The Princess   
And The   
Sacred Beasts

**By**

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[The Journey Begins 3](#_Toc130664757)

[The New World 17](#_Toc130664758)

[Treasure Hunt 44](#_Toc130664759)

[A Royal Pain 49](#_Toc130664760)

[Dragon and Tiger 61](#_Toc130664761)

The Journey Begins

Travel companions are a must  
when going on epic journeys  
or just on fun trips

The Dragon

The red-haired young man with ponytail, moustache and goatee stood nervously and watched as two people competed in the semi-finals. He would be competing with the winner for the trophy.

The young man adjusted his Gi and waited. In due course, the match ended and the wait for the next match began. The wait was always the hardest part of any competition.

He scratched the birthmarks on his face as he waited his turn. On the left side of his face ran three straight red lines from near his ear to his mouth. Identical lines appeared on the right side of his face. The lines added to the attractiveness of his face, although he hated them. Makeup refused to hide the marks.

The time came for the karate championship. Draco bowed to his opponent and the match began.

Draco launched a series of attacks with hands and feet. It was fun attacking, defending, and feeling the rush.

Each attack was delivered with enough force to score points, but not enough to cause injury to the opponent. For Draco, fighting was like dancing and had nothing to do with injuring your opponent.

The opponent was good and made Draco sweat. That wasn’t surprising since this was the regional championship.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Within minutes, Draco raked up enough points to win.

“You held back, didn’t you?” the opponent accused angrily.

“I didn’t mean to insult you,” Draco replied and bowed. “My goal was to only score points. I look forward to the time when you can push me to my limit.”

“Bravo,” an old man with a white beard said and handed Draco an envelope. The man adjusted his wizard-like robe and walked away.

“Who was that?” Draco’s coach asked.

“Not a clue,” Draco replied.

The Rooster

Cornelius Leghorn had talent. He considered himself one of the greatest actors in the world, even though he was only eighteen. Of course, he had been on the big screen since he was a baby.

Right now, he was flirting with some stage crew. The ladies were putty in his hands as he easily got them to go out with him for the night.

His blond hair, deep blue eyes, good looks, and charm always ensured that he got laid.

“Action,” the director called.

Cornel stepped on stage and delivered a heart-rending performance of love and betrayal.

“Cut,” the director called.

“Bravo,” a white-haired old man said and tossed Cornel an envelope.

The Monkey

Zéphir Adams wasn’t an ordinary basketball player. He had huge hands and arms that reached well past his knees when standing straight. He was only 5’6” but his jumping ability and his arms allowed him to out-reach basketball players over a foot taller.

Zéphir’s team was playing against a team of giants. The shortest opponent was 6’1”.

Zéphir was blocked by two towering giants. That didn’t bother his teammate, who had complete fate in Zéphir. The mate tossed a ball over the heads of the players. Zéphir jumped four feet straight up and grabbed the ball with his spider-monkey like arms.

Dropping down to the ground, Zéphir dribbled low around the legs of his opponents and headed for the enemy’s hoop. Dodging opponents is easy when you have monkey-like moves. Zéphir dribbled left, and then right.

Finally, Zéphir made it to the hoop. He did his 4’ jump and shoved the ball into the hoop. The whistle blew. The game continued for the next one minute and the whistle blew for the last time. Zéphir’s team won.

Amid the celebrations, an old man that reminded Zéphir of a wise old owl approached. The man said, “Bravo. That was an incredible game.” He handed Zéphir an envelope and left.

The Horse

“On your mark, get set,” the announcer called. A gun shot rang through the air.

Argo Belle sprinted forward in the marathon race. Argo loved running and not running at least ten miles a day always made her jumpy.

Off the runners went. At first everyone did well, but then people dropped back. Argo wasn’t aware of this since she was at the head of the pack. Slowly she pulled ahead. Mile after mile they ran. At the five-mile mark, Argo was the only one at the head. Finally, the ten mile marathon ended.

Argo felt disappointed as she took first place. The race was way too short. The crowd waited another five minutes before the runner-up took second place.

While Argo waited to be crowned, an owlish old man approached and said, “Bravo. That was some incredible running.” He handed Argo a letter and walked away.

The Mouse

The tiny, masked thief winded through a dimly lit corridor, easily avoiding the sensors. The cameras were a different story. The thief recorded the signal from the wireless camera and played it back at ten times the signal strength, overriding the original signal.

Picking locks was child’s play for the thief and distracting guards with prerecorded sounds was effortless.

Finally, the thief entered the room containing the treasure. The Hope Diamond was on a weight-sensitive pedestal and surrounded by a glass housing. That was no hindrance to a master-class thief. The cameras were disabled as before.

Fortunately, there were no floor sensors, since that would be incontinent for security guards patrolling the area.

The thief positioned a tripod above the glass housing of the diamond. The tripod lowered a three-legged cage that surrounded the housing. Now for the hard part. The cage gently toughed the pedestal without placing additional weight on it.

Looking around the room, the thief felt the eyes of a predator. There was nothing there, except the other exhibits.

A motor on the cage lowered a suction cup that latched to the top of the housing and slowly lifted. Being perfectly balanced, the legs of the cage transferred all weight to the pedestal, negating the need to know the exact weight.

Inch by inch the glass housing lifted.

The thief placed two stands on opposite sides of the pedestal, and then threaded a horizontal pole through holes in the stands. Motors on the stands lowered the horizontal bar until it touched the inner pedestal carrying the diamond and automatically stopped, ensuring the sensed weight wouldn’t change when the diamond was removed.

The feeling of being watched by a hungry predator increased.

The thief removed the diamond and then produced a tiny airbrush. Taking a deep breath, the thief drew a smiling face on the pedestal and then placed the diamond back on top of the smiling face.

With a shaking hand, the thief pressed a remote control button. The horizontal bar lifted. In moments, the horizontal bar and stands were removed.

Next, the tripod lowered the glass enclosure and then disengaged. Seconds later, the mechanisms were disassembled and stowed away within the thief’s backpack.

Another look-around revealed no one. There were no predators to be found. Breathing a sigh of relief, the tiny thief slowly crept away.

The sound of clapping interrupted the retreating thief. A man with a long white beard, wizard-like overcoat, and a crooked cone hat stepped out from behind a display. Continuing clapping, the man said, “Bravo. That was incredible.”

<Show image>

The man terrified the tiny thief. He pretended to be old, but he wasn’t. Any thief worth their salt could see that. He was the predator that was ready to pounce. The predator stopped five feet away from the terrified thief and flicked an envelope at the thief.

The thief instinctively grabbed the envelope from the air, turned around and ran out of the museum.

The Owl

Draco looked at his invitation and stepped into the expensive restaurant. He wore his favorite set of traditional Chinese clothes. It consisted of loose-fitting pants and shirt, with a crimson flap in front. There was no question to anyone that he was well-dressed.

It was surprising what you could find at a thrift store.

The waiter stepped up to him and Draco said, “I’m waiting for an Oliver Dyson.”

“Of course,” Garson said. “Please follow me.”

They entered a private dining room where five people greeted him. The white-bearded owlish man sat at the head of the table. That must be Oliver – Oliver the owl.

On Oliver’s left side and sitting closest to Oliver was a teenage boy that looked his age. At first glance he looked like a monkey. He crouched on the chair, rather than sat.

On Oliver’s right side sat an actor he recognized. There was an arrogance to Cornelius Leghorn that reminded Draco of a rooster crowing at the morning sun.

To the left of the monkey-boy and away from Oliver was a dark-skinned slender woman. She was tall, and bristled with power, like a thoroughbred horse. Draco had had a feeling she could out-run anyone, including him.

Sitting farthest away from Oliver and to the left of the attractive runner was a mouse-like girl. She was tiny, cute and had a dozen mouse-like whiskers on her upper lip. The whiskers were at least three inches long and stuck out sideways like a real mouse. The girl had short black hair, black eyes, and a black spot on the tip of her cute little nose. The oversized ears added to her mousy appearance as they swiveled independently of each other.

She seemed afraid of the old man, as if the man was going to eat her. Draco got the impression of an owl watching a mouse. The owl had no intention of eating the mouse, but that didn’t put the mouse at ease.

“Please sit-down Draco,” the man said.

Draco took his place next to Cornelius. The little mouse looked at Draco and noted his radiant strength. She hesitated a moment and then switched places to the seat next to Draco, but away from Oliver.

“What would you like to drink, sir?” Garson asked.

“Coke please, no ice,” Draco replied as he opened the menu.

Oliver had ordered a Pepsi, which surprised Draco. He had expected Oliver to order wine.

“Draco, you may order two, three, or four main dishes if you wish. You too Argo, Zéphir.”

“Really?” Draco asked excitedly as he scanned the choices.

For the next five minutes no one spoke. Oliver called the waiter when everyone was ready to order.

The waiter returned and Draco ordered a New-York steak, a mega-burger, a large plate of spaghetti and meatballs, and the seafood platter. The others ordered as well. The mouse girl ordered a boring salad. The runner ordered vegetarian. However the portions were large. Oliver and Cornelius ordered high-brow food and the monkey-boy ordered four dishes as well.

“Zéphir, don’t try to compete with Draco,” Oliver warned. “Draco has the appetite of a dragon.”

After order completion, Oliver greeted everyone. “Thank-you all for coming. Let me start with a story and then we shall have introductions.”

Draco grabbed bread rolls, slathered them with butter and stuffed them into his face.

“In the 1950’s, scientists theorized the existence of parallel worlds. This is different from the traditional parallel world theory everyone thinks of. In the tradition multiverse view, the universe splits every time a decision is made. That is ridiculous and proven false by Bell’s Inequality theorem. Think about it. If the universe always splits, then there would be no quantum effects. There are quantum effects. Therefore, the theory is wrong.”

Cornelius yawned and said, “This is boring.”

Oliver continued. “The scientists believed that streams of possibilities only split when it encounters irreconcilable differences. One such difference came at the time of the Renaissance.”

“Eat or you’ll never grow,” Draco said and placed a bread roll on mouse-girl’s plate.

The waiter came with soup. He gave two bowls to Draco.

“That was fast,” Draco commented.

“I pre-ordered the soup,” Oliver replied.

“We live in the Renaissance time stream where magic doesn’t exist,” Oliver continued. “The second time stream was theorized to allow for magic of all kinds. Technology, on the other hand, would consist only of simple machines. In this world magic sometimes slips in but cannot be proven to exist. In the other world, technology does exist, but it always appears to the locals as magic. As a result, it can’t be developed by the locals.”

The monkey-boy noisily slurped his soup. Cornelius complained about the soup but still drank it. The mouse girl daintily drank hers and Oliver was too busy talking. The runner enjoyed her vegetable soup. Draco quickly finished his and started on his second.

“Finally on January 1, 2000, they succeeded in opening a gateway to the other world and six spirits entered this world, although no one knew that at the time.

“These spirits took residence in six babies born on that day. Ladies and gentlemen, we are the six children.”

“Impossible,” Cornelius retorted. “You’re an old man.”

“I’m glad you’re paying attention,” Oliver commented sarcastically.

“I assure you that we are all eighteen years old,” Oliver said. “The spirit of the Owl resides within me. I was born with snow-white hair. At the age of ten my moustache and beard started growing. I could never get rid of it, no matter how much I shaved. Finally, I got tired and stopped shaving. It grew to this length and stopped growing.

“In addition to making me look like a wizard, the owl spirit blessed me with an IQ of 257, keen powers of observation and excellent night vision, among other things.”

“Do you eat mice?” Cornelius asked and laughed.

“Don’t worry little mouse, I won’t let anyone eat you,” Draco assured. The mouse visibly relaxed.

Oliver cleared his throat and said, “Cornelius has the spirit of the rooster. He is brash, arrogant, has incredible talent and can charm most people.”

“Hey, I’m neither brash nor arrogant,” Cornelius said angrily.

“Zéphir has the spirit of the monkey,” Oliver continued. “The monkey spirit has given him long arms, flexibility, great strength and incredible gymnastic ability.”

The food came. The waiter placed Draco’s food on a rolling cart next to him. Draco grabbed the steak plate first.

“You’re not eating that are you?” the mouse girl asked. “Aren’t you afraid of getting fat?”

“It’s next to impossible for Draco to get fat,” Oliver explained. “Draco has the spirit of the dragon in him. His red hair is the same as mine. By nature, his ponytail will always grow slightly below his butt. The same is true with his moustache and goatee. They will always grow back as they are now.”

“Are you saying Draco’s hair braids itself?” Cornelius asked incredulously.

“That’s precisely what I’m saying. However, it takes over a week,” Oliver replied.

“This I’ve got to see,” Cornelius exclaimed and got up. He grabbed Draco’s ponytail and tried to unbraid his hair. Cornelius struggled a moment but eventually got the hair un-bond.

Satisfied with the mess he made of Draco’s hair, Cornelius sat down to eat.

“See, there’s nothing magical about his hair,” Cornelius gloated.

“Draco is double-muscled,” Oliver continued. “The muscles of a normal person atrophy when they aren’t used. This is to conserve energy and is a natural survival mechanism. Draco doesn’t have that mechanism and his muscles will always get stronger, even when he does nothing.

“The downside is that he currently has a base metabolic rate of around 3,600 Calories a day. Add to that an active lifestyle. In times past, he would have died in childhood for lack of nourishment. As it stands, he can easily starve to death in less than a week if he doesn’t eat like a pig.”

“How come you know so much of us?” Cornelius asked skeptically.

“The Newtonian Society has been tracking us since we were children,” Oliver replied. “My parents are part of the society and I have been working with them since I was ten. They decided to officially contact you now since you have just graduated high school.

“Vera Jones has the spirit of the mouse. I’m sure she hates the fact that she has whiskers or that black spot on her nose. However, those whiskers allow her to sense her environment in a way that makes her almost see in the dark. She also has excellent night vision and an incredible sense of hearing, smell and taste.

“You have all heard of the smiling face bandit, who breaks into secured vaults and draws smiling faces, but never steals anything. In her last escapade, she drew a smiling face under the Hope Diamond. It drove the curator crazy, trying to figure out how it was done. I saw it with my own eyes. She is an artist.”

“Thank-you,” Vera said and blushed.

“Finally, Argo Belle has the spirit of the horse. She is an incredible runner and has the strength and grace of a thoroughbred,” Oliver said. “She also has a healthy appetite, which she needs, since her active lifestyle causes her to expend over 6,000 Calories a day.”

“You mean she eats like a horse,” Cornel laughed. Argo kicked him under the table. “Ouch,” he grunted and glared at her.

“Argo, being compared to a horse isn’t an insult,” Oliver assured. “Neither is having a healthy appetite for an Olympic athlete.”

“You’re an Olympic athlete?” Vera asked.

“She has the talent to win the gold in the Summer Olympics in all the running events, including triathlon, sprints, marathons, and hurdle races,” Oliver said. “If she entered the 20 and 50km walks, she’d probably run the whole distance instead of walking,” he added and laughed.

“Come on, eat some meat,” Draco said and shoved meat in Vera’s face. “It will grow some hair on your chest.”

“I’m a vegetarian and I don’t want hair on my chest,” Vera said defensively.

“Mice rarely eat meat,” Oliver explained. “By the way, our fashion sense and our personalities seem to be influenced by our guardian spirits. Our names are influenced by our guardian animals as well. Draco the dragon, Oliver the owl, Cornelius the rooster, Zéphir the monkey, Vera the mouse, and Argo the horse.

“I forgot to mention, Draco is a 7th Dan Karate mater. That’s amazing for someone his age.”

“What the hell?” Cornelius exclaimed. “Draco’s hair is back to normal. When did that happen?”

“It happened when no one was looking,” Olive replied. “Can any of you be certain Draco’s hair was ever messed up? The answer is No.”

Lunch ended and desert was served. “How can you eat so much?” Vera asked.

“Would you believe I have a hollow leg?” Draco asked and winked at her.

“I knew you would accept my invitation,” Oliver continued. “The spirits in you know that their true home is in the other world, where they can express their true power. In this world, most of their power is hidden since spirit beasts don’t officially exist.”

Oliver looked around and knew the others believed him.

“Now that lunch is over, it’s time to show you the facilities. Please follow me.”

They left the restaurant and went to the elevators. Oliver pressed his palm against a card reader and a light turned on. In moments an elevator arrived. Oliver pressed another card reader and the elevator descended rapidly into the bowels of the earth.

Three minutes later the elevator stopped. “We are almost 3,000 feet below the city. Our facility is built in a cave system discovered over a contrary ago by the Newtonian Society.”

They exited the elevator and out into a humongous cavern. The ceiling was over 400 feet up and was filled with imitation daylight, making it look like to outside.

The cavern housed a sprawling city.

“The underground city covers several acres of cavern space, showing just how amazing this natural wonder is. Only 8% of the currently explored cave system is being used. It’s almost like a divine gift,” Oliver said.

“We have top scientists and engineers working for us. We also secretly support the current president and in turn the president supports us in our endeavors. There was a great deal of debate as to when to invite you, but in the end, it was decided to wait. That was the only way to maximize your growth potential. You were all secretly trained to maximize your abilities. As employees you will be paid well, although not as well as Cornelius’ last contract. You are valuable to us.”

“Just call me Cornel,” Cornel said.

They entered a minibus and Oliver gave them a tour.

“Here are the labs where we study how physics and metaphysics interact. Few people know it, but Sir Isaac Newton was a meta-physicist and studied alchemy, astrology, and other meta-physical sciences.”

“Does the Philosopher’s stone exist?” Cornel asked.

“Yes,” Oliver replied. “Unfortunately, it’s a well-guarded secret which I don’t have access to.”

The tour took them to the science building, manufacturing facilities and business areas. Then came the shopping district, the entertainment district, and finally the residential area.

