

The Origin of Snow  
(A Story of the Flat Earth)  
Tanith Lee

Over the midnight desert they rode. One from the north, and one from the south, and one from the west. He from the north was white-skinned and clothed in gold, and thirty men rode behind him, musicians, and priests. He from the south was smoky-skinned and clothed in scarlet, and fifty men rode behind him, armed to their teeth — which were also capped by steel. He from the west was black, and clothed in silver, and what rode behind him were not men, more like great cats, though they too carried musical instruments, and weapons.

At the edges of the scene, the mountains crowded, and above, the sky was full of stars.

The three riders met.

"Are we here for the same reason?"

Which of them spoke? All three, and each in a different language. But all three too were scholars, and all three understood all three.

Then they started upward at the sky.

"From there?" asked White-and-gold.

"It must be from there. From the country of the gods," avowed Smoke-and-scarlet.

Meanwhile, Black-and-silver, who had the keenest sight, added, "But who is this, now, coming from the east?"

The one from the east did not ride, he walked. However, with every stride, it seemed he covered half a mile or more. No man, no *thing* accompanied him — and yet, the whole night seemed to do so. He was pale of skin, black of hair. His garments were black and a great cloak blew all about him like a storm, though there was no wind. His beauty was — unreasonable.

They did not know him. Though, being wise, they knew of his kind.

"He is a demon."

"He is, without doubt, from their high caste, the Vazdru."

"We must be wary."

"Greetings," they said.

The Vazdru stood looking up at them. Never before had any of the three been looked *up* at, by one standing *below* on the ground, who seemed in fact to look *down*. At last, he spoke.

"Your three-fold journeys made some noise across the ceilings beneath."

"You pardon, sir," said Black-and-silver. "We did not mean to disturb you, or your people in the fair city of Druhim Vanashta underground."

"But we are here," said White-and-gold, "to attend the arrival of a new god — or at least a mighty magus —"

"Or most holy messenger," said Smoke-and-scarlet.

"The advent has been predicted," they said. "He is to fall from heaven like a star."

Azhrarn, the Vazdru, who — at that time — was not yet *Prince* of demons, laughed softly. Never had music more wonderful been heard, or with such a knife-like edge.



"Neither god nor mage, nor, for that, messenger, will fall. The gods keep to themselves."

"Handsome sir, the constellations, whose movements we study, tell us otherwise. Tonight a great wonder will occur."

"The stars do not move," said Azhrarn. "They hang like diamonds, from roots of air."

Perturbed, the three riders glanced at each other.

Eventually Black-and-silver said, "Then we are ahead of our time. Perhaps this gift from heaven is due in some other age."

"If so," said Azhrarn, "the earth will then no longer be flat, as now it is. And the gods will be otherwise, for now they have no interest in mankind. Save sometimes they are disgusted by you."

As the three riders frowned in disappointed and uneasy silence, the demon vanished. Instead a coil of shadowy sand spun away — but whether north, south, west or east — none of those three wise men could tell.

Azhrarn, mere prince among princes, waited alone on a rock in the desert, and gazed towards the mountains, pondering.

At length he leapt forward, and in another moment was instead on the highest peak of the furthest crag. Here a cave opened, within whose darkness burned a flicker of emerald fire.

"Who are you?" demanded the dragon, when Azhrarn appeared in its lair. "No matter," it graciously conceded, "you are a most fascinating creature, and I shall enjoy dining on your flesh."

Jaws full of points like swords, clashed. Azhrarn stood smiling a little, as the dragon regained its balance, affronted.

"Give up. I am no prey of yours."

The dragon took no notice. It flapped its wings about him some minutes, hawking up fire, snapping and rending — and achieving nothing. Then finally Azhrarn struck it across the head.

The dragon collapsed, stunned. Rather than hurt, the blow had been exquisite...

"Now," said Azhrarn, "you will carry me to the Upperearth."

The dragon snorted, and regained its confidence. "Though you are glamorous and a magician, I will do no such thing."

"You have seen some of my powers. Do this, and I will give you a reward."

"What? What can you give me?"

"Your recompence shall be in proportion to your work."

Up through the night sky, past a rising crescent moon, who seemed to avert her gaze in a veil of cloud. Up through the starry gardens, whose stars now did swing on their roots at the gust of dragon-wings — perhaps causing more astrological predictions below.

In through the gate, invisible, *unactual*, the doorway of Upperearth, the country of the gods, they flew.

Though night lay beneath, and all across the plate of the Flat Earth, it was always morning in Upperearth. Cold and shining blue, the polished and almost empty landscape, where also mountains distantly gleamed, rimmed with adamantine. In those days — a memory even long ago — groves of strange trees existed there, thin and long and silver-golden, and in their branches sat weird elementals, that the gods then kept as (neglected) pets.

These showed some interest in Azhrarn, but mostly in the dragon. The dragon sank down.

"The weight of the magnetic gravity of this place exhausts me. You must go on alone."



Azhrarn, indifferent to most gravities, left it in the groves, among the whizz of tiny chirping steams and atoms.

He walked over the plains of heaven.

