The Princess   
And The   
Unknown Road

The Unknown Road is  
forever being eroded -  
But the road is never-ending

**By**

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The Unknown Road

Only the fool chooses uncertainty  
over a safe and secure future

Luke walked peacefully down the country road as a pleasant breeze caressed his cheek. The sky darkened and the shrubbery thickened into brambles. Luke saw a movement to the right. There was something in the bushes. It was looking at him. It was hungry.

Luke picked up his pace. He had to get back home, for the woods were dangerous at night. Things without names lurked out there.

Fear gripped Luke as he walked the forbidden road. He knew he shouldn’t have taken the Unknown Road, but he was bored and wanted adventure. He regretted not taking everyone’s advice, and now he was going to die.

Fighting panic, Luke walked on. Relief was great as he finally arrived at the fork in the road. One path was bright and cheery. It had pretty flowers and headed for the town of Pleasantville. There he would find a safe life where he would grow up with family and friends. There he would have a steady job and be a dependable member of society.

The signpost for the other path said Unknown Road. It led deep into Forbidden Forest. Beyond were the Mountains of Uncertainty, eternally shrouded in black thunderstorms and crawling with monsters. From that path no one ever came back.

The instructions for the folk in the road read: “Welcome to the Crossroads of your life. Choose your path in life or be forever stuck.”

Surrounding Luke were the skeletons of countless people who died in indecision.

Luke desperately wanted to choose Unknown Road, but it terrified him. What would people think? How would he live? Shouldn’t he come back when he was more prepared (even though preparation was impossible)?

Something snapped behind Luke. A shiver ran down his spine. He turned in terror and ran down the road to Pleasantville.

MC900065312[1]~

Luke woke in bed, drenched in sweat. A tear rolled down his face and he knew he had made the worst choice of his life. Of course it was just a dream, but regret griped his chest.

“Get up dear or you’ll be late for school,” Luke’s mother Jane called in her beautiful sing-song voice.

Luke went to the washroom, took a quick shower and got ready for school. This was the last day of school and he would be graduating. Despite being only fourteen, he was graduating high school at the top of his class with honors.

Next September he would go to college and his parents were proud of him. He was destined to live the rest of his life in Pleasantville. That didn’t mean his life was easy. It only meant that there were no surprises.

Luke arrived at school and headed for class. On his way, he passed the girl he had a crush on, but was too shy to speak to.

A vision of his dream flashed through his head and he cursed. *Damn it. I need to embrace the Unknown Road, or I’ll be a muggle for the rest of my life.*

Luke walked up to the girl and tried to speak. Unfortunately, the only sound that came out was a mouse-like squeak.

“Are you okay?” the girl asked.

Luke smiled, nodded and walked away.

Most people considered him to be a genius. He knew the truth. It’s easy to be smart when you don’t have pesky things like a social life to get in the way of studies.

Also, being the son of a nuclear physicist and an electrical engineer, he had special training since he was a child. His parents worked hard to make sure there was no uncertainty in his future.

Luke also foolishly believed – if you knew something about all subjects, you could be a great conversationalist. That was an excellent incentive to study.

School finished and Luke headed home. He always walked down 172nd Ave NE, and then a park trail to 171st Ave NE. After that was a ten minute walk to his home.

This time, instead of turning right on Ashford Trail, he turned left, into the unknown part of the woods.

Luke soon discovered the park was much larger than he first realized. It felt as if he was cut off from the city and was now in the countryside. Walking down the peaceful trail, Luke was happy to have made the detour.

Intense pain exploded in the center of Luke’s skull, like someone drilling a nail into his brain.

Luke spun around in terror to face his attackers. There were no attackers.

The pain in Luke’s head increased and his vision blurred. Colors separated from objects and dizziness overtook him.

MC900065312[1]~

Luke woke up in a hospital bed, in the emergency ward. His mother held his hand and tears streamed down her face. His father just stood in the corner and brooded.

“But doctor, he’s too young to die,” Jane complained.

Fear gripped Luke.

“What’s going on mum?” Luke asked in a shaky voice.

Jane hugged him but said nothing.

“The doctors found several tumors in your brain,” Luke’s father Joe informed him. “One is next to your pineal gland. Others are in your visual cortex, auditory cortex, and other important regions.”

The doctor handed the x-ray to Luke. Dark areas were found in the specified locations.

“Son, the good news is that the tumors seem to be benign, according to the blood tests,” the doctor said. “For the time being we have decided to leave them, since they are in very sensitive areas of your brain. If the conditions worsen, we might try chemotherapy.”

