

# The Search for a Legend

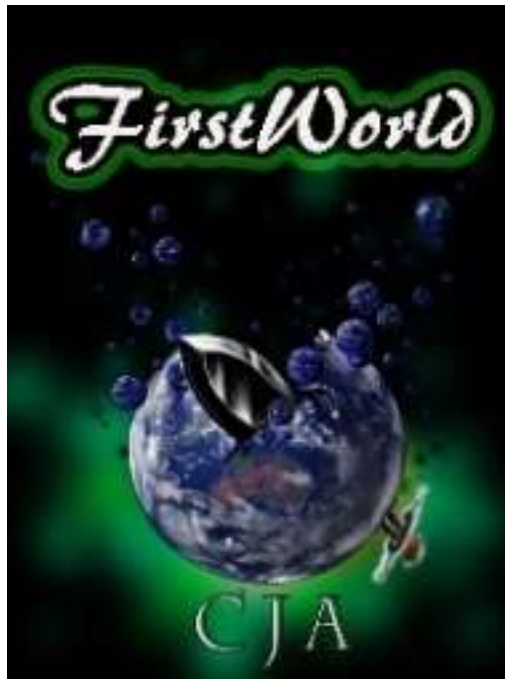


*Part 1 of Quest for Knowledge*

*A First World Novel*  
*Christopher Jackson-Ash*



**"The Search for a Legend"  
Part One of  
"Quest for Knowledge"  
Being  
Volume 1 of the "FirstWorld Saga"  
by  
Christopher Jackson-Ash**



For further information on the FirstWorld multiverse including free downloads please visit  
[www.FirstWorld.info](http://www.FirstWorld.info)

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# **Quest for Knowledge**

## **Volume 1 of the FirstWorld Saga**

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## **Acknowledgements**

Fictional universes or multiverses have long offered alternative realities that may seem preferable to our own lives. Growing up, I escaped from a troubled childhood into J.R.R. Tolkien's magnificent creation of Middle Earth and was inspired by Elves, Dwarves, and Wizards. Later, I discovered the Sword and Sorcery of writers like Michael Moorcock. Moorcock wrote about the various manifestations of the Eternal Champion and his companion roving the Multiverse in an endless battle between Law and Chaos. I was always intrigued by the possibility of time travel and the paradoxes that it threw up. Many writers, from H.G. Wells forward have explored these and I have enjoyed them all.

It was always my hope that one day I could create my own multiverse to escape into and I have done so in FirstWorld. If you perceive echoes of Tolkien or Moorcock in my work, you are correct. They were my inspiration and I thank them and honour them. You'll find others there too, from Arthurian legend through T.S. Eliot to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. My multiverse is big enough to contain them all. Is it infinite? That's the \$64,000 question.

## Foreword

The device on the table looked for all the world like a soothsayer's crystal ball. The cloaked old man with flowing white hair and matching beard would have looked like everyone's favourite soothsayer were it not for his eyes. Coal black pupils floated in a sea of blood. They were locked in an unblinking stare into the heart of the ball. His hands were fixed on either side of the object, as if they were glued there. The veins in his neck pulsed in purple profusion and his brow was creased in fierce concentration.

Whether he heard the communication via his ears or whether it was spoken directly into his mind, he didn't know. The voice boomed and resonated in his skull. It was deep and old and seemed to carry an authority and purpose that sapped his will to gainsay it.

"Somewhere in the multiverse, a child has been born. I can feel him everywhere, but I cannot locate him. He has been born in many dimensions but only one of him will rise to challenge me. He will appear to be weak but he will be able to wield the Sword. He is Gilgamesh reborn." It sounded like he spat at the name of the ancient Hero. "Like the one who came before, he cannot destroy me but the Sword can inflict terrible wounds. I would not like to feel it again."