In one area stood a well of glass, filled with some sort of sludge. Three guardians lay muffled and asleep on a bench. He ignored such trivia.\*

Whatever else, Azhrarn, from the moment he heard the hoofs galloping above Druhim Vanashta, had known this night was pregnant with some bizarre event.

Curious, prescient, untender, he reached a godly palace like a shaft of sunlight changed to crystal.

A god was inside. (Flawless fly in amber.)

There he poised, the god, in the even-then moronically self-absorbed over-intellectualism of these particular deities. They had made Man, then lost interest in him. But demons they had *not* made. The demons had made themselves — and very marvellously too. *Their* design was much better.

Azhrarn touched the glassy sunbeam. It shivered but did not give way. The god however shot him a look.

Through the god's transparent skin and mirror eyes, violet ichors dimly showed. He (or she) was perfectly lovely, and in a way that was, frankly, repulsive.

"What do you want?"

Gods did not speak. They did something however, which we must believe amounted to speech, since the stories are sometimes full of their chatter.

Azhrarn heard the question. He said, "Mankind has smelled something cooking up here. What is it?" "Nothing. It is nothing," said the god.

By his, or her — or *its*, (only the gods themselves might know what gender they were) *denial*, proof was given Azhrarn. Such beings would never deny what was not a fact.

Azhrarn ran. He raced across the plain. All types of indescribable and ridiculous god-stuff flashed by — pavilions, gardens, *devices* — fruitless to attempt to see, let alone consider them.

He came to a square of open land (if it *was* land). The square was of a colour the earth did not, and never would, have. Nor does it now. A group of gods were here, and they unwound together a long, long parchment. And as they did this they fed it into the mouth of a hideous but also — be glad — quite indescribable object. Perhaps it was animal, perhaps machine, or vegetable, even. In any event, it ate the parchment up and swallowed it down.

Azhrarn asked no further questions. Truly, there *was* an aroma, a smell like burning. He knew instantly what they were at.

The endless scroll was the writing of fate. That was, a fate not yet made accessible.\* Inchoate and free-flowing, still it contained, obviously, many predictions, a whole rota of events that must and would occur.

Azhrarn leaned forward, trying to see what was written there. He noted only one awful sentence, in letters no human could decipher: *One day the earth's flatness will be roundness.*

The gods were still young enough at this hour that they were by then trying to block his view.

"Humanity snuffing after this like a dog — three troublemakers in the desert — Man the cockroach must not learn too much — such matters must be hidden — " voicelessly they screamed.

\*Actually, the Well of Immortality, as he would later know.



And he, Azhrarn, still only a prince among princes, did not know *not* to reach out and snatch —

In that glimpse, he saw that every letter written there was unlike any other —

Then the parchment which smelled of burning — burnt him, savagely. It was like clutching the whitest, hottest fire. But he bore it, and he tore that fragment away. And in that instant the furious gods, still capable, in their elderly youth, of real annoyance, evicted him from heaven.

The glacial blue cracked. Through the sudden gap Azhrarn was cast, and fell.

He fell like a dark star. Like a premonition of many other things to come. Yet in his hands he retained the smouldering fire of parchment.

This, meeting the atmosphere of the Flat Earth, became abruptly a white and splintering whirlwind.

Only then did Azhrarn let go. He took charge of himself in contrast, and stopped his fall. On an island of cloud close by the moon, he found the dragon, which had, it seemed, left heaven of its own accord, irritated beyond endurance by the attentions of the eager pet atomies.

Together then they watched the shreds of fate's scroll scatter down towards earth.

"The gods will punish you," opined the dragon.

"I tremble," said Azhrarn, idly.

"You have burnt your hand."

"That is your reward, then, for taking me there," said Azhrarn. "You may lick the roasted meat of demonkind."

The dragon pleated its scaly forehead in a scowl. Then duly licked the alluring scorch.

Down on the desert, the three wise men saw the flakes of white begin to descend.

"What is that?"

"It burns — "

"No — it is cold — "

On the tops of far-off earthly mountains, white fire-flakes of unreadable fate, gathered in sparkling hoods of ice. Elsewhere, upon forests and rivers, upon the shores and hills of the world, glittering like tears of sorrow or laughter, in they came.

While in his high tower, a fourth wise man, who had analysed the stars more carefully, and had not left his city, caught on one finger a single fleck of the falling white.

Through a magnifying lens he examined it. Then another, and another. Each was of wondrous pattern. Each was unique and unlike all the rest.

Across the face of the Flat Earth, mankind at its windows and doors, staring.

"What is *this*? Are all the stars falling? They *burn* — no they are *cold* — what shall we call this thing?"

Azhrarn, young on his cloud, looked silently and named the fluttering white *Broken Letters*.

In his tower the fourth wise man named the phenomenon *Flowers*.

A king's favourite wife called it *White Bread* — but the king's favourite slave called it by a different, saucier name.

Everywhere, it *was* named. And by naming, made perpetual, since words are magic, then, now.

Letters, stars, flowers, bread, *seed* — One day, perhaps, we of this foretold and altered earth, will decode them. And so learn the rules of Fate in the secret alphabet of snowflakes.

\*Or man-like — later in the stories Fate will be Ksheshmet, one of the Lords of Darkness.