The Princess

And The

Abyss Diver

**By**

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0. Intro

School was created to make suitable   
workers for the workforce,   
but does the world still need flesh robots?

Thursday, September 2

Luke and his best friend Ripper stepped out of the tour bus and onto the school grounds of the Albert Einstein Academy for Gifted Children.

At a glance you wouldn’t think the two would be friends. One was a tall, muscular jock who was both handsome and popular. The other was a short, socially awkward, chubby kid with acne and thick glasses.

Luke stepped to the edge of the growing crowd of students and took in the scenery. All about them rose the magnificent mountains of Switzerland.

“I can’t believe we are both going to this crazy school,” Ripper said. “You maybe, but I’m just a dumb jock.”

“Nonsense,” Luke said. “You are smart. You’re problem is motivation. Besides, you’re here on a sports scholarship.”

“Maybe so,” Ripper said. “However, without your tutoring I couldn’t have obtained the minimum grades. Why did you sign up as a tutor?”

“My mum insisted I make friends. She was the one who suggested I tutor,” Luke said. “Although very soon all tutoring will be done by AI agents. Corrections: most.”

“I’m glad my career is safe,” Ripper said. “Robot sports never took off. People want to see real people battling and bleeding for their entertainment.”

“My aunt had a live band for her June wedding, even though it was more expensive,” Luke said. “And the rich never use robots, preferring humans to serve them.”

The last of the teens exited the busses and a woman called out, “Attention kids.” She paused until everyone quieted down.

“My name is Mrs. Bertrand. Welcome to the Albert Einstein Academy for Gifted Children.

“Please form lines to get your student devices. You are required to have them on your person at all times. The only exception is your dormitory rooms.

“They serve both as identification and as a wallet.

“Don’t worry. They are sealed and waterproof to…let’s just say your bodies will be crushed before it gets damaged.

“After that, enter the auditorium and find a seat for your orientation ceremony.”

Over a thousand kids followed the woman to a large building. Luke and Ripper lined up, chatting as they waited. All about them kids noisily talked.

Slowly the line advanced and finally they arrived.

Luke handed the proctor his letter of acceptance. The man entered data into his laptop and fiddled with a device. He handed the device to Luke and said, “Welcome to school.”

“Thanks,” Luke said and joined his friend. Together they headed in.

The auditorium was a large chamber housing over 2000 people, according to a nearby sign.

Quickly they found a seat.

Luke pulled out his device. It said 9:37AM.

“That’s weird,” Luke said.

“What’s weird?” Ripper asked.

“This cell phone isn’t IOS or Android,” Luke said. “Also, it’s rather bare-boned, with only 6 apps.

“There is a Map App, Party Chat, Character Info, Identification, Library, and settings. There is no app store or anything.”

“What does 0C, 0S, 2G mean?” Ripper said.

“Perhaps we are in the tutorial room of a MMORPG game,” Luke said.

“That would explain this character app,” Ripper said.

Luke clicked on the Character icon.

Luke Billhardson – Level 0

Strength: 4

Agility: 3

Constitution: 5

Vitality: 7

Nerve: 11

Manna Channeling: 7

“You’re right,” Luke said. “That is freaky.”

Luke glanced at Ripper’s stats.

Ripper Jones – Level 0

Strength: 11

Agility: 9

Constitution: 11

Vitality: 11

Nerve: 4

Manna Channeling: 2

“Your physical stats make sense, at least compared to me,” Luke said. “But what’s up with manna and nerve?”

“Perhaps Nerve means how smart you are and maybe magic is real,” Ripper said.

“Greeting everyone,” a man in a business suit on stage called, silencing the room.

“My name is Dr. Everson Thornville and I am your principle.

“Welcome to the Albert Einstein Academy for Gifted Children.

“You are all here because we believe you are the shining future of our tiny blue star. Over the next few years you will learn the skills needed to handle the terrifying changes that will befall Blue Star.”

“Blue Star?” Ripper asked. “Doesn’t he mean Earth?”

“I know,” Luke said. “This place is starting to get weird.”

The audience murmured in confusion.

“In this school, you will not learn to become a worker at an office, factory or what not. AI can do that easily,” the principle said. “Our goal is to teach each of you to become masters of your own destinies. Only then may you overcome the monsters surrounding us and gain true strength.”

“Monsters?” Ripper asked.

“Either it’s a metaphor or the principle is crazy gamer,” Luke said.

The principle smiled at the confused students and said, “Annie Winfield, please enter.”

From offstage a teenage girl entered, wearing the school uniform.

The auditorium broke out in murmuring. That wasn’t surprising.

“Damn, she looks like an elfin princess,” Luke said as he almost drooled. He had the urge jump on stage and…

Luke wouldn’t do that in real life. He wasn’t that stupid. However, nothing prevented him from ravaging her in his mind.

All about, the other teens had the same desire, even many of the ladies.