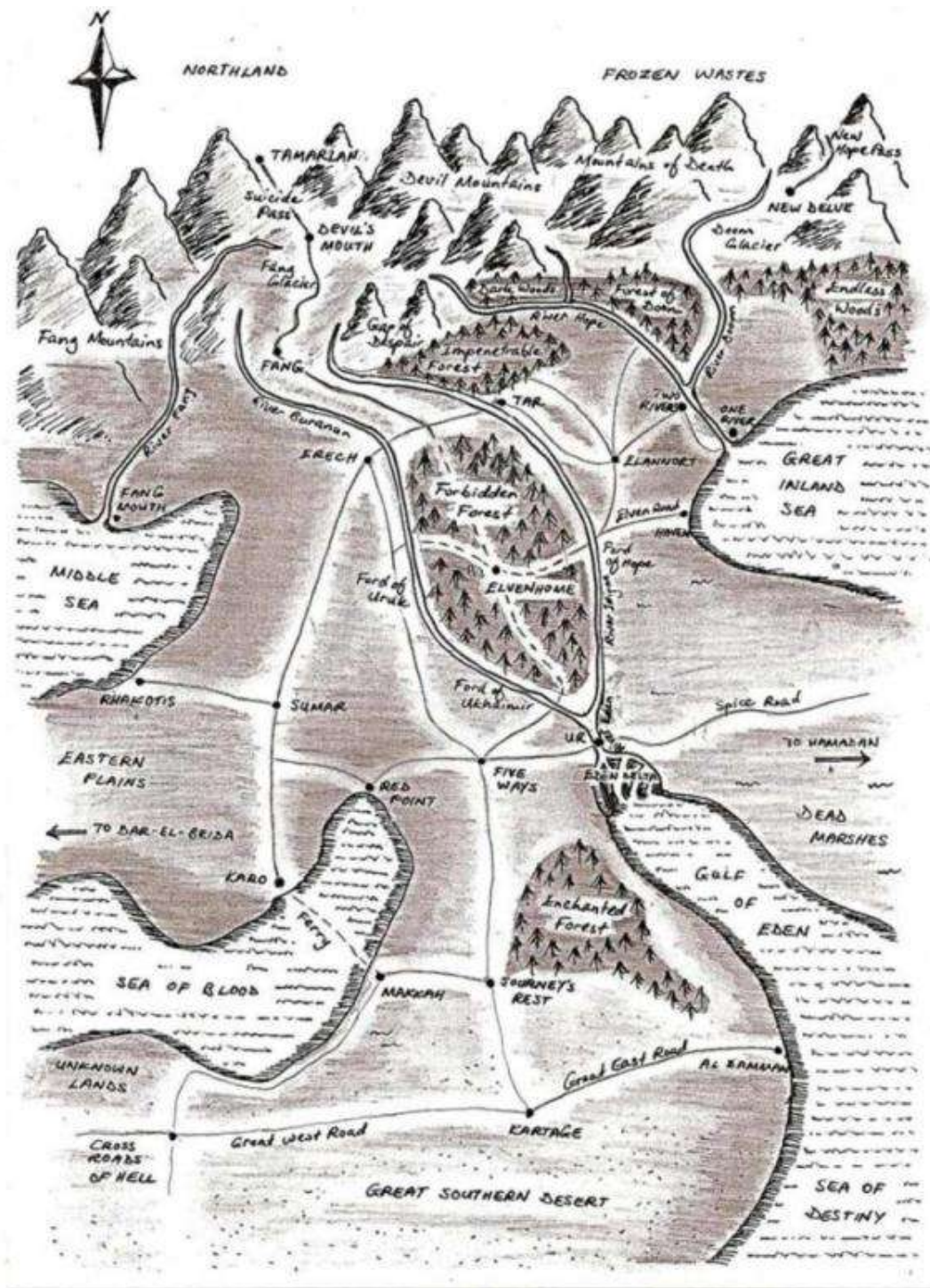
The listener felt incredible pain as if his head were going to explode. He would have removed his hands from the ball, but he had no will of his own left.

"You must find him and destroy him. Our enemies will seek him too. They would have him become their Hero. The Sword has been lost for many ages. Seek it out and you will be handsomely rewarded. Fail me and I will destroy you."

The old man was flung backwards from the ball, blue flashes of electricity jolting from his hands to the crystal. He finished up in a crumpled heap on the floor. He took his time to stand and brush himself down. He covered the strange device with a black cloth and let out a deep breath.

"I will serve you as long as it suits my plans. Elannort though, will be all mine." He let out a low growl, which sounded more like a dog than a man.

# Map of Central FirstWorld



## BOOK 1

### The Search for a Legend

In which Simon Redhead discovers some strange facts about himself and the history of FirstWorld.

“When the two who are one  
Return to the sun  
When the flame-haired child  
Is first become  
While the guardians sleep  
Humankind will weep.”  
Ancient Prophecy



## Revelation

Melbourne, Republic of Australasia

5<sup>th</sup> February 2043

At first light, the Jihad armies of Islam swept across the southern borders of Europe and Central Asia. Italy, Greece, Turkey, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan bore the brunt of the first attacks. Within hours, thousands of square miles of territory were in enemy hands.