“You’ll be staying in the same apartment complex as me when you’re here. Your biometrics has already been recorded, so you may enter whenever you wish. We have given you an advance on your salary and deposited it in your favorite bank accounts,” Oliver continued. “Of course, there is a gym, swimming pool and other stuff. Get comfortable in your new apartment. Tomorrow the fun begins.”

The rooms had name tags, but some had none.

“I’m going exploring,” Vera said and left.

“I’m going to get laid,” Cornel said and walked away.

“I’m running,” Argo said and headed for the elevator as well.

“Come on Draco, let’s explore,” Zéphir said. “I love this place. It’s so 3-dimenional. The world upstairs is entirely too flat.”

“Sure Zéphir,” Draco replied, and they headed out.

Zéphir jumped out the window and scurried down the building like a monkey. Draco hesitated a moment, since he wasn’t used to exiting buildings through that route but followed.

They went beyond the main underground city and into the raw tunnels. Normally monkeys aren’t good in total darkness, but Zéphir was different in a way he wasn’t aware. Draco was a dragon and could also handle darkness.

Both new friends travelled the labyrinth of tunnels together, over rocks and chasms and between crevices. Climbing unexpected cliffs was fun too.

“Hey look, there’s a cool waterfall,” Zéphir pointed.

Draco’s stomach growled. Zéphir laughed, and then his stomach growled. “I guess we are both hungry,” Zéphir laughed. “Going all out can use up a lot of energy.”

Off in the darkness, an owl watched, happy that they were getting along so well and discovering their true power.

The New World

Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore

-- Dorothy, the Wizard of Oz --

Draco woke up and found a note on the door. It said to meet in the common room at 8:00 AM. That was 20 minutes from now. Draco brushed his teeth and changed. His wardrobe contained plenty of clothes to choose from, exactly matching his unique fashion sense. That disturbed him. This shady Newtonian Society knew way too much about him.

It was hard to believe that the conspiracy theorists were right and that there where dark societies in existence, quietly shaping the course of history, and yet here he was, in a vast underground city unknown to the people of the upper world.

Draco had a feeling that refusing to join was not an option and that sent shivers down his spine. Dragons don’t like being confined. He would need to bide his time and find out what was going on before acting. He was no monster in the brain department like Oliver, but an IQ of 143 was nothing to sneeze at.

Draco stepped out and entered the common area. He greeted Zéphir with a high-five, and then rubbed Vera’s head.

“Hey, you’re messing my hair,” Vera complained.

“Don’t worry about it,” Draco replied. “It doesn’t matter how messy your hair gets. You will always look cute.”

“You’re a guy,” Argo scolded. “You don’t know how important hair is to a woman.”

“Come let’s go for breakfast and then I will show you the other world,” Oliver said by way of greeting.

They headed for the apartment’s restaurant’s buffet. The gang loaded up on food and sat at a common table.

They discussed their experiences of last night.

“This Underground isn’t part of the Renaissance world. It supports both magic and science. That’s why your spirit beasts could express more of your power. Keep in mind that you have vast powers, which will take some time for you to master.

“After breakfast we shall go to the other world.”

Oliver’s phone rang and he got up. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to answer this,” he said and left.

“What do you think of this Newtonian society?” Argo whispered.

“I’m suspicious of it,” Draco replied. “For one thing, Oliver said our spirit beasts came from the other world and it seems our hosts have free access to the other world. That means they have free access to spirit beasts. Why do they need us, and why are they paying us so much money? Although I admit, with over 5,000$ in my bank account, my wallet has never been happier.”

“What, you had less than that in your account before?” Cornel laughed.

It was $425.76. Draco didn’t say that.

“Not all of us are blessed with the power or desire to manipulate others for personal gain,” Argo scolded.

“When it comes to manipulating others, I think I’m an amateur here,” Cornel replied.

“I guess this is one of those secret societies people keep talking about that’s trying to rule the world,” Vera said.

“I’m going to play along until I find the truth,” Draco said.

“You’re all stressing too much. You should enjoy yourselves and have fun,” Zéphir said and ate a banana.

“Sorry about that,” Oliver said as he returned. He sat down and waited for everyone to finish eating.

“Let’s go everyone,” Oliver said and led the way. They entered a parked van and headed out.

After a ten-minute ride, they entered a building and rode an elevator downwards. The car travelled downwards for what seemed like eternity but was at least ten minutes.

“We have descended 6,700 feet,” Oliver said as they stepped out.

The destination was a huge cavern with a domed roof that was almost six hundred feet up. A two-hundred-foot-wide magic circle was drawn onto the granite of the ground. The circle consisted of concentric circles with tiny circles between larger circles. Strange symbols filled the space between the enclosing circles.

Outside the magic circle were banks of huge machinery.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Oliver commented. “We have millions of dollars’ worth of machinery and computer equipment in this cavern. Both magic and science combine to activate the gate.”

“Why is it so hot?” Cornel asked.

“That’s because we are over a mile underground. There’s our ride,” Oliver said, pointing at a road train.

The indicated train was a sixty-foot-wide monster. It was more like a cargo ship.

The first car was a triple-decker passenger car. The other cars were flat-bed cars stacked high with shipping containers.

Following Oliver, the gang climbed a passenger loading platform and entered the train. They had to stand because the car was packed. Other last-minute passengers squeezed in.

“Operating the gate uses a great deal of resources, so it’s cost effective to use this monster train. The gate opens once a week.”

**Will depart in ten minutes.**

**Please board if you haven’t done so.**

The countdown began and Draco waited.

The passenger doors closed, and the loudspeaker said, “The gate will open in one minute.”

The train inched forward. It exited the tunnel at the 20 second count and headed for the circle at breakneck speed.

“Five, four, three, two, one. Gate open,” the loudspeaker called.

Machinery hummed and the ground vibrated. The magic circle glowed.

At the center of the magic circle a torii or Japanese Gate rose from the ground. The torii was painted Chinese red, had its two square pillars spaced eighty feet apart and the cross bar was over hundred feet in the air when it stopped rising. The inside of the torii gate had a reflective surface like the surface of a pool of mercury.

Seconds later the train crossed the outer perimeter of the circle and accelerated. Within moments it hit the shinning surface and entered.

On the other side of the gate another train exited.

As Draco passed through the shimmering wall, he felt as if he was being shredded to dust as he passed. However, there was no pain. The world seemed to disintegrate down to its component parts and reassemble.

Draco passed through to the other side, feeling nauseous.

The other side was a cavern identical to the first. The train crossed the outer ring of the magic circle and entered a tunnel.

The train continued travelling for a few minutes and then came to a stop. Behind them the gate descended back into the ground. The machinery turned off and the magic circle stopped glowing.

“Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” Vera quoted.

“What are you talking about? We were never in Kansas,” Zéphir asked.

Ignoring the two, Oliver said, “The gate is an amazing thing. We still don’t fully understand its operation. Needing magic and technology on both sides to operate is a pain. There should be an easier way, but we haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Want a candy bar?” Zéphir asked and pulled out two.

Feeling like puking, Draco said, “No thanks. I’m feeling sick.”

“Are you okay?” Vera asked worriedly.

Breathing deeply, Draco said, “I’ll be fine. How come none of you are feeling sick after going through that gate?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you,” Oliver said. “In legend, some dragons have the power to cross dimensions. It’s possible that you have that power, which is why you felt sick. Dragons are hard to study because they are elusive and difficult to study.”

“Don’t they like rampaging?” Cornel asked.

“Yes,” Oliver admitted. “However, they’re always gone when we arrive.”

Stomach quieting down, Draco followed the others off the train.

The gang followed Oliver to an elevator. This time they rode the elevator to the surface. They stepped out into a stone corridor of a medieval castle. Suits of armor lined the corridor. Tapestries adorned the walls. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The elevator doors closed, and a tapestry lowered, hiding the elevator.

Oliver led them down the corridor and past luxurious rooms filled with priceless artwork.

“This is the abode of Lord James Fletcher. He is part of our society, and this is where you will be staying while here,” Oliver said.

They left the building and Draco found himself in front of an acre of English gardens. Statues, sculptured trees, and fountains displayed the wealth and power of the lord.

A horse-drawn carriage waited in front. Two horses stood restlessly, wanting to move.

“Come. I shall give you a tour of the city,” Oliver said. “Please enter.”

Cornel and the ladies entered the carriage.

“Draco let us sit in front,” Zéphir said.

“Okay,” Draco replied and followed.

Oliver got in and a moment later Vera got out and joined Zéphir and Draco in front. She sat on Draco’s lap since there was only space for the driver, Zéphir and Draco. Draco wrapped his arms around Vera, and she wiggled her nose like a mouse.

“No mouse would voluntarily be with an owl,” the driver commented with a laugh and signaled the horses to move. “Little mouse, you are lucky to have a dragon to protect you,” the driver said. Looking at the driver, Draco felt he was seeing a rabbit. “Dragon, how many toes do you have?”

The question confused Draco. Then he remembered the mythology of dragons. Common dragons had three toes, noble dragons had four toes and royal dragons had five toes.

“I don’t know,” Draco replied. “I have the same number of body parts as any other human.”

“James, they have yet to fully explore their other nature,” Oliver said. “We don’t know the full extent of their power other than that they are powerful.”

They headed for the city. The city looked like an 18th centenary city with its houses, cobbled streets, and lamps. As a rule, the largest structures were only three stories high.

“This is Olympia, the capital of the country of Washington,” Oliver said, starting his tour. “In this world, the United States never formed. Instead, the states are now nations with monarchs. The reason kings rule here seems to have something to do with the fact that this is a world of magic and royalty is by nature magical.

“Princes and princesses are integral parts of fairytales.

“On that hill is the royal palace. That’s where the royal family lives. It also contains facilities for dealing with foreign diplomats. Surrounding that are the government buildings.

“In two hours, the royal family will be greeting the citizens. Today is Princess Annie’s eighteenth birthday. By the way, happy eighteenth birthday to all of us,” Oliver said.

“Is there a connection between us and the princess?” Draco asked.

“Not that I’m aware off,” Oliver replied. “Why do you think that? Is it because we have the same birthday?”

“Never mind,” Draco retracted. “Forget what I said. I’m just being illogical.”

“Don’t dismiss your feelings,” Oliver cautioned. “This is a world of magic where hunches are taken seriously. I’ll take your observation into consideration.

“By the way, we don’t understand the zodiac beasts since they haven’t been seen in a thousand years. Historical records are sketchy at best. For instance, there is almost no reference to the owl, since it’s not one of the twelve most people know about.

“It doesn’t help that every time the challenges are different.

“As an aside, this world has thirteen months in a year. Each month is a lunar month with 28 days each. In addition, there is an extra day each summer solstice and a leap day every four winter solstices.”

They got down at a place reserved for upper-class people and waited. In due course the princess made her appearance. She waved at the assembled masses and bestowed her divine blessing. She knew she was better than them and the masses knew that too.

The princess turned and stared at Draco. Her eyes penetrated his brain and transfixed him, flooding him with a multitude of emotions he couldn’t understand.

Vera grabbed Draco’s arm and snuggled against him. Draco didn’t notice since he was in a world of his own.

Oliver looked at Vera and understood the problem. “Don’t get jealous Vera. Dragons are by nature drawn to princesses. They can’t help it. People have used princess as bait to capture dragons since ancient times. On the bright side, Princess Annie is a tiger. Dragons and tigers always fight.” They also had passionate relationships, which always ended up in tragedy. Oliver didn’t mention that.

Vera was so focused on the princess and her future boyfriend that she didn’t notice how close the owl was to her.

The princess turned and entered the palace. The show was over and yet Draco continued staring.

Oliver snapped his fingers near Draco’s ear and commanded, “Draco, snap out of it.”

Draco awoke from his trance and looked around. “What happened?” He asked.

“You were enthralled by a princess,” Oliver explained. “Come, let’s continue our tour.”

Oliver continued his tour of the city with the marketplace and several popular locations. During the trip Draco said nothing but remained in a world of his own, ignoring any request for conversation.

They returned to the residence for lunch. “The first task we have in front of us is finding the remaining zodiac spirit holders. Every thousand years the zodiac beasts appear to fight a great evil. Our job is to find that evil and defeat it before the world is destroyed.”

The group sat down for lunch.

“Don’t you want world domination?” Cornel asked.

“No,” Oliver replied. “Our only purpose Sir Isaac Newton set before us is protecting our world in time of need. The only reason we have collected power is to fulfill that purpose.”

“How come?” Draco asked, finally snapping out of his daydreams.

“Tyranny comes about when power is monopolized by a few people,” Oliver said. “The more the power is distributed, the greater the freedom. Personal power is the great equalizer.

“As a result, we of the Newtonian society have been focusing on global education and developing personal strength. Even here, where it’s impossible to change the power structure, education plays a vital role in balancing society.

“To answer your unspoken question, a parallel Newtonian society was formed here as well, inspired by Sir Isaac Newton. One focused on physics and the other focused on meta-physics, but the goal was the same. Finally, we were able to meet eighteen years ago and join forces.

“Of course, we scout the best to join our society. That is necessary for us to continue.

“Don’t believe what I say. Seek the truth for yourselves. That is the motto of the Newtonian Society.”

“Who is the foe we need to defeat?” Draco asked.

“Don’t know,” Oliver replied. “The foe changes every time. We just know that the enemy will appear when all thirteen zodiac beasts are assembled. Unfortunately, the longer we take, the more powerful the foe will be when it shows up.”

“Why weren’t we contacted before?” Argo asked.

“To develop maximum strength, we had to give you secret training unknown to you,” Oliver replied. “The only exception was me, because of my nature. My power was maximized because of exposure to the society at a young age.

“The Society is upset that we still have seven more to find, but we are certain we will find them.

Oliver became quiet and focused on eating. The others quietly digested what was said.

“Now I will show you to your rooms and then you may do whatever you want until 8:00PM tonight,” Oliver said.

They were led down several corridors and into a wing for guests. Draco entered his assigned room and opened the closet. His clothes were there. Freaky. On the table was a pouch. In it Draco found three gold coins, five silver coins, and twenty bronze coins.

Draco stared at the gold in fascenation. So much gold and it was all his. A strage sense of excitement welled up in him like he never experienced before. He felt like kissing and licking the riches and rubbing the coins against his face. He felt like…

“Draco let’s explore the city,” Zéphir called and opened the door.

Draco experienced accute embarassment at being cought wanting to fondle his gold. He felt treatened by Zéphir’s presence and had the urge to punch him in the face.

Hastily Draco put the money back into the pouch and then put the bag into an inner pocket. He then turned around and said, “Okay,” to Zéphir.

Heart still pounding and face flushed, Draco followed Zéphir into the common room. Thankfully no one noticed.

“How do we get to the town center?” Zéphir asked.

“Please follow me and I will take you to your horses,” a servant answered.

The two friends followed.

“In high-school, an equestrian team formed and somehow I got roped into joining,” Zéphir commented.

Feeling back to normal, Draco replied, “Same here.”

They went to the stables and the stable hands adjusted the saddle of Zéphir’s horse to accept Zéphir’s stubby legs.

They headed for downtown.

“This place doesn’t feel real,” Zéphir said. “It’s almost like being in a video game.”

“Look up there,” Draco said excitedly. “There’s a guy on a flying carpet.”

“And that woman is flying on a broom,” Zéphir added in awe. “This place is way too cool. All my life I felt I didn’t belong. Now I’m home.”

“You got that right, best friend,” Draco replied.

“I wish I could fly,” Zéphir said.

“Maybe you’re a flying monkey, as in the Wizard of Oz,” Draco suggested.

“That would be cool,” Zéphir agreed. “But how do I fly?”

“Not a clue,” Draco replied. “I’m sure the old owl knows. He’s a monster in the brain department.”

The two rode aimlessly through the city. They entered a shady area of the city. The buildings were old and crumbling. Trash littered the streets and graffiti covered the walls of the buildings.

Vagrants looked at them from dark allies as they rode, probably wondering why they were there. The two were bathed with raw hostility.

“This place is giving me the creeps,” Zéphir commented.

“Same here,” Draco replied.

Just then Draco was startled by the scream of a woman.

“That way,” Zéphir shouted and headed in the direction of the scream.

They found an attractive young woman and a ten-year-old girl. The woman was stacked. She had the classic hour-glass shape and was smoking hot.

A gang of unpleasant men was toying with both mother and child and the two didn’t like it.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Draco asked menacingly and swung down off his horse. Zéphir followed.

“None of your business, lordlings,” the leader called. He seemed to have the spirit of a hyena. He was most definitely dangerous. “Get back to your manors. This place is not for you.”

“I’m making it my business,” Draco said in a commanding voice. “I will not allow scum like you to harm the innocent. That is my code of honor.”

“Same here,” Zéphir agreed. He took a banana out of his pocket and ate it.

“Wrong answer,” the leader sneered. “Get them,” he commanded. “Remember. If they’re dead, we can’t get in trouble. Then we dispose of the bodies in the rich area.”

The thugs advanced and Zéphir tossed the banana peel. The first thug stepped on the peel. His leg shot upward, and he went head over heels, just like in the cartoons. He landed on his stomach, with legs and arms splayed outwards.

Having completed its task, the banana peel disappeared.

Draco took a fighting stance and waited. The thugs attacked.

The bad guys had an assortment of spirits. They included various predators, such as bears, snakes, and wolves.

Draco attacked the bandits. On one level he was a martial artist fighting a bunch of hoodlums. On another level, he felt like a fire dragon battling wild animals.

Zéphir fought too, with his monkey karate.

The fighting dragged on. After a while, Zéphir got separated from Draco. From the corner of his eye, he saw a snake and a rat molesting the two ladies. The snake was fondling the woman’s breasts and the rat was doing worse to the little girl.

Zéphir looked in shock and disgust at what he saw. He had a niece who was also a victim of child molestation and it bothered him that he couldn’t protect her. And here he was, still unable to protect that little girl.

Something snapped in the easy-going Zéphir. How dare those disgusting creatures touch that innocent girl like that?

Zéphir howled and beat his chest like an angry gorilla. Anger and rage flooded him as he felt himself grow.