“Annie Winfield is the youngest daughter of Edward Winfield, chair and founder of this school,” Principle Bertrand said. “And yes, I’m talking about Winfield Energy.

“Although not the first company to commercialize fusion energy, their product is by far the most compact, safe and dependable. And yes, we do have a Winfield reactor.”

The Winfield reactor used a proprietary process to capture fast neutrons from the fusion process and convert the energy directly into electricity. Being no bigger than a large shipping container and costing 100 million apiece, it was slowly powering more and more ocean liners and cargo ships.

It wasn’t surprising that Edward Winfield, Annie’s father became a trillionaire. AI and unlimited energy made for a powerful combination.

“However, that is not why she is here,” the principle said. “Yes, many of you here exceed her in terms of physical fitness and problem solving, to name a few. However, her combined scores exceed everyone here, and that’s saying something.

“Ms. Winfield, please speak to your cohort.”

Annie stepped up to the mike and took a breath.

“Thank you Principle Thornville,” Annie said. “6 years ago my father founded this academy using his considerable wealth. The purpose is to gather all the best and brightest kids of the world in order to forge a better world for everyone.

“Sad to say the world is full of monsters. They live just below the surface, hungry to come out and slaughter. The environmental contamination, desecration of sacred lands, polarization of the world, despair and hate are making things worse.

“Our goal here is simple. Become strong and never place our fate on so-called saviors.

“I look forward to growing ever stronger with all of you.”

With that Annie stepped off from the podium.

“Thank you Ms. Winfield,” the principle said.

“School starts on Monday. Including today that will give you 4 days to get over any jet lag.

“Your luggage will be in your dormitory rooms. Your map app will guide you there.

“Be aware your phones have limited coverage here.

“Also, you will find your school issued uniforms, school books, and everything else you will need to attend classes.

“Go to your dormitories and settle in.

“Your homework is to become familiar with your devices.

“After that, I encourage you to spend time getting to know your fellow students and exploring the local town. Also, the hiking trails are amazing, with rivers, waterfalls and canyons to explore.”

The principle paused and then said, “I do need to warn you. Please avoid leaving town or school grounds after dusk. This is especially true of the surrounding forests and mountains.

“It can be rather dangerous out there, especially at night. More than a few students have broken their legs or worse. And off course there are…dangers out there.”

That sent a chill down Luke’s back.

“Principle Thornville, please don’t scare the kids,” a woman said.

“This is vice-principle Eliot Drew,” the principle said, pointing at the woman. He turned to the vice-principle and said, “Fear is essential if one is to stay safe. You know what is out there.”

The principle turned back to the audience and said, “The boundary of both the town and school grounds is well marked.

“You are required to be either on campus grounds or in the town between dusk and dawn. Those rules are there for a reason. We don’t want tragedies. Dismissed.”

The auditorium burst into a cacophony as everyone tried to understand the dire warning.

“Damn, that was weird,” Ripper said. “Why not just say we will get into trouble?”

“Maybe there are wild animals,” Luke said. “No, that doesn’t make sense. The principle said we should explore during the day.”

Ten minutes later they were at their dormitory room.

The studio apartment had a kitchenette to the left and a washroom to the right. Beyond were two elevated beds. Under each bed was a study area with desk, chair, and chest of draws.

On the floor to the right was Luke’s luggage. Stacks of books sat on the desk.

“What’s the WIFI password?” Ripper asked.

“Challenger 423,” Luke said, pointing at a sign on the wall.

“Thanks,” Ripper said as he opened his laptop.

Luke unpacked, placing his clothes and items in his closet and chest of drawers. Last item was his laptop.

It was time to call his parents.

“Hi Mum, Dad, Goat Father,” Luke said.

Ripper glanced at Luke but didn’t say anything.

“Hi Luke,” Luke’s mum said. “Was the trip okay? Was there any problems?”

“No mum,” Luke said. “The trip was just tedious, since all I could see were clouds. Here is my room.”

Luke panned the phone around and said, “I even have a kitchenette, so I can practice my cooking.

“Ripper, say ‘Hi’.”

Ripper waved and Luke stepped out onto the balcony.

Luke pointed his phone at the surrounding mountains.

“Those mountains are beautiful,” Luke’s mother said.

“I hear there are plenty of those nut jobs in Switzerland,” Luke’s dad said.

“There were some protesters at the gates when we arrived,” Luke said.

“So Goat Son, did you eat any good books lately?” Luke’s uncle and godfather asked.

Luke stepped back into the room and pointed the phone at his new school books. “I have plenty of food,” He said.

Luke stepped back out onto the balcony and closed the door. He and his uncle started bleating at each other.

“Stop that you two,” Luke’s mother said angrily. “What if you did that in public?”

“Well he is Billy the Goat,” Luke’s uncle said. “He can’t help it.”

Technically Luke’s name was Luke Billhardson, or as his uncle liked saying, Billy, Billy the Goat.

“And my uncle is the Goat Father,” Luke said.

“Okay dear, you better go,” Luke’s mother said. “You have plenty of work ahead of you.”