Simon Redhead stumbled out of bed, oblivious to the world's impending doom, and observed himself in the bathroom mirror. *Not a pretty sight*, he thought. Pale green eyes stared back at him from a drawn and puffy face that showed all the symptoms of lack of sleep. *I must get a haircut*. His orange shoulder length hair hung in long, lank strands, in desperate need of a wash.

His thoughts returned, as they often did, to the childhood taunts and the way his 'mother' would soothe his anguish. She was all he had had in the world. His stepfather, or rather his mother's husband, had run off with a ballet teacher when he was six. Simon couldn't remember much about him, and didn't want to. *The bastard!*

Simon emphasised his thoughts with an open handed smack that shook the mirror. The outburst released some of his pent-up anger, but it did nothing for his frustration. He ached for love and companionship. Not for the first time recently, he decided to give the first lecture a miss, and went back to bed. He let his mind wander through a favourite fantasy, involving a fellow student in his class. *The feel of Julia's soft body in his arms; the smell of her perfume; the taste of her kisses; finally exploring a woman's body*. He was just reaching the part where he removed her panties, when his body beat his mind to the finish. The physical relief eased the ache in his body, but did little for the anguish in his heart. *Damn, wish I could last longer. How will I ever satisfy a woman? I may never get the chance to try.*

In his melancholy, his thoughts returned to the funeral just three years before and the two strangers who had haunted his dreams ever since.

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Simon Redhead slumped on his bed, crumpling his newly pressed best suit, his only suit. He tried to distract himself by listening to the modern history module he had received on his E-Pod. It played on the view screen that made up one entire wall of his room, but he closed his eyes and let the words wash over him. He should really concentrate, because he had to pass the general part of his degree before he could begin to study his chosen subject, medicine. The speaker droned on and Simon's thoughts continued to wander. Some people now had their E-Pods implanted in their bodies, so they would never leave home without them. You couldn't exist in society without your E-Pod. You couldn't even take a train or buy a simuburger, so it made sense. Simon wondered whether he should have it done. Some words in the monologue from the screen snapped Simon back to attention.

"The decade was given the name the terrible teens. It began with the great global depression that lasted until 2017, which threw millions of people worldwide into unemployment and poverty. In module seventeen, we will study the causes of the depression. Its results however are considered by many to have saved humankind from extinction. The climate change



tipping point had almost been reached. The balance almost tipped into total chaos.”

The words made Simon shudder. His dreams flashed vividly into his mind. He had been having the dreams as long as he could remember. As a small child, his mother had taken him to see a psychiatrist, so worried had she been about his nightmares. Despite all of his probing, the doctor had been unable to find the underlying cause of the problem. Eventually, Simon had managed to control his fear. The dreams had never gone away, though he had led his mother to believe they no longer troubled him.

Simon sobbed and wiped a tear from his cheek. Despite her not being his real mother, she had loved him as if he were her own flesh and blood. The last few months of her suffering had been terrible. It had reinforced his desire to study medicine and to make a difference. In the end, despite the black void it had left in his guts, he felt it was a blessing that she had taken the euthanasia option and ended her agony.

“Australia was badly affected by climate change. Drought, firestorms, cyclones, and floods ravaged the continent. Another type of flood, refugees from the now submerged Pacific Islands and Bangladesh, threatened to overwhelm society. It was only with the election of the first Green government in 2022 that a political solution to the problems facing the country was finally grasped. Along with like-minded governments in the rest of the developed world, they finally provided the leadership necessary to make people realise that their materialistic life-style was unsustainable. They led society to find a new balance.”

There was that word again. The one that he heard repeatedly in his dreams: balance. Except that in his dreams, it somehow had more importance. It was The Balance. Simon didn't like to think of himself as a wimp, but there was no doubt he was a quiet and gentle character. As a small boy, he remembered breaking down in inconsolable grief when he had found a dead bird on the side of the road. When his school friends captured flies and removed their wings, he would cringe and look away, riven with horror.

Yet in his dreams, Simon killed; not birds and flies but people. Hundreds of thousands of people died at his hands, so that his pale skin was stained red with their blood. The same colour as the ruby, which had been burned into his mind by the nightly visions. It called to him, promising him that he would unlock a missing part of himself if he would only come and find his true destiny. There was a sword too. It was a big jet-black broad sword and it was the cause of all the bloodshed. In reality, Simon could barely swing a golf club, even a left-handed one. In his nightmares, he wielded the black sword and scythed down his enemies as if it were second nature to him. This was the one thing that frightened him more than anything else. He so desperately wanted to take the Hippocratic Oath and do no harm, yet every night he seemed to enjoy bringing death to his seemingly innocent victims.