Zéphir pounded the thugs with his massive muscles. Finally, the thugs had enough and ran.

Draco approached and said, “You’ve changed, my friend. I can’t look down on you anymore.”

Zéphir looked at himself and discovered that he had the body of a 6’7” bodybuilder. He was massive and made Draco look like a shrimp.

Draco turned to the woman and child and said, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, thanks to you two,” the woman replied gratefully.

“We’re just glad to be of assistance,” Draco said and rubbed the little girl’s head with his right hand.

“Ouch,” Draco winched and pulled his hand away from the little girl’s head. He had a hangnail that got snagged in the girl’s hair.

Draco pulled the nail out and crouched in front of the child. “How would you like the claw of a dragon?” he asked the child.

The little girl’s eyes sparkled like lipid pools in the moonlight. Sparkling with happiness, the girl gave Draco a hug. “Thank-you,” she cried happily.

Draco hugged her back and said to the woman, “Here, take this for your daughter.”

The mother gingerly place one hand under the other and Draco dropped his fingernail onto her palm.

The nail fragment transformed into a two-inch-long ebony dragon claw. The flat end had a gold ring for threading a string for a necklace.

The mother stared reverently at the claw and said, “I don’t know how to repay you, Majesty.”

Draco gave the child one last hug and stood up. “That claw is a powerful source of good luck. However, it can’t protect you from your own foolishness. I hope you understand that.”

“Yes Majesty,” the woman said with all the gratitude she could muster.

“We’ll escort you away from this place,” Draco said. “Please don’t come again to this bad place. The next time we won’t be here to save you.”

“I understand,” the woman said and bowed.

Draco turned and found that his towering friend had the two horses. They escorted the two ladies to the better part of town and the little girl gave Draco one final hug. They waved bye and Draco and Zéphir walked away.

“That was fun,” Zéphir said. “I never expected to turn into a gorilla.”

“You’re the gorilla dreams,” Draco.

“Girl of your dreams?” Zéphir asked. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know about you but I’m starving,” Draco said.

“Same here,” Zéphir said. “All that fighting has made me hungry.”

“And now you have the appetite of a gorilla,” Draco said.

“Damn straight,” Zéphir agreed. He then looked down and got a surprise. “Good grief. My clothes have changed.”

Indeed, Zéphir wore a finely tailored business suit, with a red tie, decorated with bananas.

“I guess this really is a world of magic,” Draco said in wonder. “It’s also strange I knew what to do with my fingernail.”

They got back on the horses and headed in the direction of the palace.

They arrived at the shopping district and found several restaurants.

“Which restaurant should we enter?” Draco asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Zéphir replied. “Next time we’ll just eat at another restaurant.”

They entered the nearest restaurant and in due course the waiter asked what they wanted to eat. The food wasn’t that great, but it was filling. Draco looked at his broken fingernail and discovered it was whole again. That was cool.

“Now what?” Zéphir asked. “We have hours before we must return.

“Waiter, we are new to town. Can you please suggest places we can visit?” Draco asked.

“Well, there’s the stadium, the museum of magic, museum of transportation – there is the tourist bureau. Go down Carver Street and turn left on Main Street. It’s a large building with the sign for Pegasus,” the waiter replied.

“Thank you,” Zéphir said.

“It’s a pleasure to serve,” the waiter replied.

Draco and Zéphir paid and left.

At the tourist bureau, they got a travel map of the city. It was beautifully drawn with the points of interest well defined.

“Hey look, there’s a museum of military art,” Zéphir said.

“Okay, let’s go,” Draco replied.

The building was a three-story structure, guarded by statues of a centaur pointing an arrow at the sky and a Minotaur swinging a club.

The first section was military transportation. There were Egyptian chariots alongside flying carpets and brooms.

Transportation also included horses, three-toed dragons, ostriches with saddles, and giant lizards with two rows of seats on the top. There were also giant Roc birds with carriages on their backs, like the Flintstones.

In the weapons section, there were the standard weapons such as swords, spears and bows and arrows. There were also replicas of magical weapons, such as medusa eyes, Excalibur, and the Lance of Destiny. Of course, both Excalibur and the Lance were currently lost.

Before they knew it, it was 7:30PM.

“Holy crap, it’s time to get back,” Zéphir exclaimed.

The two raced through the urban jungle and arrived with ten minutes to spare. Draco entered the common area of their suite of rooms and found that they were the last ones to arrive.

“Draco, who’s your new friend and where’s Zéphir?” Oliver asked.

“That is Zéphir,” Draco replied. “He just ate too much spinach.”

Draco noted Vera standing in the corner. She looked at him shyly, obviously wanting a hug.

“Come here my little mouse,” Draco said and gave her a hug when she came. “I love you, my little mouse. You’re so cute, especially when you wiggle your little nose.” Draco sat on a large fur-covered chair closest to the fireplace and cuddled with Vera. To everyone it seemed he was hugging his favorite pet instead of a person.

“But you think of me as a child,” Vera complained.

“Actually, I think he views you as his pet,” Argo commented.

“It’s not Draco’s fault Vera,” Oliver consoled. “Draco hasn’t reached puberty yet. It will be decades or more before that happens. Dragons are one of the few races of sacred beasts that live centuries and dragons take a very long time to gain full adulthood.”

This conversation was making Draco uncomfortable. “Hey, I’m a full adult, the same as the rest of you,” Draco said angrily.

Cornel laughed. “Vera looks like a child, but Draco is the actual child. Does he have hair below?”

Draco’s face turned red. “That’s not funny,” Draco said angrily. “I’m just as grown-up as the rest of you.”

“Mice are short-lived creatures,” Vera said worriedly. “Will I die soon?”

“No, my dear,” Oliver assured. “The lifespan of a person is determined by what has the greater lifespan. It is true that mice only live short lives. However, humans have the lifespan of up to one hundred years. In other words, you can live a full human life.

“Now let’s change the subject.”

Draco felt a sense of relief. He didn’t like the others discussing whether he had reached puberty.

“Now let’s discuss our experiences today,” Oliver said.

Cornel described how he got a free lunch and how he had a Ménage-à-trois with five hot women.

“You really are a pig,” Argo said in disgust.

“So, what did you do Argo?” Oliver asked.

“I ran faster than I ever ran before,” Argo said excitedly.

“I explored the city and the sewer system,” Vera said.

Zéphir and Draco described their adventure rescuing the mother and her daughter. Oliver gave Zéphir the third degree, forcing every detail concerning his transformation.

“I think we have underestimated the Zodiac beasts. Perhaps that is partially to blame for not finding the other beasts,” Oliver commented.

“Okay everyone, please follow me.”

They went to another room. In the center of the room was a granite basin filled with water. Set around the pool were pillows.

“Everyone, please sit down,” Oliver instructed. “We shall use water divination to find our next companion. By the way, magic can’t be thought. It must be learnt. It’s as natural as breathing, but near impossible to study. Its power comes from analogy, metaphor, and expectation. In this world superstitions rule.

“Now hold hands, focus on the water, and clear your minds as best you can.”

Draco focused his mind and held Vera and Zéphir’s hands.

At first nothing happened. Oliver chanted in a strange language. The room darkened and eerie shadows flickered near the corners of Draco’s eyes. Vera’s nails dug into his hands as her palms became sweaty.

“O great oracle, tell us who our next companion is,” Oliver intoned.

Ripples appeared in the water of the basin and then died. Moments later, the base of the basin darkened and went black. The dark pool shimmered as if a forbidden doorway was opening. An image formed. It was the image of – the princess.

Moments later the image disappeared, and the water went back to normal. The creepy shadows disappeared, and the room brightened.

“Let’s go back to the sitting room,” Oliver said.

“Why was that so scary?” Vera asked.

“That’s because we are peering into the world beyond,” Oliver replied. “That is a very dangerous place for mortals. Rest assured that we have countless wards in place to ensure our safety.”

Draco looked at his hand as they headed for the sitting room. Vera had drawn blood. Draco licked his hand until the blood disappeared.

“Draco’s hunch was correct. The princess is one of us,” Oliver continued.

“Draco, Zéphir, in two weeks, there is going to be a martial arts competition. I am certain that the princess will compete. She has won multiple competitions already, even against men. I think this is a great way for her to get to know us and eventually join us.”

A chill went down Draco’s back as he contemplated fighting a tiger. He knew defeating a tiger was impossible, but he also knew that he had to fight. Confronting one’s fears and especially one’s phobias is the path of the warrior.

Putting on a brave air, he said, “Sounds like fun. I see no problem fighting with her.”

“You’re willing to fight a girl?” Argo asked, shocked.

Draco frowned. “This isn’t a domestic situation. We are competitors. I see no problem fighting her inside an official match. Outside a match is a different story. I would never hit someone outside a match, no matter how angry I got, unless it’s to protect someone. That is my code of honor.”

“We can’t do another deviation until the signs shift. I believe the next window of opportunity will be when we succeeded in making the princess one of us.” Being an owl, Oliver had a natural ability for divination. “Draco, Zéphir, I’m counting on you to make contact.”

The butler entered with hot chocolate milk and snacks. Draco eagerly accepted a mug. He sat back and watched the flames flicker in the fireplace.

Draco felt drowsy. The flames seemed to expand and encompass his world. He plunged into the fire.

There in front of him was an army of darkness. Dark elves walked hand in hand with trolls and zombies. Vampires flittered around the banshees. Beyond them were legions of demons, starting with imps and becoming ever stronger.

The army seemed endless as he flew over the evil creatures.

Finally in the distance was a shadowy figure. It resolved itself into a motley black dragon. It towered over its minions, and it had countless heads. Draco looked into the eyes of one head and was flooded with intense hatred for all things living. The next head looked at him and he was enveloped with eternal loneness. A third head moved into view and showed Draco a world of regret. Other heads clamored for attention. Each revealed an aspect of the darkness within the human soul.

Draco felt hands shaking him. He heard screaming and then realized that he was the one screaming.

Draco opened his eyes and the nightmare images slowly faded.

His friends looked worriedly at him.

“What did you see?” Oliver asked, concerned.

Draco looked at the steaming milk that he spilled on his lap. It was sticky and gross on his legs. He would need to take a bath and have his clothes washed. Draco took a deep breath and described the scene.

Oliver wasn’t happy. He paced around and then said, “This is bad. This is very bad. I need to tell the others.”

“That idiot just got a nightmare,” Cornel dismissed. “Who cares?”

“That wasn’t a nightmare,” Oliver said angrily. “It was a seeing. Draco scried the future when he stared into the fire,” Oliver said. “I should have warned you, there are countless ways to scry. Looking into fires, and reflective surfaces are two of them, so be careful, especially at night. At night, the border between this world and the spirit world gets thin. 3:00AM is the witching hour when spirits walk the land. Then everyone should be wrapped in protective asleep.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I have people to meet.” Scowling furiously, the owl left the room.

“I should go too,” Cornel said. “I need to entertain two cute twins I met this afternoon.” He walked away, humming to himself.

Draco got up and headed for his room.

“Where are you going?” Vera asked in a squeaky voice.

“I need to change and shower and brush my teeth for bed,” Draco replied.

“Don’t worry Vera, he’ll be back to protect you,” Argo consoled.

Five minutes later Draco was back wearing red silk pajamas with embroidered dragons.

Vera grabbed Draco’s hand and led him to her room. She made him stand near her bathroom door as she got ready for bed. Feeling embarrassed, Draco looked away as Vera used the facilities without bothering to close the door.

“Can you please sleep with me tonight? I’m feeling scared,” Vera squeaked. She then showed puppy-dog eyes to him. Her eyes seemed to grow huge and sparkly as she held her hands together in front of her.

No one can resist puppy-dog eyes and Draco agreed after a moment of hesitation. Having previously gone to the bathroom, Draco jumped into bed and Vera spooned into him. She wrapped Draco’s arm around her. Draco felt her shaking. He placed his leg over hers, reached up to the lamp above the bed and turned it off.

The room went dark, filled only with moonlight and the light coming from the crack under the door from the other room.

Images of his vision flooded Draco. That darkness dragon was terrifying beyond anything he could imagine. Beyond the fear, there was something alluring about that dragon as well. Being a dragon himself, he knew he was vulnerable to it. Could he turn evil and join that army, he wondered?

With a shaking hand, Draco drew the sign of the cross on his forehead and then on Vera’s forehead. He then whispered a prayer. “Jesus, please protect us from evil.”

The fear disappeared, replace with a sense of peace. Vera’s tiny body stopped shaking as well and Draco drifted into slumber.

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Sunlight streamed into the room and Draco opened his eyes. Vera was curled in a ball at the edge of the bed, sleeping like a mouse.

Draco got out of bed and Vera stirred.

“Morning Vera,” Draco said and headed for his room.

“Morning,” Vera replied and yawned.

Draco did his morning routine, changed, and entered the common area. He sat in front of the fire and contemplated the events of yesterday.

“Are you okay Draco?” Argo asked worriedly.

“This world is so alien and dangerous,” Draco said. “You noticed all those charms people have on their doors and windows, didn’t you? It’s because this world is filled with danger, danger that can’t exist in the other world.”

Argo sat next to Draco and put an arm on his shoulder. “It’s all right Draco. Everything will work out for the best.”

Draco smiled at her in gratitude and said, “Horses are strong creatures, proof against the darkness.”

“Are you afraid you’ll get taken over?” Oliver asked as he entered with a cup of coffee. He looked bedraggled from a sleepless night.

Draco sighed but said nothing. That was exactly what he was afraid of. That owl was way too observant.

“So did you get lucky Draco?” Cornel asked as he entered.

“Draco isn’t like that you disgusting pervert,” Argo said with disgust.

“Yes, nothing happened,” Vera said defensively.

“You’re right,” Cornel agreed. “He has yet to get hair down below.”

Embarrassment pushed aside the darkness of yesterday’s seeing, and it receded into the distance. Face red, Draco asked, “Can we please talk about something other than me?”

“I was right,” Cornel laughed. “You don’t have hair down below.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Oliver interrupted. “It’s time for you to earn your keep. How would you like to go treasure hunting?”

“That sounds like fun,” Zéphir said. He had changed back into his former self during the night.

Draco’s stomach rumbled. “Can we go after breakfast?” Draco asked.

“Of course,” Oliver said. “Filling your stomach is important.”

The others laughed.

During breakfast Oliver explained the details. “Okay everyone, the servants are packing our luggage now. For convenience we will be taking modern equipment, including modern backpacks. If everyone’s ready, we can go.”

Draco headed down with the others. In the stables, Draco found their horses and two horse-drawn covered wagons.

Draco and Zéphir got on their horses. Oliver went on one wagon and Cornel and Vera got on the other wagon.

They headed out with Argo running beside them.

They headed out of town and towards the Cascade Mountains. The ride soon got boring, and Draco pulled out a book and read.

By evening they entered the mountains. Draco always found the mountains restful. They had a strength that was incomparable.

They stopped at a local hotel for the night. Vera, Cornel, and Oliver looked exhausted. “Man is my butt sore,” Vera complained.

“I know,” Oliver agreed. “I’d rather ride in a modern car.”

“This world is too primitive,” Cornel complained. “You would think magic would make this world more comfortable.”

“Magic isn’t technology,” Oliver explained. “It isn’t easy to control, and it can’t be mass-produced.”

Argo was hyped up. “That was a great run,” she said and began her stretching exercises.

“I don’t know about you but I’m starving,” Draco said.

“Come friends, this restaurant has excellent food, according to my sources,” Oliver said.

They entered the restaurant and took seats.

Argo looked at her shoes and said, “This is incredible. I wear out shoes in less than a month, and yet these shoes show no wear.”

“That’s because you’re a horse,” Oliver replied. “Horses don’t wear out their feet, no matter how much they run.

“By the way, you will need to get to sleep early. We will get up at 5:00AM and leave at 5:30AM.”

“I never get up at such an ungodly hour,” Cornel complained.

“Trust me, I have a little surprise for you,” Oliver said. “Now get to your rooms and go to sleep.”

Vera yawned and said, “I’m going to bed. I’m pooped.” The others headed to their rooms as well.

“What should we do?” Zéphir asked.

“I don’t know. This collection of houses pretending to be a town seems boring,” Draco replied.

“Why don’t we fight?” Zéphir asked. “I saw how strong you were yesterday.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Draco replied. “I’ve never fought someone who uses monkey karate.”

Treasure Hunt

Behind every rock could be a dungeon,   
and every dungeon has bosses hiding treasure

A servant knocked on Draco’s door and Draco groggily got up. He had gone to sleep later than he should have, fighting with Zéphir, as well as examining the contents of his backpack.

Draco did his morning routine and went to the main room. The others trickled in.

“Okay everyone,” Oliver said when everyone arrived. “We’ll go to my surprise and then we’ll have breakfast.”

Everyone got on their horses and followed Oliver through the darkness. Up they ascended on a winding path. Finally, they arrived at the summit of the ridge they were climbing.

In the east the sky lightened. The heavens illuminated with fiery reds, yellows, and purples. Birds greeted the morning with singing and the scent of pine filled the air.

Just before the sun rose above the horizon, it shot rays of light into the sky. Then the sun showed itself, warming their chilled bodies.

“That’s so pretty,” Vera said in wonder.

“I’ve seen many sunrises, but this was the best,” Argo agreed.

“It rivals even my beauty,” Cornel acknowledged.

Zéphir just picked his nose.

Draco was about to comment when his stomach did the talking.

“I wanted to show you the sunrise because few city people see them and the sunrises in this area are especially pretty,” Oliver said. “Also, sunrises always bring with it a blessing, which is why wise people always rise at the crack of dawn. This blessing should help us with our treasure hunt. We can now return and eat breakfast.”

The trip back was uneventful and breakfast at the hotel was filling. They headed down the road for another half hour when they arrived at the entrance of a cave.

“Grab your packs everyone,” Oliver said. “From now on, we’ll be going on foot.”