“Work hard, Luke,” Luke’s dad said. “Remember I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks mum, dad,” Luke said.

“Remember to eat plenty of tin cans,” the uncle said. “You need plenty of iron for your growing bones.”

“Okay Goat Father,” Luke said. “Bye mum, dad, Goat Father.”

Luke hung up the call and entered the room.

Ripper looked at Luke curiously.

“My uncle and I are both Capricorns,” Luke explained. “And goats are funny creatures. It’s something we’ve been doing all my life. Do you have a favorite animal?”

Ripper paused a moment and then said, “I suppose it would be a gorilla. The ultimate line backer would be a gorilla. They are the ultimate symbol of speed, strength, and endurance.

“I finished unpacking.”

“Let’s go get something to eat,” Luke said and they headed out.

“Town or cafeteria?” Ripper asked.

“Town,” Luke said. “I’m betting you will get bored with the cafeteria fast enough.

“Not you?” Ripper said as they headed for the front gates.

“As you heard me talking to my uncle, I am a goat,” Luke said. “I don’t have hang-ups about food. As you can guess I enjoy eating, and also cooking.”

“There is that Annie,” Ripper said. “Want to go see?”

Annie was surrounded by admirers.

“Not really,” Luke said. “She is out of my league and I don’t believe in celebrities and heroes. You can go if you want. You’re handsome enough and an amazing athlete.

“As my uncle says, there are three types of people in the world: Sheep, Shepherds and Goats.

“Sheep always look for shepherds to guide them.

“Shepherds seek to guide and control others, often to the sheep’s detriment.”

“Why do you say that?” Ripper asked as they approached the gates.

“What do shepherds do to sheep?” Luke asked. “They raise them for food and wool.

“I am a goat. I neither follow nor lead, but follow my own path.”

Luke’s device beeped. Pulling out his device he read the message, “+1 to mental manipulation resistance.”

“Freaky,” Ripper said as he stared at the message. “It’s like we are in a freaking video game.”

They stepped out of the gate and were greeted by the protesters.

Placards read, “Nuclear energy is dangerous,” “Quantum communication damages space,” “Stop all space warping research,” and “The end is neigh.”

They passed the protesters and Ripper asked, “What do you think of that?”

“Nonsense,” Luke replied. “You can’t damage space. If you could, then the space around the sun would be ripped to shreds. And yet, science has yet to find any anomalies.”

The town spread all about them. Restaurants lined the street they were walking on.

“Which restaurant?” Ripper asked.

“Any,” Luke said. “I like exploring different foods.”

“You did mention you liked that old series, ‘Bizarre Foods’,” Ripper said. “Okay, let’s go to that burger place. On second thought, there are way too many students there.”

They entered the least crowded place, but even that was bustling.

They waited and soon enough a waiter led them to a seat.

Luke picked up the menu and scanned. There was a good selection of burgers, steaks, and even vegetarian options.

The waiter returned and asked, “Any drinks for you?”

“Coke please,” Ripper said.

“What’s your most popular soft drink?” Luke asked.

The waiter named Rivella, hot chocolate, Apple Juice, and Ice Tea, to name a few items.

“I’ll have Rivella, no ice please,” Luke said, since Rivella was the most exotic sounding drink listed.

Drink order taken, the waiter left.

“Did you hear? Bobby disappeared two nights ago,” a local man a table away asked. “This morning his body was found, all moldy and decayed. The stink was horrible.”

Ripper looked as if he wanted to gag.

“This town used to be peaceful,” the man’s companion grumbled. “What the hell are they doing with all those particle accelerators and that science mumbo-jumbo?”

“They are tearing holes into space is what they are doing,” another man at another table said. “Letting in all manner of demonic creatures.”

“Don’t spit,” a woman across the table scolded. “That’s just gross.”

The waiter returned to the table and brought the drinks.

Luke and Ripper gave their order and the waiter left.

“Something is seriously messed up in this town,” Ripper said, loud enough for the locals to hear.

“You’re from the school, aren’t you?” an elderly man at another table asked. “What are they doing there?”

“Just arrived today,” Luke confessed, “Although, the principle did talk about monsters and the need to get stronger. I was expecting a speech about hard work, not that.”

“And what’s that about not going out after dusk?” Ripper asked.

“There are things out there,” another woman said simply.

“Shouldn’t the government come out and find out?” Luke asked.

“They have, but have never found anything,” the woman said. “Claims we are a bunch of superstitious fools.”

The conversation ended when the food came.

Luke ate in silence, enjoying the food.

“Now what?” Ripper asked as they paid the bill.

“I want to explore the town and buy groceries,” Luke said. “Also want to explore the hiking trails. It’s only 1:00PM. There’s plenty of time before sunset.”

“Aren’t you afraid?” Ripper asked as they walked out of the restaurant.

“I only believe in science,” Luke said. “However, walking alone in a strange forest in the night isn’t wise.”