A knock on the door brought him back to reality. The door opened and Uncle Jack poked his head in. “It's time to go, Simon. Are you ready?”

*How can you ever be ready for your mother's funeral?* Nevertheless, he stood up, looked in the mirror and brushed down his suit. It hung off his skinny beanpole frame in ripples of black crinkles. His pale, almost white complexion matched his shirt and was a total contrast to the suit. However, his shoulder length hair dominated the impression, as it always did because of its bright orange colour. It had earned him so many unpleasant nicknames during his school days: ‘carrot top,’ ‘traffic light,’ and ‘Beaker,’ to name but a few. The most

dreadful irony of all was his adopted family name. Redhead by name, redhead by nature, his mother always said, when he came home in tears from school, cursing nature's cruel gift. She wanted him to be proud of his most distinctive feature. Now she would never comfort him again. He was alone in the world, with his strange genetic gifts from parents he had never known.

The funeral passed in a blur. It was cold in the church and Simon had to fold his arms across his chest and hold on to himself to stop the shivering. It was a non-denominational service. His mother had believed in a higher force, but not in a specific god. The world had seen a great schism in recent times into the more fundamentalist aspects of all the great religions. Simon eschewed them all. He saw no evidence for the existence of God. He was a firm atheist. *What God would have taken two mothers from me before my twentieth birthday?*

It was a small gathering, just close family and friends. Even so, Simon didn't recognise a few of the people there. He stood at the doorway with Uncle Jack and shook the hands of everyone as they left the church. The dearth of people only reinforced how alone he now was. He supposed that he had been a mummy's boy with few real friends. Now he was just a lonely boy. He did have two close friends, though and they had both been there. The three of them had been together since the first day of pre-school. Perhaps they had stuck together because of their physical differences from the rest of the class. It was easier to resist the bullying that way.

Jamie took his hand and then embraced him in a big squashing hug. He only came up to Simon's chest and was shaped like a barrel with short arms and legs. His out of control curly black hair tickled Simon's nose. "Thank you for coming," Simon said for the umpteenth time.

Jamie released Simon from his bear hug. "I'm here for you, Simon, if you need anything. You know that, don't you?" Simon nodded. Jamie hadn't found his place in the world yet and seemed to be drifting aimlessly. He was always around when Simon needed a friend.

Christian was small too, slim and pale like Simon, but with thin blond, almost white hair. He was aiming to be an E-Pod news journalist. He gave Simon a hug too, but was much gentler than Jamie had been. "Keep your chin up, mate. We'll see you later at the pub."

Several of his mother's distant relations passed by. He barely recognised them, but offered his thanks and received their platitudes dutifully. The last person to leave the church was an old man Simon didn't recognise. He hobbled slowly, supporting himself on a stick. His back was hunched and he was wearing a full-length black coat that hid everything beneath. He had a shock of long white hair and a flowing white beard. If he had been dressed in red and had some stomach padding, Simon would have taken him for a department store Santa Claus. Despite everything, Simon smiled. The man smiled too and Simon was taken by light that seemed to radiate from his grey-green eyes. Simon offered his hand. "Thank you for coming. I don't believe we have met?"

The old man took his hand in a firm warm handshake. He held it for a little longer than was strictly necessary. When he spoke, his voice seemed to resonate and wrap around Simon like comforting arms. "I knew your mother, Simon. I have watched your progress from a distance for many years. Keep up with your studies, my boy. We'll meet again soon, I'm sure of that."

Simon felt as if he were rooted to the spot. He tried to talk to the man but words wouldn't

come out. He stammered and spluttered and by the time he had regained his composure the man had hobbled off. Simon rushed outside after him, but he was nowhere to be seen. *He couldn't have moved so quickly.* Uncle Jack was waiting for him. "Where did the old man with the stick go?" Simon asked.

"I didn't see an old man with a stick," his Uncle replied. "Come on, let's go and join the wake at the pub. Have you thanked the vicar?"

Simon was more puzzled than ever. Surely, he couldn't have imagined the old man. He remembered the almost tingling warmth of his handshake and the concern in his eyes. As he turned from the church with Uncle Jack, he could have sworn he heard the old man's voice in his head. "I knew your mother, Simon." The words seemed to carry an image with them. It wasn't his mother. She was a pretty, young blonde girl, cooing over a baby in a pram. Simon saw such love in her eyes, directed at the baby, directed at him. He tried to reach out a tiny hand, but the vision evaporated. Try as he might, Simon couldn't get it back. As they departed, Uncle Jack probably thought the tears in his eyes were the result of the service.