“I don’t like wet, dirty caves,” Cornel complained. “It will ruin my clothes.”

“You’re free to remain behind, since your special skills won’t be needed,” Oliver said. “However, don’t you want to be there when we find the treasure?”

“We are doing this for your organization, so who cares?” Cornel replied.

“Fine,” Oliver said in exasperation. “You may stay here.”

The others entered the cave while Cornel flirted with one of the servants.

The cave turned out to be a long tunnel filled with rocks. The tip of Oliver’s staff glowed and illuminated the area. The light was soft but bright enough to see at least twenty feet ahead and behind.

Oliver seemed to almost fly over the rocks that clogged parts of the tunnel.

“We believe this cave was manmade and thousands of years old,” Oliver lectured. “Some parts of the tunnel suffered collapses, which is why it is such an annoyance to go through.”

“Who built it?” Draco asked.

“We don’t know,” Oliver replied. “The strange thing about this world is that there seems to be an overabundance of ancient civilizations found here that no one heard about. Ancient civilizations are magical things that this world loves.”

“Are there aliens?” Zéphir asked.

“No,” Oliver replied. “Aliens are a myth of the renaissance world. There are however sightings of gods travelling through the skies in their chariots, which I suppose are the same thing.”

They entered a large craggy cavern. At the far end was a stone doorway covered with hieroglyphics.

“The translation on the door is, ‘Mines of King Mohan. Those who enter without permission, beware. One false step will be your doom.’”

They entered and walked down a path. The path broke into three paths. Oliver chose the central path. The path widened and Oliver warned, “Keep to the right and watch your step.”

The central area of the tunnel had holes in it, as if the ground had collapsed. Looking down one such hole, Draco found the ground filled with spikes. Among the spikes were skeletons.

They entered another area with colored squares and holes in the walls.

“Only walk on the red squares,” Oliver warned and pointed at a skeleton on the floor. Several arrows ran through its ribs and one through an eye socket.

They passed through, with Zéphir bringing up the rear. When they were through, Zéphir tossed a rock at a blue square. A moment later a barrage of arrows went over that square.

They entered a third area. In the center was a pool of water.

“Vera, below is a locked door. You need to unlock it and go beyond. There you should find a way to the other side of that door. From there, you should be able to open the door,” Oliver said.

“Unfortunately, I can’t do it myself since I’m bad with water and the others who went down could never explain to me what the mechanism was so I could figure out how to open it.”

“I understand Oliver,” Vera said and removed her backpack.

Vera jumped in and everyone waited. A minute later Vera returned and rummaged through her bag. She retrieved several tools and headed back again. This time five minutes passed.

The door opposite the pool opened and Vera stepped out. They entered a treasure vault filled with gold and jewels, as well as junk such as pottery, ancient artifacts, and paintings.

Heart pounding, Draco stepped towards the large pile of gold coins and ornaments. He was about to rip his clothes off and jump in, when he realized he was not alone. He rapidly retreated from the room, while silently cursing the others for being there.

“Are you alright?” Argo asked worriedly. “You’re sweating and your face is red.”

Oliver chuckled.

Feeling intense embarrassment, Draco ran away from the gang and headed back to the cave entrance and the waiting Cornel. Not sure how he got back, Draco stepped into the sun and headed into the woods to cool his head.

Back in the vault, Argo asked, “What happened to Draco?”

“Dragons are addicted to gold and jewels. It’s an important part of their life cycle,” Oliver replied. “Exposing him to it was necessary. Please don’t talk to Draco about it. It’s embarrassing to him.”

Changing the subject, Oliver said, “That was excellent work. This gold will most definitely help us with our preparation for dealing with that army of darkness Draco scried.”

The gang headed back while several servants stayed behind as the gang returned to the outside.

Once back outside, they found Draco waiting for them.

Draco looked at Vera in surprise and said, “You’re all wet.”

On impulse, Draco took a deep breath, pursed his lips, and blew on Vera. The water blew away and in moments Vera was dry.

“Thanks Draco,” Vera smiled in gratitude.

“No problem,” Draco replied and rubbed Vera’s head. Vera didn’t mind this time, since she knew that her hair was already messy.

“That was so cool, just like Indiana Jones,” Zéphir said excitedly.

“This was just a simple place,” Oliver said. “The world is filled with dungeons that are guarded by amazing traps and dangerous monsters.”

“But they’re nothing for a genius like you,” Draco said.

*I have to visit one of those places by myself, and then find a place to keep that treasure,* Draco mused. He then realized that wasn’t a healthy thing to do. The best thing was to keep away from treasure.

“That’s not true,” Oliver objected. “My intellect is like that of a Vulcan. I can solve logical problems most people would consider impossible. However, the world has things that can’t be logically analyzed and require other forms of intelligence then what I have.

“Each of the thirteen animals of the Zodiac represents the thirteen ways a person can function. This includes intellectual, emotional, spiritual, etc.

“I can solve any logical puzzle, but Vera can open locks in this world that I never could,” Oliver said. “That’s because some puzzles defy logic. Just because I have an IQ of 257, doesn’t mean you can’t make a difference. Each of you has talents that no one else has and all thirteen of us are needed to help save the world. That’s enough lecturing for one day.”

They headed back to the hotel. Once there, they ate lunch and were on their way home.

A Royal Pain

It takes a dragon to fight a tiger

Weeks passed as the gang got familiar with the city that was both foreign, and familiar at the same time.

It was time for the tournament. People from all around the country were participating.

Zéphir and Draco entered and approached the registration desk. They had each won preliminaries in their region. Zéphir and Draco showed the clerk their credentials and another clerk escorted the two to the competitor’s area of the stadium. The others arrived in time to hear the announcer announce the start of the competition.

“Hey look, there are our friends,” Zéphir said. He tried to wave to them, but they couldn’t see him from their location.

“Welcome to our annual tournament to find the strongest fighters in the country,” the announcer boomed. “As you know, there are 128 regions. Each of our fighters has won in their region. Let’s give a big hand to our competitors.”

The audience exploded into applause.

A scoreboard appeared showing which fighter would be fighting whom. Draco briefly wondered how the scoreboard operated without technology.

According to the display, Zéphir and Draco would only fight in the semifinals if each won their own matches. Draco suspected Oliver rigged the order in which people would fight.

The winner would potentially fight the princess, assuming they and she made it that far. Of course, she was the winner of last year’s tournament, so winning to the semifinals for her was expected.

The only question on Draco’s mind was, did her opponents fight her with all their might or did they let her win? He had no intention of going easy on her, since she was a tiger.

The ring consisted of a fifty-foot square stage. Beyond that was a ten-foot wall, above which was the audience area.

“The first match will be Draco verses Walter,” the announcer called. That was good. Draco had mentioned to Oliver that he hated waiting. That led more credential to the theory that Oliver had tampered with the orderings. It didn’t matter, since only the best could win the tournament.

Walter had a warthog spirit. Walter the warthog – Draco found that amusing.

The match began and Draco found that Walter’s skills were nothing to laugh at. He was an incredible fighter and used a fighting technique Draco never saw before. Walter charged Draco and tried to shove him up from below, with both hands pointing upwards like tusks.

Draco spun to the right, and narrowly missed the attack. He hit the back of Walter’s neck with the cutting edge of his hand. It felt like hitting a brick wall. *Damn, that guy is tough.*

The next thing he knew, he was on his back. In a blink of an eye, Walter had slammed Draco against the concrete. The impact cracked the floor, sending shockwaves throughout the stadium. The warthog guy was going all out.

Draco grunted and got up to see the opponent charging him. Draco spun on his hands and slammed his feet against Walter’s stomach with all his might.

He had no choice. Not giving 100% would spell his defeat. Compared to Walter, Draco’s previous opponents were weaklings. Draco never had to use more than 40% of his power to defeat them.

The warthog went flying out of the ring and slammed hard against the encircling wall. The force of the hit shattered the concrete wall, throwing up a cloud of dust.

For a moment Draco felt guilty for kicking so hard and possibly killing his opponent.

A thought entered Draco’s mind. How was it possible to crack concrete and throw people fifty feet into walls? It was like something out of a fighting Anime like Dragonball Z, where two opponents fighting often destroyed cities.

In a far corner of his mind, Draco could hear the announcer describing the action, and wondering if Walter was dead.

The referee began counting: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5…

The rubble stirred and Walter got up. He dashed to the stage and jumped on. He slammed hard at Draco and sent him flying. Draco hit the opposite wall with a resounding bang that shook the stadium.

Another cloud of dust flew up.

Again, the referee began counting.

At the eighth count, Draco got up, ran to the stage, and got on. He was now ready for his opponent.

Blow after blow landed and the fight dragged on. By now the stage was trashed. This was Draco’s toughest opponent, and he wasn’t sure if he could win.

Blow after blow they exchanged hits. The clothes of both Draco and Walter were shredded and all of Draco’s muscles were sore and bruised.

In desperation Draco focused all his energy between his palms and slammed his palms upwards against Walter’s stomach. Walter went flying upwards toward the ceiling. Draco jumped upwards and slammed an elbow against Walter’s neck.

Walter slammed against the ground.

The referee began counting: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5…

Walter stirred. He struggled to get up and then collapsed. The match was over. Draco won.

Draco staggered off the stage and to the area assigned to warriors.

“That was an incredible match,” Zéphir said excitedly. “How did you survive going head-first through that concrete wall?”

“I don’t remember doing that,” Draco replied. “I guess my fighting spirit protected me.”

“Maybe it was your hard head. Well, you can rest now,” Zéphir said. “Your next match will be in two days.”

“Come Draco, I need to heal your wounds,” a nurse said. She took him to a back room and made him sit.

She placed her hands two inches in front of him and pink energy engulfed him. All injuries disappeared and Draco felt better, but still tired.

Walter was brought in on a stretcher. Two other healers worked on him.

“Can I please have a mirror?” Draco asked a healer. The healer handed him one and he looked at his face. The lines on his face remained. Draco wondered what it would take to get rid of those lines and handed the mirror back.

After two minutes of work the healers stepped back and Walter got up.

“That was an incredible match,” Walter admitted. He shook his head. “I thought I was the greatest fighter in the universe, but you kicked my ass. Where did you come from? I’ve never seen you before in any tournament.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t easy,” Draco replied. “You pushed me harder than anyone I ever faced. For a while I thought I was going to lose. Would you believe I come from another world?”

Walter nodded, accepting the statement as fact. He got up and headed for the stadium. Draco followed.

“So, what brings you to this world?” Walter asked.

“A man named Oliver contacted me and four others and said we had the spirits of Zodiac beasts, and it was our destiny to protect the world from evil.

“We came to this world to find the other seven Zodiac beasts,” Draco replied. “So far, we have the rat, dragon, monkey, horse, rooster, and owl. The princess is the seventh, although we haven’t contacted her yet. I am supposed to do that when I fight her in the finals. If you’re any indication, the chances of me getting to meet the princess are slim to none. By the way, this is my friend Zéphir. He has one of the Zodiac beasts.”

“Please to meet you,” Walter said. “I am Walter, and my spirit beast is the warthog.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Zéphir replied. “I can’t wait for my match. If you’re any indication, this competition is going to be beyond difficult.”

Draco looked at the arena and discovered it was fully repaired.

“Don’t be so sure,” Walter warned. “I know most of the fighters. They are all weak. The only one you need to worry about is the princess. She’s amazing. Normally women don’t participate with men, but she kicks ass better than anyone else.”

“That’s good,” Draco replied. “I am hoping to fight Zéphir in the semifinals, to see who will face off against the princess.”

“It’s time for me to go,” Zéphir said. “Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg,” Draco replied.

Zéphir entered the fight and won in less than a minute. Zéphir returned and said, “You’re right. That guy was weak. I can’t believe Draco was able to fight such an incredible opponent. I’m jealous.”

Walter laughed and said, “Perhaps we’ll fight another time.”

“By the way, since our matches are over, let’s meet the others,” Draco said. “Walter, would you like to come with us? I want the others to meet my new friend.”

“No problem,” Walter replied. “I am alone and so am free.”

They entered the audience area of the stadium and found the others.

Vera ran to Draco and gave him a hug. “I was so worried about you, especially when you went head-first through that concrete wall,” she said. “In that battle, I thought you died several times.”

“I told Vera not to worry since you have a hard head,” Cornel said and laughed.

Draco hugged Vera and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I just didn’t expect Walter to be so strong. Let’s go to lunch. I’m starving. Then we can see the other battles.”

There was only one person who could take his life and Walter wasn’t the one.

“Come everyone, let’s go eat,” Oliver said.

The gang exited the arena and headed for a nearby restaurant. They entered a restaurant and ordered.

“What exactly are zodiac beasts, and how do they differ from regular sacred beasts such as the one I have?” Walter asked.

“Draco, you shouldn’t be talking about these things to just anyone,” Oliver scolded.

“But why not?” Draco asked. “This involves everyone, since that army of darkness intends to conquer the world.”

“That’s the problem with secret societies,” Argo grumbled. “They think they’re better than everyone else just because they have some secrets.”

“It’s not like that at all,” Oliver said defensively. “It’s our job to protect the world.”

“Every two-bit dictator the world has ever known has made the same claim,” Draco accused.

“Fine,” Oliver relented. “It seems I’m outvoted.” He explained the problem to Walter.

“Can he stay with us?” Draco asked. “He’s a strong fighter. I’m sure he’ll come in handy.”

“Impossible,” Oliver objected. “At the least he has people worried about him.”

“I have no ties,” Walter said. “This sounds like fun.”

“This isn’t supposed to be fun,” Oliver said angrily. “This is end-of-the-world serious.”

“You worry too much,” Walter said with food coming out of his mouth. “You should eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we do the same, or drop dead.” He tossed down a beer.

“That’s just gross,” Argo said in disgust. “You really are a pig.”

Oliver just raised a bushy eyebrow but said nothing.

Walter wasn’t bothered by the insult but just continued eating.

“What does everyone think of Walter joining us?” Oliver said.

“I don’t care,” Cornel replied.

“I think we’ll have fun with him,” Zéphir said.

“Yup,” Draco agreed.

“I’m fine if Draco is,” Vera said.

“He’s a pig, but since we already have crude people such as Zéphir and Cornel…,” Argo agreed.

“You may tag along. Since one of the Zodiac beasts we are missing is the pig, you are technically a candidate,” Oliver said. “However, don’t get your hopes up. The world is filled with people with pig spirits.”

“I thought his spirit was that of a warthog,” Zéphir said.

“As Argo has pointed out, the warthog is a member of the pig family,” Oliver explained.

“Come on everyone, let’s get back to the arena,” Draco said. “I don’t want to miss any more matches. All those fighters have so many techniques I have never seen before.”

“In the final battle, it will be fighting spirit that wins the match,” Oliver said and paid the waiter.

“If I knew you were paying, I would have eaten more,” Walter grumbled.

The gang headed for the arena.

The battles proceeded for the next two hours. Finally, it was Princess Annie’s turn. She stepped out of her box and entered the rink. The bell rang and with one punch, ended the match.

Draco felt fear, excitement, and disappointment. He was scared because she could crack his skull open, excited because he would be facing a powerful opponent, and disappointed because he wasn’t able to view her fighting style.

The princess turned and looked him in the eye, silently challenging him to a fight. She was so cute and so dangerous. The proud tiger turned away and headed back to her box.

The other battles were almost boring, and many people left, having seen the princess fight.

The three fighters rejoined the others. “That was fun,” Draco said. “Did you all have fun as well?”

“Not really,” Argo replied. “I don’t enjoy seeing two people trying to kill each other.”

“You’re a gentle person,” Oliver said. “However, we’ll need fighters for what is to come.”

“Where are you staying?” Draco asked.

“At the Turtle Inn a few blocks away,” Walter replied.

“Zéphir, you haven’t fought Walter,” Draco said. “I think that will be good practice for the next rounds of matches.”

The gang headed out and found a park for the two to practice in. As with Draco’s match, this match was drawn out as well. In the end both were exhausted. However, no one was injured since this was a practice match.

“Is it possible for me to visit your home world?” Walter asked.

“We shall see,” Oliver said non-committed.

“The food over there is incredible,” Zéphir said. “For instance, there are things called hamburgers and pizza.” That started an excited discussion on foods throughout both worlds.

“Oliver, if you don’t need me, I’m going for a run and then head back home,” Argo said.

Oliver looked up from an arcane book and said, “No problem.” Argo dashed away.

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The next few matches were boring, and Draco used less than 30% of his power to defeat his opponents.

Finally came his match with Zéphir. He was looking forward to this match, especially since he had no idea who would win.

“Zéphir old buddy, are you ready to have your ass handed to you on a plate?” Draco asked.

Zéphir gave Draco a raspberry, spraying saliva all over the place.

“Say it, don’t spray it,” Draco complained and wiped his face.

They stepped onto the ring and the bell rang.

Draco attacked, trying to get as many points as possible. Not surprisingly, each attack was blocked. Zéphir attacked with a series of kicks and chops that left Draco’s arms numb.

The battle intensified and Zéphir gave a roundhouse kick to Draco’s stomach. Draco went flying and slammed into the encircling wall. A loud bang echoed through the stadium as dust billowed up.

Draco was back in the ring before the referee could start counting. Draco used his momentum to return a kick to Zéphir. Just like Draco, Zéphir slammed into the other wall.

Two seconds later, Zéphir was back in the ring. The audience cheered as both contestants clashed.

Draco launched a powerful punch at Zéphir. Zéphir dodged and slammed Draco down onto the concrete, cracking the ring in two.

Draco rolled to the right just in time and Zéphir punched the ground. The whole stadium shook at the force of the impact.

The miss cost Zéphir valuable time. As a result, Draco was able to kick Zéphir up into the air. Draco jumped up and slammed Zéphir into the concrete, just like the first match.

Again, the stadium shuddered as the crowd went wild. Back and forth the battle went on. By now the ring was rubble and the concept of a ring out lost any meaning.

