magik and Mystery at York where all the great minds of magelore and the highest magicians from the Old Religions and the New were invited to finally determine and cast in word and deed the laws of magik. And in the process, the old books, amongst them The Book of Null, were condemned and proscribed.

Finally, in the reign of Athelstane IV, in 1666, the Laws of Magik were codified into the Office of the Triumvar under the aegis of the Crown

The Book of Null had finally been lost to memory.

Now, apparently, it had been found again.

‘There,’ said Salamander, pointing to several lines, ‘there’s the spell. Helixes and mirror fields and scrying parameters. Hidden in the runes. Look there, space-time indices. It’s very good work.’

‘What now?’ Afferton rumbled, his liquid eyes roving over the interior of the little room, glancing uncertainly at the silver cutlery - there’s something about the indoors, he told himself, that closes in on a fellow; something that could - *trap*.

Salamander decided. ‘I have to present this to the Office of Magikal Malfeasance.’ Rufus nodded agreement. ‘They are the only ones who can give me permission to re-enact the spell and swap the lads back.’ He yawned. ‘Time is now of the essence. I’ll leave for London on the early dirigible.’ He yawned for a second time. ‘Let’s go home, Rufus.’

‘Damn!’ Afferton swore under his breath, as they dropped Salamander at his hotel. ‘I forgot to smell out that attachment at the lad’s place.’

‘Tomorrow, Afferton,’ Rufus told the old werewolf. ‘We’ll do it tomorrow.’

That evening there was a small celebratory dinner at the Mayhorn’s home. Edgar and Mary Aldredge attended and Garreth’s father was in rare good humour. As he told everyone, he had known it was only a matter of time before it was sorted out and Garreth would be back. No real harm done, eh? And the lad’s had the adventure of a life time too boot, yes?

Jemma wasn’t sure how she felt at the prospect of Danny returning home. Not that she *didn’t* want Garreth back - but Danny *was* rather interesting. And funny.

Horatio Crabbe checked his image in the mirror before venturing out.

His own features had already overlaid his sister’s enough that she would be unrecognisable to anyone who knew her, and the rough, long dark dress and shawl gave the impression of a poor old crone. *Old Crone!* A bitter laugh escaped his lips. Here was a body that clad his soul, and as old as it was, it vibrated throughout with **LIFE!** With **FEELING!** Its life essence infused his senses and overpowered them; his mind reeled at the **POWER** that coursed through him - he exulted - **CRAVED!** – nonono - he had to fight the urges - yes - yes - *had* to control his feelings - or *she* would return and take her body back - or *they* would sense him and hunt him down.

Slowly, reluctantly, Horatio forced his emotions away and hid them. Then, satisfied at his control, he stepped out into the dark; and there, on the streets, he would be just one more unhappy creature of the night.

A ghostly moon rode behind silhouette clouds and cast pale, wavering shadows on the ground as Horatio made his way through the darkling streets to the damp alleyways of the riverside. Here there were no streetlamps or other signs of human comfort. In those squalid places the ones he sought took refuge from the bright of day and the curious inspections of the Law.

Horatio had to rely on his subterfuge and disguise, there was no way he could seek those he wished to find by arcane means. It was so *hard* not to use his powers, so *hard* not to give in to the driving need of his dark Talent. But, he consoled himself, it wouldn't be long now. The dream of power unlimited in the world of null was so close. No, it wouldn't be long before he, Horatio Crabbe, would take revenge on life itself for all the years of his misery.

The night closed in around him. Brackish water oozed around the cobblestones and the smell of rotting timbers and mud filled the narrow spaces between warehouses and wharves. The soft lap of water marked time with Horatio's quiet tread as he picked his way through the broken reality of human dreams. This place was the bottom of the heap. No-one could fall lower than this and still take their body with them; and climbing out of it was too great a task for those who fell into it so easily.

It was paradise for Horatio - he fed on the very despair that pervaded the place - his soul absorbed the misery that seeped like river mist around his ankles. And in that misery he devised his own plan, one that would punish his sister and followers alike.

Senses, long ingrained but seldom used, brought his eyes around to stare full into the gaze of the biggest rat he had ever seen. It sat on a wall ten feet away and looked at him without fear.

'Ahhh,' Horatio sighed. 'There you are. Tell your master I have need of him.' The rat just stared back calmly, and anger flared in the mandrake's mind. 'Obey me, familiar,' he seethed, his eyes flashing diamond bright, 'or risk my power!' A tendril of thought crept from the rat's mind, fearful and supplicatory; wisps of fear and sorrow and regret followed as the sorcerer's familiar tried to direct its master's wishes.

'Much better, sorcerer. Much better.' Horatio's voice was oily and smooth and positively *dripped* with venom. 'You and your kind are to meet with me.' An image of Theolonia's great grey house flashed into the familiar's mind. 'Here. At this place. There the ways of old shall be returned to the true followers.' Yes. He would send them to his sister's house; let the Law find them together. Let the Law punish them equally - punish his followers because he needed a diversion; punish his sister because - because - because, he finally admitted to himself - he hated her.

Silently, the mandrake drifted into the night.

A fine drizzle of rain drifted down on the alleyways and narrow-ways of the waterside, as Horatio Crabbe continued his search. It wasn't necessary to contact each and every sorcerer and witch personally, his experience over the years had gained enough converts that word had spread; most senior witches and sorcerers knew that there would soon be one abroad who would lead them back to the Old Ways.
Fools!

One glowing eye gave the familiar's position away, one eye that caught the light of the moon. But Horatio didn't need the moon; his instincts told him things no eyes could see. 'Mistress cat,' he addressed the single eye. 'I have need of your other self. At this place, at this time.' Again the tendrils of the mandrake's corrupted mind went forth and found a willing receptacle. 'Do not fail me.' Then he was gone, swallowed up in the night.

Danny Royce turned up at Rufus' office bright and early the next morning ready to help out as a runner. Jemma's uncle had arranged for a room in a nice establishment five minutes walk away; and that suited Danny. He had felt very uncomfortable with the Aldredges; and he was certain that they in turn were just as uncomfortable with him. He had a few of Garreth's clothes and Rufus had promised to buy him more if things dragged on a bit.