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Simon thought the wake would never end. His mother's distant family members seemed determined to drink the pub dry. His eyes repeatedly searched the room for the old man. He would have liked to talk more with him. Unfortunately, he didn't join them. Uncle Jack got drunk and sang old Gaelic ballads that spoke of their family's heritage. It only made Simon wonder where he had really come from. He'd asked his mother, of course. He'd asked many times after the shock of the initial revelation of his adoption had subsided. She had said that she knew nothing. He had come to them one hot January night in need of a safe refuge and they had provided it, was all he could get out of her.

"Where did I come from?" He asked Uncle Jack, who was taking a breather from his singing exploits on the stool across the table from him."

"Well, lad, if you don't know that by now there's something amiss, by all accounts." His uncle laughed at his own joke, and Jamie and Chris who were both nursing beers beside him on the red leather bench seat both smiled. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen any of you three with girlfriends. You should let Jack the lad take you out one night and show you how to chat up the ladies. What do you say?" Fortunately for the trio, Jack was dragged away by Great Aunt Maud who wanted to discuss the will and wanted to do it now. When Great Aunt Maud said jump, you didn't even ask how high because you knew you couldn't jump high enough to meet her expectations.

Jamie sighed. "He's right though, our success rate is pretty poor."

"Almost non-existent," Christian agreed. "We should find a new hobby, one where we'll meet lots of girls."

"There are more girls than boys in Simon's class. Some of them are real stunners too. It doesn't seem to have done him any good, though," Jamie teased.

"Perhaps Simon will throw a party and invite them all?" Christian said.

“Yes, a house-warming party. You’ll have to move now; they’ll sell the house for sure. Aunt Maud will demand it. Where will you go?”

A cold finger of dread tickled its way down Simon’s spine. “I hadn’t thought about it. I wanted to concentrate on my studies. Mum said I should do that and she’d look after me. I guess I’ll have to get a job to support myself now. There’s a lot to think about.”

“Well, you can always kip on my couch if you’re desperate,” Jamie said. “Anyone for another drink, after all Simon’s paying and it’s better spent now than Aunt Maud getting her hands on it.”

“I’ll get them,” Simon said. “I could do with a stretch, same again?” He stood up and moved to the bar. He ordered three beers, adding them to the tab, and turned to head back to the table. He noticed a strange man, propping up the corner of the bar watching him. He was tall and very pale, ill looking like his mother had been in recent weeks. His clothes were shabby and worn. His mouth curved upwards in a grin and showed several broken and rotten-looking teeth. Deep set, black eyes met his and locked on, unblinking.

Simon set down his glasses and approached the stranger, offering his hand. “I don’t believe we have met. I didn’t see you at the funeral. What relation are you?”

The man seemed reluctant to take Simon’s hand, but eventually took it and quickly released it. His hand felt cold and clammy. When he spoke, his voice was shrill and high-pitched. “I can’t abide churches. I had a bad experience in one once.”

Simon felt the urge to say ‘What, you got married?’ but resisted. Still the man’s eyes were locked unblinking on Simon’s. He was starting to give him the creeps.

The man licked his pallid lips. “You can call me Uncle Dring. I once knew your mother and father.” The black eyes suggested that he wanted to say more.

Simon shuddered and backed away to retrieve his beers. “Well, nice to meet you. Thank you for coming.”

“The pleasure was all mine.”

Twice today, Simon had met strange men. One had seemed kindly and the other creepy. They had both mentioned his parents and Simon had the distinct impression they didn’t mean the mother he was laying to rest today. *I’m getting paranoid.* There was one man who had been conspicuous by his absence. Simon felt the bile and his anger rising when he thought about it. He placed the beers in front of his friends and tried to smile.

“Who’s that creep?” Jamie asked.

“He looks like he’ll be next..,” Christian stopped in mid-sentence. “Sorry.” His pale face turned a bright red and he looked down sheepishly. For some reason that Simon couldn’t fathom he burst out laughing and his friends, at first hesitatingly, joined in.

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Three days later, by which time Uncle Jack had sobered up and recovered from his hangover, the key family members gathered at the lawyer's office for the reading of the will. Great Aunt Maud clucked around organising everyone into appropriate seats. She placed Simon right at the back, in a corner. She was his mother's father's sister and had never married. *I expect that she never found the perfect man.* She seemed to be of indeterminate age and indeterminate sex; though Simon felt that she must be ancient and a woman beneath her grey pinstriped trouser suit. Uncle Jack had explained how the family money from her brother had bypassed her to his mother. Now, since Simon was not a blood relation, she expected to get her hands on it at last.