The two took advantage of that and fought using all the space in the enclosing wall.

The battle dragged on for almost an hour when Draco landed a lucky shot to Zéphir’s face.

Draco felt like collapsing as he watched his friend fall to the floor. He knew that this was it, that if Zéphir got up, he would win.

The referee counted and slowly the audience joined the counting. Zéphir tried to get up but was too exhausted to move.

Draco won the match.

Draco took two steps and collapsed. The crowd went wild. Few times in their lives have they seen such an intense match.

Assistants picked the two fighters up and took them to the back to be healed.

The final match with the princess was tomorrow. That was a good thing. Healing repaired all physical damage, but it took time to restore stamina.

Exhausted, the two friends headed for the others.

Dragon and Tiger

The battle between dragon and tiger is  
endless  
but rarely boring

Time came for the final match between Princess Annie and Draco. The stadium was packed as everyone wanted to see the epic battle between two incredible fighters.

Draco approached the ring and was overcome with terror. He was facing a tiger, which could literally rip him to shreds. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that it was his path to face all challenges.

Draco stepped into the ring and looked into the tiger’s yellow eyes. That was a bad decision, since it made him feel weak in the knees. He wrenched his gaze from her burning eyes and took in the rest of her.

The princess was wearing a simple uniform, which was perfect for fighting and offered maximum freedom, while still maintaining her princess-like dignity.

Draco knew with every fiber in his being what to do. He had to attack with 100% of his power from the start, or she would literally kill him.

The bell rang and the princess slammed Draco with a round house kick. He flew into the wall with a bang.

Pre-battle jitters disappeared as Draco returned to the ring. Draco returned the favor to the princess. She went flying and hit the wall with an equally resounding crash.

Returning to the rink, the princess launched a punch and Draco intercepted it with his own fist. There was a loud bang as both fists collided.

Blow after blow were launched as both fighters clashed. After ten minutes of exchanged blows, both fighters jumped back to take a moment to catch their breath.

The audience howled in appreciation. Audience members screamed, “Princess Annie, we know you can defeat him.” The cheering for the princess increased. Draco tuned it out, but he did hear his friends cheering for him.

“You’re pretty good for a dragon,” the princess admitted.

“Same to you,” Draco replied.

“This is the most amazing fight I ever saw in my life,” the announcer screamed. The audience agreed.

The match resumed and again blow-after-blow reigned.

Finally, an opening showed itself and Draco launched his new move he first used on Walter. He kicked hard against Annie’s stomach and sent her into the sky. He then jumped into the air so that he could slam his elbow into Annie’s back.

Annie twisted in mid-air and punched him hard in the gut. She then gave Draco a look that said, “I saw that move before. Try something else.”

Annie twisted again and landed on all fours. She launched herself upwards and fought Draco in midair, like Dragonball Z. Each hit boomed throughout the stadium, rattling the windows, and knocking tiles from the ceiling.

For an endless moment the match continued in midair as both contestants tried to end the match.

The voices of the spectators became hoarse from all the screaming, and still the match continued.

Draco launched every move he could think of, but each was effectively countered. The same was true with Annie.

Draco felt himself being slammed into the ring once again. The force shattered the ring and rattled the foundations of the stadium.

In the obscuring dust, Draco slammed Annie against the only part of the retaining wall that remained intact. The stadium shook once again as more material fell on the audience. The treat of a stadium collapse was now very real.

“That’s enough,” King Leo Onassis of Washington called, drowning everyone out. “I declare the match a draw.”

Draco faced Annie and just breathed heavily. He was exhausted and so was the princess. Both their clothes were completely shredded. Draco was only wearing torn shorts. In addition to torn shorts, Annie wore a frayed shirt that was now a tank-top with shredded sleeves.

Only in an anime do you see something like that.

In a fighting anime, a person’s clothes get shredded in a fight, but their modesty is never compromised.

Draco looked at the devastation and said in surprise, “Did we do all that?”

“This battle isn’t over yet,” Annie said in a breathless voice. “I would have won if my daddy hadn’t stopped the match.”

“In your dreams Princess,” Draco replied. He too wasn’t ready to concede. “I’m the better fighter and you know it.”

“Maybe in your fairytale world,” Annie shouted angrily.

“Your world is the fairytale world, Princess,” Draco retorted.

The two growled at each other.

“Anytime, anywhere,” Annie challenged.

“Break it up you two,” Leo scolded as he stepped towards them. “The match is over.”

“That was a most incredible match,” the announcer said. “Who would have thought our Princess Annie would have found an opponent that was her equal.”

Again, the two growled at each other, neither wanting to admit defeat.

“And now for the awards,” the announcer said.

Golden medals were placed around Draco’s and Annie’s necks. The stadium resounded with applause, threatening to bring down the already weakened structure. Bronze medals were given to the two semifinalists.

“Please everyone,” the announcer said, “head to the nearest exit. There’s a danger that the stadium will collapse.”

“Please come with us, we need to heal your injuries,” a healer said. “You both have broken ribs and bones.”

Draco scratched his head and flinched in pain. He looked at his finger and found a hangnail. He carefully removed it and, in the process, ripped out a long sliver of skin. That hurt. He sucked on his bleeding finger and placed the nail in his pant pocket.

Draco sat down beside the princess and healers began their jobs. He was bubbling over with excitement. He had fought on equal terms with a tiger. He looked at Annie and was no longer afraid of her.

“Princess, there’s something I need to talk to you about,” Draco began. “You have the spirit of one of the Zodiac beasts.”

“That’s impossible,” Leo exclaimed as he stepped into the healer’s room. He looked terrified.

“I’m sorry Majesty, but the time has come,” Draco replied. “Including your daughter, seven of the Zodiac beasts have been identified. I believe Fighter Walter may be the eight, but we have yet to confirm that.”

The gang entered the room and Draco said, “Oliver the owl is our leader. He can explain everything to you, including where we came from.”

“Let’s go to the palace,” Leo said grimly. “This is too grave a matter to discuss just anywhere. But first you two will need to change and shower.”

“What’s going on daddy?” Annie asked. “What are Zodiac beasts?”

Leo just shook his head.

“Roger, please bring our rides to the royal entrance,” Oliver commanded. Roger hurried away.

Oliver turned to Leo and said, “Majesty, may Draco change at the palace? We have his spare clothes here. That way we won’t have to delay.”

“Of course,” Leo replied.

Father and daughter entered their carriage. A minute later, the other carriage and horses arrived.

The gang got on their rides and followed the royal carriage.

Twenty minutes later, they were at the palace. Servants helped Draco down from his horse and Leo commanded, “Escort Young Draco to a guest room so he can change and shower and then bring him to the royal library.”

One of Oliver’s servants handed Draco his clothes and Draco followed another servant into the palace. Draco entered the indicated room and quickly showered and changed. The servant then escorted Draco to the library.

The library was a 40 by 70-foot room. The walls were covered with bookshelves filled with ancient tomes. At one end was a fireplace and furniture filled the center.

Draco took a seat nearest the fireplace and rested. Oliver and Leo talked about local issues. Finally, the princess entered and sat on an easy chair opposite Draco.

Oliver began his explanation of the Newtonian society and the reason for its existence. He also explained how the initial discovery of the six zodiac beasts in the renaissance world was made, and how they identified the princess.

Halfway through the explanation, Draco’s stomach growled.

“Jeeves, please bring some snacks for our guests,” Leo commanded. Minutes later, food arrived.

Draco attacked the food with relish, trying valiantly to be civilized in front of king and princess. He didn’t want the princess to make fun of him. Walter reached for food and Argo slapped his hand. “Neither the king not the princess wants to see you eat,” she scolded.

“The biggest reason I wanted Draco to enter the martial arts competition was so he would meet your daughter and gain her trust,” Oliver began.

“People can get close to each other when spirits clash,” Draco explained.

“Majesty, if you wish, I can show you the gate so you can see the truth for yourself,” Oliver said. “Also, we would like to do a seeing with your daughter as soon as possible.”

Leo looked at his magical advisor Randal and Wizard Randal said, “I would love to see that gate.”

“Okay, we shall accept your invitation,” Leo said and got up.

Draco approached Vera and said, “Vera, I’ve been wanting to give you this, but was unable to until now. Vera, how would you like a dragon claw?”

“I would love one, especially if it came from you,” Vera said excitedly.

Everyone crowded to see. Vera cupped one hand under the other in front of her and Draco dropped his fingernail into her palm. As before, the nail transformed into a claw. This time, the claw had red and gold spirals overlaid on the obsidian of the claw. The spirals twinkled in the light.

“It’s beautiful,” Vera said with shinning eyes. She gave Draco a hug.

“Young lady, may I please see that?” court wizard Randal asked.

Hesitantly, Vera nodded and handed over the claw. Randal took a monocle out and stared at the claw through it. He mumbled spells under his breath and waved a wand over the claw.

“What do you see, Wizard Randal?” Leo asked.

“This claw is worth at least 5,000 gold pieces...,” Randal began.

“Impossible,” Cornel exclaimed. “It was just Draco’s stupid nail a few seconds ago. Are you saying he can make a fortune just by clipping his fingernails?”

“That’s not how it works,” Oliver explained. “Just cutting his fingernails will do nothing. To get a dragon claw, you need four elements. First, Draco must have a girl he wants to protect. In this case it’s Vera.”

“Ever since that night I saw that vision, I’ve been worried about Vera and wanted to protect her,” Draco admitted.

Leo listened in fascination. It was rare to entertain guests with dragons as sacred beasts, since they were so rare. Less than one in 10,000 people had dragon spirits. Most of them were the three-toed variety. Actual dragons could only be found in uncharted areas, making them valuable when captured.

“Why were you worried about her?” Annie asked, feeling a little jealous.

Draco explained about the dream and how she had begged him to stay with her for the night.

Continuing his explanation, Oliver said, “Second, he needs to fight a strong opponent for the girl’s sake. The quality of the opponent and how close to the limit he is pushed will determine the quality of the claw. He fought a princess and she pushed him beyond his limits.

“Next, one of his fingernails needs to break during the battle.

“Even if Draco were to fight Princess Annie again, the chances of this happening again would be next to none. Dragons break very few claws during their lives. Many never break any claws.”

“The same thing happened during the street fight, didn’t it?” Zéphir commented.

Draco nodded. “I wanted to protect that mother and daughter from those thugs.”

“One last thing,” Oliver said. “Did you notice that the nail transformed when Draco dropped it into Vera’s hands? Giving it to Vera was the last element of the transformation.”

Oliver turned to Wizard Randal and said, “How many toes does Draco’s sacred beast have? I was unable to examine the other claw.”

“Five toes,” Randal replied and handed the claw back to Vera.

Leo nodded. “That’s what I expected. Bernard, please get a gold chain for Vera.”

Butler Bernard said and left.

“Majesty, when you’re ready, I’ll show you the gate,” Oliver said.

“My dear, are you of royal descent?” Leo asked Vera.

“No, Majesty,” Vera replied. “My parents were ordinary people.”

“Strange,” Leo mused.

“Maybe not so strange, Majesty,” Oliver replied. “She has one of the Zodiac beasts. According to legend, the Zodiac dragon has a fondness for the rat, and let her ride on him.”

They exited the library and walked towards main entrance.

Bernard met them as they exited the palace.

“Here you go, Majesty,” Bernard said.

“Here you go dear, Leo said and handed the chain to Vera.

“Thank you Majesty,” Vera said and threaded her claw and then hung it around her neck.

Within moments the group was heading towards the manor. Arriving twenty minutes later, Oliver led the gang to the corridor with the elevator.

Leo watched as the tapestry rose, exposing the elevator. The doors opened and everyone entered.

The doors closed and the elevator moved downwards. Annie screamed, startled by the sensation, even though she was told what to expect.

Draco chuckled.

“Do you want a knuckle sandwich?” Annie threatened.

“Annie, I’m so glad you found an equal to be your boyfriend,” Leo said.

“I’m/He’s not her/my boyfriend,” both Draco and Annie said angrily.

Leo only chuckled.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened.

“Incredible,” Annie said as she stepped into the wide-open space.

“Majesty, please enter,” Oliver said and escorted Leo and Annie to front of the passenger car, where they had a great view. The king and princess sat in their sectioned off part of the car and waited for the countdown.

The countdown began and the torii gate rose from the ground. The road train entered the gate. As before Draco felt as if he was being shredded. This time he felt an infinity of worlds opening up and was afraid he would get lost. Then he felt a sense of familiarity. He was here before.

Draco entered his home world. This time the nausea was worse. Breathing deeply, Draco stepped out of the train and waited for the others.

“Are you okay son?” Leo asked worriedly.

“Gate travel makes me sick Majesty,” Draco replied. “Oliver said it’s because I’m a dragon. I’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

“Prepare for another gate opening in a few hours,” Oliver told a foreman.

“But we won’t be able to prepare another shipment in that short a period of time,” the foreman complained. “Even this opening was rushed.”

“We have no choice,” Oliver said in both a commanding and sympathetic voice. “We are entertaining a king. We need to build our schedule around him.

“Come, Majesty, there are so many things I would like to show you,” Oliver said. He then took out his phone and gave commands.

“Why is this place so hot?” Leo asked.

“That’s because we’re in the bowels of the earth, Majesty,” Oliver replied.

They rode the elevator all the way up to the surface. It didn’t stop but went to the top of the building. The elevator opened onto the roof. The king looked around in wonder at the vista.

Oliver escorted the king to a waiting transport helicopter and let the king sit in front. The helicopter flew off and headed for Seattle.

“This is what’s called a helicopter, Majesty,” Oliver began. “Normally it’s very noisy. However, we’ve been able to make limited use of magic here to make the noise quiet in the cab.”

“This city is incredible,” Annie commented as she stared at the city below in awe.

“This is a relatively small city. Other parts of the world have vastly greater cities,” Oliver said.

Twenty minutes later they approached Seattle and landed in a nearby heliport. After that was a ride in a minivan to the Seattle Center.

“Amazing,” Leo marveled. “The buildings are humongous.”

“That’s the power of technology,” Oliver said. “Unfortunately, it’s very difficult to use it in your world, although renovating the royal apartments of your palace is possible.”

They entered the Space Needle and Oliver said, “Reservation for ten people under Oliver.”

“Yes, I got your reservation half an hour ago,” the receptionist said. “Please go to the elevator.”

In the restaurant level another receptionist greeted them. “Reservation for Oliver,” Oliver said.

“Of course,” the receptionist said. “The table has been set as instructed.”

A waiter escorted the group to a table near the windows.

“Everyone, please wait to be seated,” Oliver called. “Majesty, please sit here.” Oliver pulled a chair out at the left end of the table.

Oliver ran to the opposite end of the table and pulled the chair out for Annie. “Princess Annie, please sit here. Draco, sit to the right of the princess.”

“Are we entertaining royalty?” the waiter asked with a mixture of amazement and fear.

“Yes waiter,” Oliver replied. “Majesty, Wizard Randal, do you prefer red or white wine? Sweet or dry?”

“White wine, dry,” Leo ordered.

“Red wine, sweet,” Randal requested.

“Waiter, please bring your best wines. Price is not an object. I’m sorry princess, but the drinking age here is twenty-one. Waiter, we will all have water.”

“I see,” Annie said with a frown.

“You’re not drinking wine?” the king Leo asked in surprise.

“Despite my appearance, I’m only eighteen,” Oliver replied.

Oliver then seated everyone else.

Argo walked up to Oliver and whispered in his ear. “Why do I have to sit next to that Walter pig?”

“Because he *is* a pig,” Oliver whispered back. “I want you to make sure he doesn’t disgrace us by sticking his face in the food or does something equally gross. I can’t do that since I need to deal with the king and Draco is equally indisposed. I’m counting on you.”

Argo sighed and sat down.

Oliver sat to the right of the king and helped him order food. He also helped Wizard Randal, who sat on Oliver’s right. Draco helped Annie with her order.

“Is it my imagination or is this restaurant turning?” Annie asked.

“No, it’s turning,” Draco replied.

Oliver had a conversation about world events in the renaissance world and mentioned the parallels and differences. Leo and Randal were fascinated.

“Will you stop stepping on my foot or elbowing me?” Walter said angrily. “It’s distracting.”

“Only when you behave yourself,” Argo replied. “I know you’re a hedonistic pig, but can’t you control yourself for half an hour?”

“But I can’t let this opportunity for enjoyment go to waste,” Walter complained.

Argo rolled her eyes in exasperation. “I’m surprised you ever train.”

“He doesn’t train,” Draco answered. “All his experience comes from the thousands of street fights he has been in.”

“I love fighting,” Walter admitted. “It’s fun. Fighting jaded lovers is fun too, as is making love to them later.”

Argo grimaced at the comment but said nothing.

“I’m sorry Majesty for not having a proper tour for you,” Oliver said. “Contact with your daughter and you went much faster than expected. Next time we’ll arrange a proper tour for you and your family appropriate to your status.”

“Thank-you for your hospitality,” Leo said. “This world is amazing.”

Dinner ended and Draco said, “Come on Princess, I’ll show you around.” He grabbed the princess by the wrist and pulled her with him.

“Hey, don’t yank princesses like that,” Annie said angrily.

“Quit your complaining,” Draco grumbled. “I fought you, so I know there’s nothing delicate about you.”

“What do you mean, I’m not delicate? I’m a princess. I’m as delicate as a rose,” Annie replied angrily.

“There they go again,” Argo laughed.

“They can’t help it,” Oliver commented. “It’s the nature of Dragons and Tigers to fight.”

“On the other hand, princesses and dragons are strongly drawn to each other,” Leo added.

“Oliver, next time why don’t you take them on a cruise or to Las Vegas or Singapore?” Draco suggested. “Singapore is the best.”

“That’s a good idea,” Oliver said. “Majesty, I better take you home. I was unable to prepare anything else on such short notice.”