Mr Jennings, his mother's solicitor, was an avuncular man. His mother had always spoken warmly of him. With his trim moustache and balding head, he reminded Simon of a certain Belgian detective of long ago. Simon enjoyed classical crime thrillers and was thinking about a good role for Maud, preferably involving poison, when Mr Jennings cleared his throat and brought the gathering to order.

Before he could speak, Maud interrupted. "Please be brief, Jennings, we simply need to know who gets what. I have an appointment at the Estate Agents in ten minutes. I have a property to put on the market."

Mr Jennings appeared to roll his eyes. "Well, if that's alright by the rest of you?" He paused and stared at them. No one was game to challenge Great Aunt Maud. "In that case, I shall cut to the chase. The will is extremely simple." Maud turned her head and Simon could see her smiling – an almost unique occurrence.

"With the exception of a few personal items, which have specific bequests, all of Mrs Redhead's estate, including her house, is to be sold and the proceeds placed in a trust fund, to be administered by myself." Mr Jennings paused and Simon could hear the grunt that emanated from the middle front-row seat. "The trust is to be used for a single purpose. If I may read the actual words from Mrs Redhead's will: The trust fund is to be used to support my son Simon until such time as he is established as a qualified doctor of medicine. I gave you that pledge Simon and I intend to honour it. After that time, any residual funds are to be donated to the Australian Cancer Centre. I know that there will be some family members who are disappointed by this," Jenkins stopped for effect and looked over the top of his glasses at Maud. "But I assure you that this is by far the best use to which the money can be put."

Jenkins folded the document and smiled. Uncle Jack gave Simon a friendly punch on the arm. A number of unladylike obscenities seemed to emerge from the front row. Simon was sure he heard the word bastard used several times. Great Aunt Maud, with a face like thunder, stormed out of the room and out of Simon's life, he hoped forever.

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In three years, he hadn't seen Great Aunt Maud again, but the memory of her reaction to the will made him smile and helped to fight back against the depression that threatened to overwhelm him. Simon raised himself out of bed and staggered into the shower. The jets of cool water felt good. They seemed to do more than simply cleanse his body; he began to feel inwardly refreshed as well. His thoughts turned to the irony of his situation. *Here I am, a medical student, with plenty of gynaecological experience, and yet I'm still a virgin.* He thumped the shower wall in anger, as once again he cursed his awkward shyness with the

opposite sex. *I'm pathetic!* As he slowly dried himself, he toyed with the idea of using the services of a prostitute. The idea had certain merit in fantasy and raised expectations again in his young body, but in the cold reality of his scientific brain, it seemed expensive, impersonal, and dangerous. *I'm not that desperate, yet!*

He pulled on a crumpled pair of jeans, tee-shirt and sweater. His tall and skinny body had the effect of making most clothes he wore look like they were hanging on a beanpole scarecrow. His choice of green shirt and yellow sweater, combined with his hair made him think of a traffic light, which raised his spirits immensely. He perused the room for something edible that would serve as breakfast. A half-eaten simuburger appeared to be the only sustenance on offer. He quickly rejected that in favour of tea and a simubacon roll at his local café. *If I hurry, I still might make the first lecture.* It was important, because it covered caesarean sections, and he would have to assist with his first before too much longer. He looked forward to that with the sort of cold dread an actor must have before their first night. *Am I really cut out to be a surgeon?* He smiled at his pun. *I might have more luck as a stand-up comedian.*

Strangely, he felt more cheerful than he had for some time, as he left his rooms. The persistent dreams that had been troubling him more and more lately were almost forgotten. It was a warm, autumn day and the early sunshine felt good on his back. The café was almost deserted when he got there. He ordered quickly and sat at the bar to await his food. The entertainment panel was set to blare out raucous pop music, as usual. The interruption for a news flash surprised him. The news that was delivered shocked him. Muslim forces were invading Australia. It appeared to be part of a major world offensive. The planet was on the brink of the third world war. Australia's vast open spaces and valuable resources had long been coveted by the populous countries to the north. They were now taking them by force. The announcer was contemplating the west countenancing the nuclear option as Simon's new-found cheerfulness evaporated.

His hunger and the half-finished simubacon roll forgotten, Simon left the café. There was commotion in the street. It seemed that panic was already beginning to grip. Groups of people seemed to be milling backwards and forwards with seemingly no clear idea of where they were going. Simon felt the familiar throbbing in his temples that heralded the start of a migraine. *Damn, I must go home, take some pills, and try to sleep it off.* He had barely started to move when the first wave of nausea hit him. He doubled over in agony and when he straightened up, everything seemed to be a blur. He felt as if he were slipping out of the real world. People became fuzzy, noises were muffled, and cars passed by in blurs of colour like streaks on an artist's canvas. *What the hell's happening to me?*

"Take a grip," he muttered to himself. He tried to breathe deeply and focus. Nothing changed; his world was a blur. As he began to stumble forward, something caught his eye. Across the road, on the corner, leaning against a lamppost as casual as you like stood a small boy – totally in focus amongst the blur. Simon did a double take and stared at him, uncaring of the reaction he might cause. As he looked more closely, he corrected himself. *Not a boy at all, but a very short man.* He was no more than four feet high, solidly built with a huge stomach that was barely concealed by the large dark coat he was wearing. Perhaps the most striking feature though was his head. He was wearing a wide brimmed hat with a large white feather pinned to its brim. Under the hat, a pair of large blue eyes seemed to reflect the wonder that he was seeing in the world. The hat could not hide the shock of black curls that tumbled from his head as though trying to escape confinement. His nose was positively aquiline, giving him a look of arrogant superiority that overlaid whatever his true feelings might be.

Simon seemed drawn to him in a strange sort of way. *I feel like I ought to know him, but I have never seen him before in my life.* He would surely have remembered such a character. As if drawn by a magnet, Simon began to walk toward the strange fellow. The cars on the street still seemed blurry, but he was able to make them out well enough to attempt to cross the road. As he approached the junction, he became aware of the noise of a vehicle that seemed louder and faster than the rest. He looked up in time to see it bearing down on him at high speed. Although the vehicle was a blur, the driver wasn't. At that moment, the sight of that face imprinted itself on his memory. Not so much the face, more the eyes, black and evil, and the mouth curving upwards in a sickly grin.

It all happened so quickly. *I'm going to die, without ever sleeping with a woman. I recognise that man.* All of a sudden, the strange fellow from across the street was beside him, pushing him clear. He stumbled and fell, hearing the sickly thud of flesh and bone being crushed and the roar of a car being driven away at high speed. Simon passed out. *I may not have got you this time, but I soon will. Your days are numbered red boy! Uncle Dring never lies.* The words appeared in his mind as he slipped into unconsciousness and the echoes were still there when he awoke.

He came to in the ambulance. His vision seemed normal again and the migraine had gone. *A knock on the head must have done me some good.* "How are you feeling?" The warm voice of the female ambulance officer greeted him. "You were very lucky," she continued without giving him a chance to respond, "by all accounts you should have died today." They seemed strange words for an ambulance officer, but these were strange times for sure and they summed up nicely his recollections of the past few minutes. *Your days are numbered red boy!* The thought echoed in his mind.

"I'm feeling fine, there's really no need for you to take me to hospital," he tried to smile but it must have looked very forced. "The man who saved me, how is he? What happened to him?" The concern was evident in Simon's voice. *Who was that man? Why did he save me?*

"Don't you be concerning yourself over that, now. We'll get you to hospital and they'll give you a good checking over. Then the police will want to talk to you, I'm guessing. They'll be able to fill you in on the details better than me."

Their arrival at the hospital prevented any further questions. Simon was generally fussed over and received a full body scan. At last, a young doctor came to talk to him. "Well, young man," he began, "you have had a very lucky escape. All the test results are negative. If you feel up to it, you're free to go home."

Simon felt fine. In fact, he felt better than he'd felt for some time. *I wonder why I'm feeling so good? Perhaps I should ask the doctor? Better not.* "Thanks, Doctor, I'll do that," he said. "Can you please tell me what happened to the man who saved me?"

The doctor brushed off his question. "There's a police officer waiting to see you outside. I'm sure he'll be able to help you. The sister will look after your discharge after the policeman has seen you." He hurried off.

Simon didn't have to wait long for the police officer to arrive. A young, male detective constable questioned him at length about the accident. Simon told him everything he could



remember, except the bits about his blurred vision, the details of the strange fellow's appearance, and the driver. In reality, Simon told him very little, but repeatedly questioned him about the man who had saved him. *Why won't they tell me?*

Eventually the police officer gave in. "It's very strange," the detective spoke slowly, seeming to pick his words carefully, "there were several eye witnesses who confirm your version of the events. In fact, they all saw the small man crushed by the car. His head was smashed to a pulp. He couldn't have survived. However, by the time the emergency services arrived, his body was nowhere to be found."