“Don’t be upset Wizard Oliver,” Leo replied. “Diplomatic relations take time.”

“Yes, Majesty,” Oliver said gratefully. “Tell me when you want to return, and we’ll arrange a week-long holiday. Also tell me how many people you want to bring. I have to make arrangements.”

They walked around the viewing deck enjoying the scene, and then returned to ground level. Forty minutes later they returned to the manor.

“Everyone dismissed,” Oliver said. He and Draco escorted the king and princess to their carriage. Draco waved to them as they left.

Draco went to their wing of the manor and entered the common room. He lit the fire and sat in the easy chair in front of the fireplace.

That was a fun and tiring day. He liked the princess but being with her was stressful.

“I think Vera needs a hug,” Oliver said.

Draco looked at Vera and beckoned her to sit with him. She sat with him, and he wrapped an arm around her.

“You love the princess, don’t you?” Vera asked.

Draco shrugged. “She’s incredibly strong and pretty, but she also terrifies me. She will be the end of me one day.”

Draco yawned and then asked, “So when are we going to have our next seeing?”

“I don’t know yet,” Oliver replied as he leafed through a book. “That depends on the princess’ schedule. You’ll be our liaison since five-toed dragons naturally associate with royalty. The king really likes you and views you as a future son-in-law. Sorry Vera.”

“Woh,” Draco said defensively. “I’m not ready for a relationship, and definitely not marriage, especially not with a tiger.”

“That’s for sure, being a baby,” Cornel agreed.

“Shut up Cornel, I’m not a baby,” Draco said angrily.

“I’m taking a bath and then eat and then sleep,” Walter announced and began undressing. “Maybe I’ll eat and sleep in the bath.”

“Wait till you enter your room, pig,” Argo scolded. “Since when do pigs take baths?”

“A mud bath,” Walter clarified and walked away.

“I guess we should all go to sleep,” Oliver said. “I have plenty of training for each of you.”

The others got up one-by-one and went to their rooms.

Draco just watched the fire. Fires always gave him a sense of peace. “I guess we should go to sleep too,” Draco said and got up.

Vera nodded and headed for her room.

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Sunday dawned bright and sunny. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Draco called as he got up from bed.

Oliver entered and said, “The king has sent you an invitation for Sunday mass at the Roman Catholic Cathedral, and then lunch. The royal carriage is waiting outside.”

“Okay Oliver,” Draco replied and headed for the washroom. Six minutes later Draco stepped out of his room, munching a candy bar. He tossed the wrapper in the garbage can and headed out.

“Good morning, Regal Draco,” the carriage driver said and bowed as he held the door opened.

“Good morning,” Draco replied. He didn’t question the title of Regal, and just assumed that the driver was being polite.

They headed to the cathedral. The cathedral was an impressive structure, like the middle-ages structures of Europe. People entered and milled around the front.

“Regal Draco,” the driver said. “You came down much faster than we expected, and so the royal family might take some time to arrive.”

“No problem,” Draco replied. “I’m in no rush. This is the first time I’ve been here. This is a beautiful cathedral.”

The royal carriage pulled up and the royal family stepped out.

“Draco, I’m glad you made it,” Leo said. “This is my wife, Rachael. That’s my eldest son Ralph and his wife Lisa. That’s their three-year-old daughter, Emily, and six-year-old son Chester. That’s my second eldest son Joseph. And of course, you know my youngest.”

Rachael was a Leopard. She was in her late forties, like her husband. Ralph was a jaguar. Lisa was a fox. Baby Emily was a house cat, Chester was a Cheetah and finally Joseph was a Cougar.

“Wow, Emily is so cute,” Draco said.

Emily reached her arms out to Draco and Lisa handed her over.

“Hi little Emily, you’re so cute,” Draco said again and scratched her stomach. The kitten giggled.

“It’s time we got in,” Rachael said.

The royal family entered and walked to the front. All eyes were on him as he walked beside the princess. For the first time, Draco realized he was walking besides royalty and that the princess really was a Princess with a capital ‘P’. She looked incredible in her pink dress.

Feeling self-conscious, Draco just followed. He felt like running away, but he knew that wasn’t an option.

Annie noted a change in Draco and whispered, “Are you okay?”

Draco nodded stiffly.

They entered the area reserved for the royal family and Draco took his place with Annie on the left and Lisa on the right.

The mass started and Draco sat down with Emily on his lap. She made happy sounds and played with a baby girl doll.

The mass here was different than in the other world. As the mass proceeded, it seemed that the church was filled with a divine energy.

The various parts of mass proceeded and then it was time for the collection. Draco looked at the king and discovered the king had placed in a handful of gold coins.

Draco checked his pocket and found only one gold coin. He had spent his other coins on necessities. Gold was way too ephemeral.

A feeling of reluctance overcame him. A voice in his head screamed, *Are you crazy? That is gold you’re giving away. This is the first time in your life you have gold, and they don’t need it. Don’t be stupid.*

For a few seconds he fought with himself. He knew he had to give up the gold but that was easier said than done. With a supreme act of will, he dropped the gold and passed the basket along.

Draco looked up to see the cardinal smiling at him. Apparently, he had seen Draco’s struggle and that embarrassed Draco.

Then the Gifts were brought up and the cardinal prayed over the Gifts. A stillness descended over the congregation. A light not seen by the naked eye descended on the Gifts and gave the bread and wine a living essence Draco couldn’t describe even to himself.

The only thing Draco knew was that he was in the presence of otherworldly powers.

The priest came to the royal box and gave Draco the transformed bread and wine. He felt strength flow into him as he accepted the Eucharist. Draco knelt in amazement. Finally, he said, *God, please give me the strength to face my challenges.*

Still in a daze, Draco sat as the other parishioners went forward. The announcements were made, and the priest and altar servers left the altar.

The nervousness Draco felt at the beginning of the mass about associating with royalty was gone and he was filled with renewed spirit, or was that, Spirit?

Everyone proceeded back out. At the carriage, Rachael asked, “Draco dear, do you have plans for today?”

“No Majesty,” Draco replied. “I’m free.”

“Excellent,” Rachael replied. “Then you can have lunch with us.”

“Thank-you Majesty,” Draco said, entered the carriage, and sat beside Annie. Emily sat on his lap and made happy noises.

“She really likes you,” Lisa said.

“I know,” Draco replied. “She’s a sweetie.”

“Tell us about yourself dear,” Rachael requested.

“There’s not much to say,” Draco replied. “I was found in a basket when I was a few days old. The nuns of the orphanage found me at the front door with a blanket and a note. The note said, ‘Please take care of Draco.’ That was all.

“I grew up in a poor area with high unemployment and plenty of criminals. I went to school in a nearby school, where the parents were afraid of me, because I was endowed with physical strength far greater than normal people.

“Most people’s muscles get flabby if they do nothing for too long. That will never happen to me. Unfortunately, with that strength came a big appetite. If I don’t eat twice as much as most people, I will starve to death. Right now, I have no fat reserves.” Draco patted his stomach.

“That’s so sad,” Rachael sympathized.

“Volunteer workers came and tutored me,” Draco continued. “Later, a family adopted me, but I was never close to them, and I doubt they loved me. Thinking back, I think they were members of the Newtonian Society. Their job was to train me for the time I would arrive here and fulfill my destiny.

“I completed basic schooling and Oliver contacted me. He brought me here and that’s the end of the story.”

“That’s a fascinating story,” Leo said. “I know that the Newtonian Society is extremely powerful. The question is why did they let you grow up in poverty? They knew who you were since birth, didn’t they?”

“Not quite, Majesty,” Draco replied. “According to Oliver, six Zodiac beasts entered the other world eighteen years ago, but they didn’t know that until later. I’m guessing they discovered there were a total of six spirit beasts in the other world and then assumed they entered when the gate Oliver showed you first opened eighteen years ago. So, for the first year or so, they may not have known about us. Also, being in that orphanage may have been part of the training. Secret societies love their secrets.”

“I see,” Leo replied and sunk into deep thought.

“What are those lines on your face?” Chester asked.

“Tiger claw scratches,” Draco replied. “They appeared one morning when I was your age.

“Here’s the strange thing. I only saw a tiger when I was twelve, when visiting a zoo. No, I don’t know how I got those lines.”

“Wow, you’re so mysterious,” Rachael marveled. Draco felt himself become stronger at that comment.

The carriage stopped and everyone got out. They entered the palace and Rachael said, “Bernard, please make extra food for lunch. Our guest has a big appetite. Also, bring some snacks to the family room.”

“As you wish mum,” Bernard replied.

They entered the family room and Rachael asked, “What do you think of Annie?”

“She’s the strongest person I’ve ever met,” Draco replied. “As for how pretty she is, I’d rather not comment, or she’ll get a humongous head, bigger than it already is.”

“Who are you saying has a big head?” Annie said angrily.

“It’s amusing to see them fight,” Leo said. “Too bad they’re tiger and dragon.”

“Zéphir was able to change his sacred beast from chimpanzee to gorilla. I’m guessing Annie should be able to change to any member of the cat family,” Draco replied.

“Like what?” Emily asked.

Draco began, “Lion, leopard, saber-tooth tiger, cat like you…”

“Catfish,” Emily suggested.

Draco laughed. “More like a tiger shark.”

“Incredible,” Leo said. “Tiger sharks are powerful creatures. Zodiac beasts are incredible.”

Draco thought of mentioning that catfish and tiger sharks weren’t members of the cat family, but then changed his mind. This wasn’t a scientific world. This was a world where metaphors, similes, and all sorts of superstitions ruled. Perhaps she really could turn into a tiger shark.

“How did Zéphir turn into a gorilla?” Annie asked, interested.

“He pounded his chest like a gorilla and made gorilla sounds. He was also furious at the thugs who were molesting a little girl and her mother,” Draco replied.

Servants entered and brought in snacks and drinks. “Please dear, eat,” Rachael said. “I don’t want you to starve.”

Rachael no longer looked like a queen to Draco, but just a concerned mother. She was worried about him. That was something he never experienced before. Confused, he said, “Okay…Annie’s Mum.”

The family talked about everyday things while Draco stuffed his face.

The butler entered and said, “Lunch is served.”

They adjourned to the dining room and Draco was seated beside Annie.

Throughout lunch, the mother tried to make him eat more, until Draco felt as if he was going to burst. The father just sat in deep thought and quietly ate.

“What’s it like to be a dragon?” Chester asked excitedly.

Draco shrugged. “I don’t know. What’s it like to be a Cheetah? Until a month ago, I didn’t believe dragons existed. I still don’t know what dragons look like in real life.”

“Come to the library and I’ll show you,” Little Chester said. He grabbed Draco by the hand and pulled him.

In the library Chester opened a book filled with dragons. “Aren’t dragons cool?” Chester asked. “One day I’m going to go into one of the uncharted areas in the Cascade Mountains and capture a dragon.”

“Isn’t it dangerous entering uncharted areas?” Draco asked.

“Yes,” Chester said sadly. “That’s why my mum and dad refuse to let me go now. But you’re a dragon.”

Draco felt like a captured pet and a toy for a little prince.

“Let’s go to my room,” Chester said and led Draco away. “I think your name is cool and a little scary. I wish I could have seen you fight Aunt Annie, but mum said I was too young. That’s not fair since I’m five. Dad said I should go, but in the end, mum won.”

“I agree,” Draco said. “Five is old enough. It was a great match. We almost took the house down, but then your grandpa stopped the match. We don’t know who’s stronger, me or your aunt.”

“Oh man, I wish I could have seen that match,” Chester pouted.

Hours passed and Chester’s mother Lisa entered. She found Chester sitting on Draco’s lap in his favorite reclining chair, with Draco reading to him.

“Chester, Draco, it’s time for dinner,” Lisa said.

“Okay mum,” Chester said and got up.

Draco finished off his coke and followed the two to the dining room. He arrived as the others entered. Draco was seated with Annie on his right and Chester on his left.

They said grace and then Lisa asked, “Chester, how is it like having your very own dragon?”

Chester hugged Draco and said, “I love him. He’s so cool.”

“Sorry Draco, you’ve been adopted as Chester’s pet dragon,” Rachael said. “There’s no escaping now.”

Everyone laughed.

Again, Draco felt that weird sensation he couldn’t fully relate to.

“Are you okay, dear?” Rachael asked worriedly.

“For the first time in my life, I feel as if I’m a part of a real family,” Draco said. “Thank you for accepting me.”

That made the adults feel gushy. “You are part of the family, dear,” Rachael replied.

“Thanks Annie’s mum,” Draco said and focused on eating.

Draco’s phone rang.

“What’s that?” Chester asked.

Draco pulled it out. “This is a phone. It’s a device that allows people to talk from a distance.”

“Like a magic mirror,” Chester suggested.

“Is it okay if I answer? It might be important,” Draco asked.

“Go ahead Draco,” Leo said.

Draco answered and put it on speaker, so the others could see how it worked.

“Hi Oliver,” Draco said. “What’s up?”

“How is it going with the royal family?” Oliver asked.

“I’m having fun with them,” Draco replied.

“When do you think you can get Princess Annie to come over for the seeing?” Oliver asked.

“How about tonight?” Annie suggested.

“You’re there, Princess Annie?” Oliver asked, surprised. “Yes, tonight at 9:00PM would be perfect. I’ll make sure the others are here and everything is ready.”

“Okay Wizard Oliver,” Annie replied.

“Bye, everyone,” Oliver said and hung up.

Draco put the phone back into his pocket.

Draco looked at Emily sitting opposite on a highchair. Her face was covered with food, and she had carrots in her hair. She was a very happy little girl.

“Can I go?” Chester asked. “That sounds like fun.”

“Is that okay?” Leo asked.

“I don’t know,” Draco replied. “Let me ask.”

Luke phoned Oliver and said, “Oliver, Prince Chester wants to come and watch the seeing. Is that okay?”

Luke hung up and said, “Oliver said that it will be scary, but he won’t object it Chester wants to come.”

“You’re not seriously thinking of allowing him to come, are you?” Annie asked Draco.

“Why not?” Draco replied. “He’s a prince, after all.”

“But he’s just a kid,” Annie retorted.

“I’ve been street fighting since I was four, protecting those in need in the slums I grew up in,” Draco replied. “An elbow to the nuts or a kick to the shin can be effective when you’re that short.”

“You’re a dragon, so that doesn’t count,” Annie replied.

The two continued arguing.

“I think he should go,” Leo said. “The experience will be good for him.”

“No,” Rachael responded. “We’re talking about supernatural matters. He’s too young to handle such things.”

“I agree,” Lisa said.

“Sorry Chester but you’re out-voted,” Leo said.

“Oh man, I never get to do anything fun,” Chester complained.

“One day, your dad will be king, and then you,” Rachael said. “We’ll make sure you get trained properly when you get a little older. Now just focus on having fun.”

Chester sighed, knowing he couldn’t win an argument with his grandmother.

Luke checked his phone and said, “It’s 8:20PM. We better be going.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” Rachael said.

“Okay,” Draco replied. “See you later everyone.”

They left the royal apartments and went out. A carriage took them to the manor with ten minutes to spare.

“Thank-you for coming Princess Annie,” Oliver greeted.

As before, they went to the other room and sat around the water basin. The room went dark and creepy. After a few minutes, the image of Walter appeared.

“Well, that confirms that,” Oliver said. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to try again.”

This time nothing happened.

“That’s annoying,” Oliver said. “We seem to be missing something. I guess we have no choice but to wait on destiny.”

They returned to the common area and Annie sat in the chair Oliver always sat in.

Farting sounds filled the room.

Startled, Annie jumped up and found a strange pancake-shaped red object on the seat.

“Zéphir, please don’t play your practical jokes on the princess,” Oliver scolded. “Sorry Princess Annie, Zéphir can be mischievous.”

“That’s not my fault,” Zéphir objected. “I was expecting you to sit there, since it’s your seat.”

“Some humility is good for the health,” Draco said.

“Are you accusing me of being arrogant?” Annie asked angrily.

Draco shrugged. “You did sit in the best chair in the room.”

“What about you?” Annie retorted.

“This is closest to the fireplace, and I don’t mind sitting on the floor,” Draco replied.

“What is this thing?” Annie asked.

“That’s a whoopee-cushion,” Zéphir answered. “Squeeze it and see what happens.”

Annie pressed it and farting sounds echoed throughout the room. “I think my nephew would love this,” she commented.

“You may have it,” Zéphir said. “Just place it on his chair and let him sit on it.”

“If you don’t need me, I’m going out,” Cornel said.

“Same here,” Walter echoed.

“Okay,” Oliver replied and the two left.

“I believe the other members will come to us sooner or later, just like Walter came to us,” Oliver said.

“How did you find me?” Annie asked.

“Draco spotted you, just like he spotted Walter,” Oliver replied. “The only thing we can do is wait. They are destined to show up eventually.”

“I better be going,” Annie said. “Thanks for the whoopee-cushion Zéphir.”

“Let me escort you out,” Oliver said. They walked out and Oliver asked, “What does the royal family think of Draco?”

“They love him and have adopted him,” Annie replied. “I don’t know why. He’s just a stupid dragon who intentionally gets on my nerves.”

“What do you think of the fact that Vera was sitting with him?” Oliver asked.

“I don’t care who he sits with,” Annie said angrily. “He’s just a stupid dragon.”

Oliver chuckled. “You can’t get away from him no matter how much you fight with him,” Oliver said. “That’s the nature of princesses and dragons, and of dragons and tigers.”

Annie felt uncomfortable. Oliver was too observant.

“Draco will contact you when something comes up,” Oliver said as Annie entered the carriage.

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Two weeks passed by, and Draco complained, “I’m bored. When can we go on another dungeon dive or something?”

“Me too,” Zéphir said. “They’re only so many pranks you can pull on the same people without the jokes getting stale. I want to go exploring.”

“Me three,” Vera said. “The places people guard here pose no challenge to me. I’ve already explored the sewer systems and back allies and just poking into people’s homes is no fun at all.”