Simon said nothing. He felt sick again. The thought of a stranger giving his life to save Simon's was anathema to him. The pain in his head began to rise again. *I can't handle this. I must get home to bed.* He accepted the hospital's offer of a taxi home. Thankfully, the driver was quiet, focussed on the radio news. First reports were coming in of Indonesian forces landing in Australia. Rumours suggested that Darwin had already fallen. The Prime Minister was due to address the nation later that evening. Simon ran from the taxi, up the steps and fumbled with his keys as he struggled to get inside and hide as quickly as possible. He hoped that sleep would help his troubled mind, except sleep would probably bring the dreams. *Please, I can't handle the dreams on top of everything else.*

In his dreams, Simon was somewhere else that seemed like another world. He was always looking for something, but he could never remember what it was. And there were people, evil people looking for him. People who wanted to kill him. People with eyes like the driver of the car. He shuddered at the realisation. Goosebumps welled up on his arms as he realised something else. In his dreams, he had a friend who repeatedly saved him from the evil ones. That friend was short and dumpy and wore a wide brimmed hat with a white feather. He had the brightest blue eyes, curly black hair, and the beakiest nose you'd ever seen. He'd saved Simon's life today in the real world and given his own in return. *I must be going crazy.*

For a moment, Simon wondered if he were really going mad. Then, as he entered his bed sitting room he realised he most surely had. The strange fellow was waiting for him, sitting on his bed, idly flicking through one of Simon's medical textbooks as if to pass the time.

"About time you got here," the little man said in a resonant voice that suggested a stature at least twice as high as its reality. "I haven't got all day, you know!"

## News from Afar

“Who are..., what are..., why, how..?” Simon stuttered a whole range of meaningless questions. He stared at the apparition sitting on his bed. He didn’t know whether to be afraid of him and run away or to thank him warmly for saving his life. *I’m certain that I’m going crazy. Take me to the funny farm.*

“You don’t know me, do you?” The strange fellow asked. “Curse that Manfred; he never gives me enough information to work with. I felt sure we would have met before in this dimension. I’m sorry if I startled you, Simon, but time is critical.” He jumped up from the bed, removed his hat and made a deep bow, flourishing his hat as he did so. “My name is Jhamed al Suraqi, companion to heroes, dogsbody to wizards and general layabout. I am here on an errand of the utmost importance to you, me, wizards and probably the entire multiverse. Your presence is requested on FirstWorld for an urgent meeting of the Council of the Wise. Beats me why they call themselves that, half of them couldn’t think straight if you nailed them to a plank – actually the plank would probably be able to contribute more. I’m babbling again, aren’t I?”

Simon was astounded. First, this Jhamed should be dead. Second, when had they met before? Third, why was he in Simon’s dreams? Fourth, what or where on earth was FirstWorld? Fifth, what was the Council of the Wise? ... Nineteenth, why was Simon invited?

Jhamed watched Simon’s confusion with interest. “I suppose you have a few questions? You usually do.”

“Actually, I have nineteen; make that twenty. What do you mean I usually do?” Simon finally managed a reply. “But first tell me how you are alive after a dozen people saw you with your head squashed on the pavement like a melon? Oh, and thank you very much for saving my life like that. I’m really very grateful; it’s just that I’m so confused.” Simon tailed off.

Jhamed sat down and replaced his hat, stuffing handfuls of curls inside it.

“Why don’t you get a haircut?” Simon asked.

“Is that one of your twenty questions?” Jhamed smiled.

Simon smiled too. The strange fellow had a way of making him feel at ease. He knew he hadn’t met him before but he felt like he had known him all of his life. “I don’t know why, but I feel comfortable and safe with you, Jhamed. Safer than with anyone I have ever known, except perhaps my mother; well my adoptive mother.”

Jhamed held up a hand. “Stop right there, young man. We’ve no time for one of your melancholy reminiscences. In any case, I’ve heard it all a million times before.” He gave Simon a big wink as he said this. “Look, time is very critical. How about I give you a quick run-down? The potted history, so to speak. Then we’ll get out of here and Manfred will fill in all of the details when we get to FirstWorld?”

“I may feel safe with you. But I’m not going anywhere. Haven’t you heard, Indonesia has invaded? World War III is about to start. And where the hell is this FirstWorld anyway? The airports are all closed, there’s no way to travel.”

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