“Have you been to the wizard’s school and library?” Oliver asked.

“A few times and I borrowed some library books,” Draco admitted.

“There’s a wizard school?” Cornel asked in surprise. “I thought you said that magic couldn’t be thought.”

“That’s true,” Oliver replied. “Magic can’t be thought. What I meant to say is that it can’t be thought in a classroom with a teacher and students.

“In this world no one learns that way. To begin with, children grow up with their parents and learn by seeing, hearing, and experiencing. Parents give instructions when they feel the need. Then they apprentice with someone in a field of their choice for a few years and then join the workforce.

“Magic is the same way. A master will appear when the student is ready and teaches the apprentice through a series of challenges and exercises.

“Libraries here are strange things. When you want to create a library, you reserve a space and fill it with bookshelves. You then treat it with all the respect due a library. The actual process can change, and you need the spirit of the library to guide you.

“Then one day the library fills up with books that most people can’t read.

“Wizards and people like Draco can read all books. Royalty and nobility can read books associated with rulership. Children’s books are the exception. Those everyone can read.”

“How do you become a wizard?” Cornel asked.

“A wizard is born when people around you perceive you as being a wizard. People have always perceived me as being a wizard, ever since I arrived. It probably has more to do with my appearance than anything else.

“Since this world acknowledges me as a wizard, I automatically gain the ability to read these books. That doesn’t mean it’s easy for me to understand what’s written. As with all things, understanding takes time and effort.

“Also, some things will not reveal themselves until the stage is set.

“Wizard schools are like libraries. They spring into existence when the need arises and grows and shrinks with attendance. By the way, there are no teachers in wizard schools. Instead, senior wizards at some point in their lives discover that they have apprentices. I occasionally mentor several juniors, which is strange, since I’m only 18.

“In fact, I am responsible for mentoring all of you. I have already given you tasks and will continue to do so as the need arises.”

“On second thought I don’t care. Forget I asked,” Cornel grumbled.

“Anything interesting happening at the palace?” Oliver asked.

“Tomorrow is Chester’s birthday, but you know that,” Draco said. “He’s a cute kid, but he treats me like his pet and always wants me to play with him.”

“Now you know what Vera feels like,” Argo said and laughed.

“I don’t mind being his pet,” Vera said and snuggled up to him.

“Draco, when are you going to make your move?” Cornel asked. “She’s begging you to take her virginity. You could both lose your virginity together.”

“Do you think about anything other than sex?” Argo asked in disgust.

“What else is there?” Cornel asked.

“There’s food, alcohol, opium, fighting, sleeping, animals, bondage…”

“That’s enough Walter. We don’t want to know about your perverted hobbies,” Argo scolded. “Why do I have to be surrounded by such filth?”

“What’s wrong with straps and whips, or water games? You should join me in an orgy. In fact, all of you should. You know what they say, the more the merrier,” Walter said excitedly.

“Knock it off you disgusting pig,” Argo spat. “You sicken me. You are filth, offal, trash. You don’t deserve to live on this plane of exist. You are an insult to pigs everywhere.” The aura of disgust and revulsion hit Walter like a sledgehammer.

“Argo, I think you should stop insulting him,” Oliver advised. “You’re only making him sexually aroused. He’s into all forms of pleasure, including SM.”

In disgust Argo got up and went to her room. She locked her door. Walter dashed out the common room, no doubt seeking to get laid.

“Vera, remember, he won’t make the first move, so you have to,” Cornel advised.

“Let’s change the subject,” Oliver said. “Draco, you mentioned something about the prince’s party?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “I think Zéphir should come. The kids would love to hear him tell jokes.” He paused and then said, “Oliver, I want to go travelling.”

Draco got up and ran to his room. He returned moments later with a book. He opened the book for all to see. It was a picture book filled with incredible places.

“Man, I would love to see the edge of the world, or these flying islands or these caves,” Draco said. “Every country has cool things to see.”

“What are you talking about?” Cornel asked. “The world is round.”

“Not this world,” Oliver disagreed. “This world is flat. We aren’t too far from the edge, living as we are near the West Coast.”

Vera and Zéphir stared at the book in rapture.

“Maybe that’s a good idea,” Oliver said. “You’ve already identified two members. Select a destination and we’ll go.”

“Have fun selecting,” Cornel said. “I’m going to take Walter’s advice and go hunting.” He left, humming to himself.

They spent the evening trying to decide where to go but couldn’t decide.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter where we go as long as we can explore,” Vera said.

“I’ll speak to the king,” Draco promised. “Maybe he has a suggestion.”

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The next day Draco and Zéphir went to the castle. Chester ran to Draco and gave him a hug. Draco rubbed the child’s head and said, “Happy birthday Chester. I’ll give you your present tomorrow. I invited Zéphir so he can entertain you and your friends. He’s the funniest guy I know and my best friend.”

“Thanks for that whoopee cushion,” Chester said. “It was so much fun using is on people, but then it disappeared.”

Zéphir laughed. “That’s what happens when you prank someone too many times.”

“Hi Annie’s mum, Annie’s dad,” Draco said, greeting Annie’s parents.

“Hi dear,” Rachael greeted. “Did you have a fun week?”

“Actually, we’re bored,” Draco said. “I got a book from the library yesterday, filled with fun place to visit. Unfortunately, we can’t decide where to go. I’ll get it for you.”

Draco ran to the royal library and found his book in the stacks.

That’s the strange thing about books checked out of a library. You can place your borrowed book in the stacks of any library in the world and retrieve it from the stacks of any other library. However, the library had to be acknowledged as a proper library by two or more people, and not just a bookshelf filled with books.

Draco returned to the family area and showed the parents the book. The other kids came around to look as well. “As you can see, we can’t decide on where to go first. If only travel weren’t so slow.”

“I’m going to Iraq. I’m leaving tomorrow afternoon,” Leo said. “Why don’t you come with me?”

“Can I bring Vera…?” Draco began.

“I’m coming too,” Annie announced.

“I thought you didn’t like going on boring business trips with me,” Leo chuckled.

“I can change my mind,” Annie said defensively. “That’s a girl’s prerogative.”

“Dear, what are your feelings towards Vera?” Rachael asked.

“Vera knows I have no romantic feeling for her, and seems to be content,” Draco admitted.

“However, I do feel the need to protect her, as if she were my baby sister – which is strange since Oliver says we were both born on Annie’s birthday.”

“How unusual,” Leo mused.

“Not so strange,” Draco replied. “According to Oliver, all of us were born on that day.”

“On the same hour as well?” Leo asked.

“I don’t know about that, but I’m sure Oliver knows,” Draco replied. “By the way, have all the guests arrived yet? I asked Zéphir to come and entertain them.”

“Yes,” Michal said. “Everyone’s here.”

“Chester, call the kids here and tell them we have some entertainment for them,” Draco said.

“Okay Draco. Come Zéphir,” Chester said and ran off. Zéphir followed.

After a few minutes, laughter could be heard coming from a closed room.

“What kind of people are the Zodiac Beast bearers?” Rachael asked.

“They all have very strong personalities,” Draco said. “Walter the warthog is a hedonistic pig, while Argo the horse is a prude whose only pleasure in life is running. Vera the mouse is a timid girl who loves poking her nose into everything, while Zéphir is a prankster who loves fun and adventure. Oliver is like a walking library and is obsessed about knowing everything. Cornel thinks that the world exists to serve him. You know what your daughter is like.”

“What about yourself?” Leo asked.

Draco shrugged. “I’m just an ordinary guy.”

The laughter from the room increased and Chester popped his head out of the door and screamed, “Aunty Annie, come here. You have to listen to Zéphir’s jokes.

Annie came and Draco followed. Zéphir said a classic joke as they entered. “How do you get down from a horse? You don’t get down from a horse. You get down from a duck.”

Looking around, Draco realized that the kids couldn’t take any more humor. Some were holding their sides laughing while others were rolling on the ground.

Annie walked into the center of the room and bent down to pick up a piece of paper. Zéphir clasped his hands together with index finger pointing out like a gun. He reached under Annie’s miniskirt and shoved his fingers up her butt.

Annie jumped five feet into the air and almost touched the ceiling with her head. She landed, spun around, and saw Draco standing there. Zéphir was not there.

For a moment there was silence as the kids tried to understand the totally unexpected.

Furious, Annie screamed, “Draco, what the hell did you do that for? No one gooses a princess.”

That was the last straw. The room burst into laughter. One boy collapsed and stopped moving. A second later a tiny ghostly badger with wings and a halo slowly floated up to the ceiling. Its eyes stared upwards, and its hands were together in prayer. There were no legs but a ghostly tail.

That killed all the laughter in the room.

Draco stared at the badger angel and then down at the child with crossed-out eyes. For a moment he was paralyzed with indecision. He then jumped, grabbed the ghost, pulled it down and rammed it back into the child’s chest. The boy gasped and opened his eyes.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You died of laughter and Draco brought you back,” Chester explained. “That was the first time I ever saw someone die of laughter.”

“Zéphir, that’s enough jokes for the night,” Annie said in a soft but deadly voice. “And Zéphir, if you ever goose me again, I promise you this – I will rip your lungs out. Is that clear?”

“Yes ma’am,” Zéphir replied, intimidated.

“How is it going?” Leo asked as he entered.

“Comedy hour is over,” Draco said. “Zéphir gave us a little more excitement than we were used to.”

“But it was fun,” the badger boy said.

“See you later,” Zéphir said and walked away.

“Where are you going?” Draco asked.

“Sorry, I’m not comfortable around a certain snotty-pants,” Zéphir said. “See you later.”

Draco wanted to argue more, but Chester dragged him away.

“Who are you calling snotty pants?” Annie shouted. “Draco, your friends are almost as annoying as you.”

“Coming from you, that’s a compliment,” Draco called back as kids of noble birth swarmed him. They led him to the garden.

Draco got down on hands and knees and gave them rides. A game the kids liked was seeing how many could climb on him while he galloped over various obstacles in the garden.

“He’s good with kids,” Rachael commented to Annie.

Annie agreed, but said, “That’s because he’s a kid himself. Only a kid plays follow the leader, or wiggle worms.”

“Come on Annie, you loved playing wiggle worms,” Rachael said.

“That was when I was five,” Annie grumbled. “I’m eighteen years old now, if you haven’t noticed.”

“He’s been playing with those kids for hours,” Leo said as he approached with a martini. “I’m tired just looking.”

“We are going to have some very exhausted kids tonight,” Rachael agreed.

They continued watching until dinner was announced. At dinner everyone wanted to sit with Draco, so he ended up at the kid’s table.

“I wish I could go into an uncharted area and capture a dragon,” a boy grumbled. “Are uncharted areas dangerous?”

“Of course,” Draco replied. “Uncharted areas are filled with dragons, or at least that’s what all ancient maps say. Then you have things like the Jabberwock and the frumious Bandersnatch.

“I’ve heard of the Jabberwock,” Chester said. “But what exactly is a frumious Bandersnatch?”

“I don’t know,” Draco replied. “According to the adventurer Alice, you should shun the frumious Bandersnatch, but she didn’t say what it was – Majesty, do you know what a vorpal sword is?”

“We have one in the arsenal,” Leo replied. “It’s a mystical sword that undulates when you shake it, like waves on a lake and makes strange warbling sounds. It’s the only thing known to kill a Jabberwock.”

“That sounds cool,” Draco replied. “Can we look at it?”

“Yes, since you’re my future son-in-law,” Leo replied.

*Future son-in-law – when did that happen?* Draco wondered. “Thanks Annie’s dad,” he said aloud.

“Daddy, please don’t decide who I’m going to marry,” Annie scolded.

“Come, I’ll take you to the armory,” Leo said. “You need to know about this stuff, in case we go to war.”

Everyone followed the king through several winding corridors and finally into the armory.

The armory was filled with a variety of weapons, such as swords, bows and arrows, war axes, and knives. Also included was leather, chain and plate mail armor.

They passed through locked doors and then entered an area filed with ornate weapons. “In this area we keep the more valuable spoils of war. Draco, you may take any weapon you wish. Unfortunately, none of these weapons are magical. Magical weapons choose their master and can’t be given away.”

As they passed a stack of ornate knives, one caught Draco’s eye. He picked it up.

The handle of the knife seemed made of ivory. Inlaid were tiny jewels, forming intricate patterns, set flush against the ivory. The pommel was a ball that looked like an inch wide red diamond. The light sparkled on the thousands of faces of the diamond. Strange magical symbols written in an ancient language scrolled down the side of the handle.

Half an inch before the blade was a circle with the Tao circle. On the black side, representing yin was a fire dragon. On the white side, representing yang was a white tiger outlined in black ink. The two creatures circling each other reminded Draco of himself and Annie.

The blade was six inches long and was of a simple design. One edge was silver, and the other was iron. Hieroglyphics inscribed the blade.

Heart beating a mile a minute and sweat pouring down his face, Draco stared at the dagger with raw desire. He would gladly give up the pile of gold he previously saw in the tomb for this.

Draco stammered, “M-majesty, I-I t-think this is part of your c-country’s crown j-jewels.”

“What are you talking about?” Leo asked. “It’s just ivory, and a red quartz crystal. A knife like that is worth a gold piece at most. Come. I’ll give you a better dagger than that.”

Breathing carefully, Draco slowly asked, “Are you sure this is only worth a gold piece?”

“Of course,” Leo replied. “It has already been classified and the sign there says these daggers are worth one gold piece each. Keep it if you like it so much.”

Draco bowed and said, “Thank-you. I will always treasure it.”

Draco pressed the Tao symbol and the blade retracted. He put the dagger hilt into an inner pocket.

The group stopped at a blank wall and Leo commanded, “Open.”

A hidden door opened, and they entered a large vault. It contained the real valuable magical items. Standard items included swords and shields. Other items included…

Draco snapped to attention when a shaft of flame engulfed him. He turned around to see little Billy hosing him with fire from a metal cylinder.

Billy dropped the cylinder, and the flame went off. Both Draco and his clothes were unharmed.

“Billy, please don’t touch anything,” Leo scolded. “These are magical instruments of war. Thankfully you only hit Draco. Anyone else would have died.”

“Yes sir,” Billy said, frightened by what had happened.

Draco put the fire hose back onto the table and then followed Leo.

“Oh my God, the vorpal sword is missing,” Leo exclaimed in shock, staring at a glass display box. The glass was intact and locked. “This was guarded by a magic lock. There’s no way a thief could have stolen it.”

“Vera the mouse could do it,” Draco refuted. “However she never steals. When she breaks in, she always leaves an outline of a smiling face. I don’t see one here. What does the sword look like?”

“It’s a great big sword with a blade almost as long as you,” Leo said. “I’ll show you a replica. In my opinion it’s one of the greatest swords the Swiss produced.”

They returned to the outer room and the king closed the secret door. They went to a display area in another part of the palace. Replicas of the great weapons of the world lined the corridor. This included Excalibur in its stone and the Spear of Destiny.

“Does that mean it’s a Swiss army knife?” Draco asked.

“I don’t know. It has never chosen anyone,” Leo said. “It’s filled with mysteries, just like you.”

Draco’s ears perked up at that. He loved mysteries.

They stopped at the sword display. It looked like the sword the hero Cloud used in the franchise *Final Fantasy*.

Without thinking Draco pulled out his hilt and looked at it. He held it pointing upwards and then twisted the red diamond.

Like a Transformer robot, the hilt transformed with clicking sounds. In moments Draco had an identical sword in his hand.

With the increase in size came a corresponding increase in weight. The sword was heavy.

“Holy crap,” Leo swore. “Everyone stand aside. I want to hear the sword sing.”

Draco held the sword sideways and shook the blade. Ripples flowed across the metal, producing a strange warbling sound, similar to the sound a long wood saw makes when shaken.

“That’s strange,” Annie said. “I didn’t think a solid piece of metal would do that.”

“A normal sword wouldn’t,” Leo replied. “However, this is the vorpal sword.”

Draco turned the red diamond again. The sword returned to its dagger form without the blade.

“I suppose you want the sword back,” Draco said sadly.

“No,” Leo replied. “I gave my word, and I can’t take it back. Consider it as part of Annie’s dowry.”

Draco wanted to argue, but his desire for the blade prevented him from speaking. Instead, he gave Leo a hug and said, “Thank-you dad. You’re the best.”

“Hey, I never said I would marry him,” Annie said angrily.

Leo ignored his daughter and said, “Come kids. It’s time for you to go home, or your parents will worry.”

They headed back to the royal suites and guardians took the kids away. The family sat in the living room and Draco took his usual place by the fireplace, although it was unlit.

“I need to practice with the sword,” Draco said.

“What sword dear?” Rachael asked.

“This one,” Draco said and displayed the full-sized sword. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“That’s part of Annie’s dowry,” Leo said.

“You’re giving a sword as part of a dowry?” Rachael asked in shock.

“This is not just any sword, Annie’s mum,” Draco said. “With this sword I vow to protect both your daughter and this kingdom from harm. It’s that valuable to me.”

“I don’t need protection and I don’t need stupid dragons,” Annie said angrily.

“You’re right,” Draco said. “You don’t need me to protect you, but that is what I’ve been charged with. Don’t worry. I promise to treat you like I always do – like the royal pain that you are.”

Annie stuck her tongue out at him.

“I’d better be going,” Draco said. He gave his future in-laws a hug, then Chester, and finally baby Emily. “See you later Princess.”

The family watched Draco leave and Chester asked, “Didn’t you say, magic weapons choose their master?”

“That’s correct,” Leo replied. “The vorpal sword chose him.”

The same was true with Billy and the fire hose. Leo didn’t say that, since Billy was too young for that weapon.

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Vera and Zéphir followed Draco through the palace. They approached the doors to the private suite of the royal family.

“Good day Regal Draco,” the two guards said and opened the doors.

“What does regal mean?” Vera asked.

“I don’t know. I assume they are being polite since Annie is my fiancée – although I’m not sure when that happened,” Draco replied.

“Hi Harry, Sally,” Draco greeted. “By the way, I got a new sword. If you don’t mind, I’d like to practice with you two when I get back from a trip I’m taking with the king.”

“Of course, we’d be honored Regal Draco,” Sally said.

“Thanks, you two. See you later,” Draco said and entered.

Chester ran to Draco and gave him a hug.

“Hi Chester, here’s your present,” Draco said.

“Thanks Uncle Draco,” Chester said and unwrapped the gift.

“That is a water gun,” Draco said. “Let’s go outside and I’ll show you how to use it.”

They went outside and Draco filled Chester’s gun with water. He then transformed his knife into a water gun and filled it.

“Now Chester, imagine you’re surrounded by an army of undead monsters. There and there and there they are coming for you to drag you to the underworld. What will you do? Fortunately, you have this water gun, filled with holy water. You take aim and shoot.”

The two ran through the gardens shooting imaginary undead creatures with pretend holy water.

“Having fun boys?” Leo asked.

“Yes grandpa,” Chester said excitedly. “Uncle Draco gave me a water gun. We’ve been killing undead monsters with it.”

“I got it from the other world,” Draco explained. “I ordered it and the train you rode on brought it over. There are enough for all his friends to play with.”

“Are you kids ready to go?” Leo asked.

“Yes dad,” Draco said. “Your people took our luggage already.”

“Draco, you have some cool rides in your world, but we have cool rides of our own as well,” Leo said. “Come. It’s time to go.”

“See you later Chester,” Draco said and tuned his gun back into a knife. They headed out to the front to the waiting carriages and headed out.

In half an hour they were at the docks. They stopped in front of the *Legacy of the Clouds*, a schooner with the royal seal.

They boarded and the captain saluted. “Welcome aboard Majesty, Princess Annie, Regal Draco. With your permission, we shall set sail.”

“Of course,” Leo said.

“Regal Draco, would you care for a tour?” the captain asked.

“Thank you, captain,” Draco said and followed. They took a few steps and then Draco noticed the other two weren’t following.

“Aren’t you coming?” Draco asked.

“It’s all right,” Vera said. “We’ll just enjoy the view.”

“As you wish,” Draco said uncertainly and followed the captain to the bridge.

When Draco was out of hearing, Vera whispered, “I’m not sure it’s a good idea coming. I’m not comfortable around royalty. I wish Draco was a commoner like us. I had so much fun with him before I discovered he was a five-toed dragon.”

Vera paused a moment and added, “The strange thing is Draco isn’t aware that he is royalty, and that the title of regal is equivalent to prince.”

They walked to the back of the ship and arrived just as the vessel pulled out of the docks.

“I know,” Zéphir agreed. “I’m not a fan of royalty either. It’s dangerous pranking them. They are too apt to say, ‘Off with his head’. Then their subjects blindly obey like sheep, and then I’m headless. Now if I were a horseman, that would be different – wait a minute, I am.

“Imagine if you will. I play a prank on King Leo. His subjects cut my head off and then I ride through town looking for new heads, or pranking people, whichever comes first.

“Vera, you’re not afraid of heights, are you? You can be a sea mouse, and I can be a sea monkey. Shiver me timbers. Man, the planks. Swab the decks.”

“I had sea monkeys once,” Vera said. “They’re kind of cute, but also weird looking.”

“Are you saying I’m weird looking?” Zéphir said angrily.

“No. I didn’t mean it that way,” Vera said defensively.

Zéphir laughed and said, “I’m just pulling your chain. Come. Let’s climb to the top for a better view.”

They climbed the tallest mast to the crow’s nest. The view was incredible. “As I mentioned, pranking royalty is dangerous, but is so much more rewarding. They are so full of it, that they find it inconceivable that someone would prank them. Then their subjects freak out as well. That’s the best.”

“Loki in the Norse myths was considered a prankster,” Vera said. “I’m sure you two would get along very well. I notice you don’t prank everyone.”

“I only prank those who are begging to be pranked. Or when I’m bored,” Zéphir said.

Vera felt a downwards pressure, like the feeling of taking off in an airplane.

Below them the sails billowed in the wind as the *Legacy of the Clouds* moved forwards and upwards. The ship ascended into the sky on what looked like the vapor trail of a jet liner.

“Amazing,” Zéphir marveled. He then pretended he was on the intercom and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Fasten your seatbelts and place your trays in their upright and locked positions. Those who fail to comply will be punished by being thrown off the ship.”

“You mean walking the plank,” Vera added and laughed.

“I wish I were a flying monkey,” Zéphir said. “You could be a flying mouse.”

“What is a flying mouse?” Vera asked.

“A bat, I suppose,” Zéphir replied. “Flying monkeys from the Wizard of OZ and giant vampire bats would make perfect minions for Draco, should he turn evil.”

The ship leveled off as it hit the cloud layer in the jet stream and sailed horizontally to its destination.

“Let’s do it,” Vera said. She jumped off the mast and flapped her arms.

Zéphir followed Vera’s lead. Both transformed in mid-fall. Vera turned into a giant vampire bat with red eyes and clawed hands at the tips of her wings. Zéphir turned into a chimpanzee with wings. He had a toy-soldier coat and hat and looked identical to the flying monkeys in the *Wizard of Oz*.

The two circled the ship and watched the crew scurrying around like ants. “Amazing,” Zéphir exclaimed. “I’ve been wanting to turn into a flying monkey for a long time but didn’t know how. Do you still regret coming?”

“No,” Vera said. “This is fun. Let’s explore. The ship is going so slowly; I doubt we will lose it.”

*Off in a place of darkness a lone figure watched. “Excellent,” it cackled and rubbed its hands together. “The minions of the Dark Lord are assembling on schedule.”*

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The ship travelled down the cloud trail and approached Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. The ladies were covered up, as per Islamic law. The men wore appropriate clothes and Draco cut his hair short just before docking. The country didn’t approve of long hair on men.

Zéphir and Vera wanted to tell Draco about their ability to transform. However, they never got a chance.

Just before landing, Leo gave Draco a warning.

“Draco, there is something we need to discuss with you. We are rather relaxed about royalty and nobility in North America.

“However, royalty is taken seriously in the Middle East. Therefore, you can’t be chummy with Vera, and Zéphir in front of the king or other big shots. Vera, and Zéphir know what to do.

“You on the other hand should follow my lead.”

“Maybe they shouldn’t come with us,” Draco suggested.

“No,” Leo objected. “Servants are expected to always follow their master.

“They aren’t servants,” Draco objected.

“I know,” Leo agreed. “However, you must follow the rules of foreign countries.”

“Yes sir,” Draco replied with a sigh.

“For the trip, Vera will be Annie’s servant and Zéphir will be yours, and of course Jameson is mine,” Leo said. “And of course, everyone is segregated. Vera and Zéphir will be in the servant’s quarters, and you will be in a room besides mine.

“And of course, Annie will be in the women’s quarters.”

“I wish I didn’t come,” Draco grumbled.

“Sorry son, but you no longer have a choice,” Leo consoled.

“And Zéphir, no pranks, or they will chop your head off,” Leo warned.

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The *Legacy of the clouds* landed in Bagdad and the cloud trail dissipated. They got off and headed for the king’s palace.

Draco walked beside Annie and Zéphir and Vera walked behind them. “Remember Regal Draco, we are just your servants on this trip,” Vera said softly.

“I know, I know, but I still don’t like it,” Draco grumbled.

After a short wait, they were escorted to the king’s audience chamber.

“Greetings my friend Leo,” the foreign king said.

“Greetings Khaled,” Leo said. “This is my daughter Annie and her fiancé Draco. Draco, please allow me to introduce King Khaled Mabrouk Tahar.”

Draco placed his hand to his chest and bowed to the king. “Please to meet you, Majesty.”

“Khaled, can you please arrange a tour of the city for Draco and Annie,” Leo asked.

“Of course, my good friend,” Khaled said and snapped his fingers.

A man approached and said, “My name is Hamid. Please follow me.”

Draco and Annie followed the man. Zéphir and Vera walked quietly behind.

Out on the streets, Draco said, “Hamid, these are my two…” Vera subtly poked Draco. He shut up.

The five got into a carriage. Hamid gave instructions and they drove off.

Within minutes they were at the Al Mansur Mall. Unlike the multi-story structure in the Newtonian world, this mall was a marketplace filled with 1-2 story shops.

“This is fun,” Zéphir said as they entered the throngs of people.

“Yup,” Vera agreed as she looked around.

“It’s noon, isn’t it?” Draco asked. “Why don’t we eat lunch? By the way, they accept this, don’t they?”

“Of course, sir,” Hamid replied. “Real money is accepted everywhere.”

They entered a local establishment and ordered.

The meal started with Hummus. The gang ordered various dishes such as manakeesh or Arabic pizza, Fattoush, Shawarma, Mansaf, and Umm Ali. For dessert they had Baklava and Knafeh.

“What do you think of the food?” Hamid asked.

“I prefer hamburgers, but this isn’t bad,” Zéphir replied.

“It was excellent,” Annie said. “My compliments to the chief.”

There was a scream far off in the distance. That was followed by other screams.

Draco hesitated a moment and then said, “Hamid, please cover for me. I’ll pay you back later.” He dashed off, followed closely by the gang.

Out on the road they found the source of the commotion. Portals were opening throughout marketplace as monsters flooded the plaza.

Draco took out his sword and began hacking at the creatures. The blade when snicker-snack every time it sliced through a creature.

“Damn,” Draco cursed, knowing he couldn’t save anyone. There were surrounded by thousands of imps, trolls, and other small fries. What they lacked in strength, they made up with sheer numbers.

Draco fought in desperation as civilians got chomped around him. “To me,” he commanded. “Make a circle. Civilians, come here for protection.

The gang formed a circle. Bruised and battered civilians began entering.

By now, soldiers and police had joined the fray. However, they weren’t coordinated.

Draco took a deep breath and bellowed, “Soldiers and police, form circles now to protect the civilians.”

Like magic the soldiers, police and civilians obeyed as instructed.

Defenders joined Draco’s circle, allowing it to protect hundreds of terrified civilians.

Draco exited his circle and launched a frontal attack, bellowing encouragement as he mowed monsters down.

Slowly but surely the tide began turning. The demon portals had long since closed and the attackers were quickly turning into mounting piles of corpses.

Draco made one last circuit, finishing off the last of the creatures. He then spent his time retrieving the injured to the main area.

An exhausted soldier approached and knelt before him. “Highness, I’m Captain Rogers,” the soldier greeted. “The area is secured sir.”

“What about the injured?” Draco asked, feeling the urge to yank the captain up to his feet.

“Emergency crews are arriving now sir,” the officer replied.

“Thank you Captain Rogers,” Draco said with a nod.

Draco surveyed the carnage and felt the need to speak once again. He climbed atop a lamppost and looked down as his newly regrown ponytail blew in the breeze. He placed his hands together like a Chinese sage.

<picture>

All eyes looked at him.

“Thank you everyone on your amazing bravery and valor,” Draco commended everyone. “Because of your help countless lives have been saved.

“Yes, I know. Attacks like this are scary. Rest assured that we are working hard to make sure you are safer. With God’s help, we will overcome.”

Draco leaped off the lamppost and did multiple flips in the air. He seemed to float to the ground. People looked at him in awe as he approached his friends.

Standing next to the gang was the restaurant owner.

“I’m sorry for not paying for lunch,” Draco apologized. “How much do I owe you?”

“It’s on the house, Highness,” the man said gratefully. “It’s the least I can do for your protection.”

“We might as well return,” Annie said. “How come you’re not covered in monster guts?”

“And when did your ponytail regrow?” Zéphir asked.

“Sometime during the fight,” Draco replied. “Vera, pleas remove it.”

The gang entered Hamid’s carriage with Vera holding the ponytail. They returned to the palace.

“Highnesses, the king wants to speak to you,” a servant said as they stepped out of the carriage.

“Please ask the king that we be allowed to freshen up a bit,” Annie said.

“Yes Ma’am,” the servant said with a bow and ran back.

Servants led his friends away. Another led him down a corridor. “This is your guest room, Highness,” a servant. “Shall I help you shower?”

“No thanks,” Draco replied and closed the door on the man. It was time for a shower, but he didn’t want assistance.

The shower consisted of a giant watering can hanging from the ceiling and a metal chain.

It was a pain, taking a showering while holding the chain and the water was only room temperature. Quick shower later, Draco changed and stepped out of his room.

The servant guided Draco to the lobby of the audience chamber. He waited and the others joined him.

They were announced and allowed to enter.

“Regal Draco, I heard about the monster attack and how you rallied the troops and valiantly fought,” Khaled praised.

“Thank you, Majesty,” Draco replied with a bow. “I’m glad I could help in my humble way.”

“It’s time for a feast,” Khaled declared and clapped his hands. “Regal Draco, you will be sitting at my table with your father.”

Servants got busy and within moments the room was transformed. Draco sat with Leo. Annie sat with the other ladies. Vera and Zéphir sat nearby with other people.

Khaled made small talk, which compelled Draco to participate. What a pain. At least the food was good, and he had his fill.

The next two days were much the same. Except Draco was forced to participate in the meetings with Leo.

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Back on the *Legacy of the Clouds*, Leo asked, “So Draco, what did you think of the trip?”

“I hated it,” Draco replied. “I can see why Annie didn’t want to come before.”

“People here view women as inferior,” Annie grumbled. “I can’t stand it.”

“They would freak out it they knew you like fighting with men,” Draco added with a chuckle.

“I know,” Leo said. “They think women were created for the sole purpose of serving men, doing housework and have babies.

“If I had known, I wouldn’t have brought Vera and Zéphir along,” Draco said. “It must have been hell for them. I was hoping for a fun trip.”

“Sorry son, but I felt it was important you understand different cultures of the world,” Leo apologized.

“So many people were involved in protecting the civilians, and yet only I got credit,” Draco said. “Annie, Vera, and Zéphir kicked ass, but no one noticed.”

“It’s okay Draco,” Vera said.

“Well, it’s not okay with me,” Draco grumbled. “Majesty, from now on, please assign servants to me should the need arise. The crew of the *Legacy of the Clouds* didn’t need to meet the king and neither do my friends.”

“Very well,” Leo said. “I will assign you a servant when we arrive in Israel, if you feel so strongly.”

“Thank you majesty,” Draco said gratefully.

“Majesty, I need to discuss with you the route,” the captain said. “We might need to make a detour.”

“Okay captain,” Leo said and followed the captain.

“Draco, come to the bow,” Zéphir suggested. “We have something to show you. And it’s quiet there.”

After arriving Annie asked, “You look distracted. What’s up?”

“I’m thinking these monster attacks are God’s way of giving the world a well needed kick in the pants,” Draco grumbled.

“You shouldn’t say such things,” Annie scolded. “Zéphir, Vera, talk to him.”

“We will always follow Draco,” Vera replied.

“Never mind that,” Zéphir interrupted. “We need to show you our new forms.”

Zéphir jumped overboard.

“Nooo,” Draco screamed and ran forward.

Zéphir flew up in his flying monkey form.

“Come on,” Vera said with a smile and jumped.

“We are definitely not in Kansas anymore,” Draco mumbled. The world was getting too weird. Without hesitation, he jumped.

In mid-air Draco transformed into a Chinese dragon. He followed his friends.

“Congratulations on your transformation,” Annie said.

Draco looked to his side and found a massive white tiger running beside him on a road made of clouds. The sight of Annie sent a chill of fear down his back. Those fangs and claws could definitely rip him a new one.

Draco was no longer a mighty dragon but a harmless gecko.

Zéphir dove and grabbed the tiny lizard before it could plunge to its death. They returned to the ship.

Once again human, everyone looked at Draco.

Annie asked, “What happened?”

“I have a mortal fear of tigers,” Draco explained. “I know with 100% certainty that a tiger will be my end. That’s strange. My natural fear and awe of you is gone.”

“That’s because your spirit beast is now that of a gecko,” Zéphir replied.

Draco looked down and discovered his clothes had changed. He was now wearing grey overalls and a white t-shirt.

“How do I change back?” Draco asked in near panic. “This could cause problems. Especially since this body is really, really weak.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Zéphir assured. “Just relax and you’ll be back to normal.”

“Easy for you to say,” Draco grumbled. “Geckos are usually lunch for quite a few creatures. What if the king sees me like this?”

“Annie, we are making a detour. Where’s Draco?” Leo asked and Draco almost jumped out of his skin. He didn’t see the king approach.

“He’s indisposed majesty,” Draco squeaked and bowed in a way he saw crew did. “May I take a message?”

“Just tell him we will be fighting areal monsters,” Leo said. He sighed and added, “We had to bypass a thunderstorm, which means passing through a swarm. The captain said this is our safest route.” He turned and walked away.

“Why didn’t he recognize you?” Zéphir asked.

“Would you recognize me?” Draco asked. “Even my personality has changed and I’m feeling rather timid. I better go and take a nap. Can I borrow your bed Zéphir?”

“No problem big, or should I say small guy?” Zéphir asked and slapped Draco on the back. Draco went flying.

Staggering, Draco headed to the bunk. He slipped in and closed his eyes.

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Draco was rudely awakened by an alarm. Jumping out of bed he found himself back to normal. Feeling grateful for his restored self, he raced out the door.

Outside, the sky was filled with nameless nightmare creatures. Draco took out his weapon and it turned into a shotgun with a gauge.

Taking aim, Draco fired. A harpy fell with a hole in its chest. He waited impatiently for the gauge to fill and fired at the next monster. He focused on only big prey, since he could only fire once a second.

Monsters landed and surrounded Draco. He considered switching weapons, but changed his mind. He was doing more good with his gun.

With his left hand he fired shots at flying monsters and fought landed monsters with his right hand. That was rather tricky since he needed to focus his power in his fist or he couldn’t perform a proper killing blow.