“I remember getting hit on the head,” Luke said. “What happened?”

“A rock or something hit you in the trepanning area of your skull. Without bone to protect the brain, you got a concussion,” the doctor replied. She frowned and added, “Trepanning is very dangerous, young man. Why did you do something like that?”

Instinctively Luke placed his hand on his head. The top of his skull where the bone plates met had a soft spot. Shuddering, Luke removed his hand.

“When did you do that?” Joe asked. Jane looked at him with scolding eyes.

“I didn’t do that,” Luke said defensively. “I know that trepanning is a superstitious practice done by primitives and New Age fools. No sane person would drill a huge hole in the center of his skull.”

“Doctor, what is trepanning?” a neighboring patient asked.

“As Luke said, trepanning is drilling holes in your head. Trepanning was used as late as the 18th centenary to treat conditions such as migraine headaches and brain swelling. Others use it to relieve spiritual pressure. They believed doing it would make you more spiritual. As if spiritual power would be blocked by mere bone,” the doctor replied.

“That’s right,” Luke said emphatically. “Only an idiot would do that.”

The doctor signed and changed the subject. “Luke, have you ever suffered from auditory or visual hallucinations?”

“No doctor,” Luke replied.

“That’s good,” the doctor replied. “Considering the locations of the tumors, there is a possibility of having them in the future. If you get them please let us know, so we can perform additional tests. Right now there is nothing we can do but wait.

“The good news is that there is every reason to believe you will live a full happy life. Nurse, please fill out the forms so they can check out. If you’ll excuse me,” the doctor finished and left for her next patient.

“Come Luke, let’s go to a restaurant and celebrate the fact you have graduated high school,” Joe said.

Luke just nodded. He had a lot on his mind and he wasn’t hungry.

Scarier and Scarier

-- Don’t be afraid. It’s only us ghosts --

School was out and college was months away. Luke’s parents kicked him out of the house, with instructions to get fresh air and to rest his brain. In other words there was nothing to do.

Luke walked down the street, heading for the library. A ghost popped out of a wall, looked around, and then reentered the wall. The experience barely registered in Luke’s brains since ghosts don’t exist.

A bird flew overhead and disappeared into a cloud. Did that bird have two heads? No. That too was impossible.

A cat girl with tail and ears ate an ice cream cone with great enthusiasm. People walk around in costumes all the time, don’t they?

In the library, Luke spotted short men wearing old fashion mining clothes. They sported white beards that touched the ground and red conical hats. One picked his nose and wiped it on the book he read.

Another glared at Luke and shouted, “What the hell are you looking at? Haven’t you ever seen…?”

“Calm yourself Raggle,” the shortest and ugliest man said. “He’s obviously looking at the painting behind you.”

“You’re right Troggle,” Raggle said, mollified. “Ordinary humans can’t see us and don’t believe we exist.”

The whole incident left Luke with a strange sense of unreality. He grabbed a 450-page book on geology and read. Reading was fun and the library was his favorite place.

Four hours later, he finished the book and put it away. The book was easy reading, being a large-print with more pictures than words. By now he was hungry. He went to the nearest restaurant and ordered food. He sat down and took a sip of coke.

Just then a basketball-sized black furry ball landed on the table. Folds of skin peeled back to reveal an eye. The whole thing was a giant eyeball. It spun around and a giant fang-filled mouth opened and gobbled up the food.

Luke screamed in terror and fell to the floor.

A waitress hurried to Luke and asked, “Are you okay dear?”

Luke looked at the table and discovered that the food was undisturbed and untouched. “Yes ma’am. Sorry for the commotion.”

Lying in bed that night, Luke contemplated the strange creatures he saw. There was no question. He was hallucinating. For a moment he considered telling his parents, but then changed his mind. They would freak out and rush him to the hospital. As if that would do any good.

As Luke drifted to sleep, he heard strange rustling sounds and saw movement from the corner of his eye. He hugged his pillow in terror and tried to sleep with the lights on. Who would have thought hallucinations could be so scary?

Luke prayed, “Please God, I change my mind about the Unknown Road. I would like to spend the rest of my life in Pleasantville.” There was no answer, or was that God laughing at him?

The next few weeks were the same. Jane would fuss over him and send him out with instructions to get exercise, as per doctor instructions. Every day he would see strange and sometimes scary creatures.

MC900065312[1]~

June 20 was a beautiful Pacific Northwest Spring day. For other people, this was the eve of summer. For Luke this was just another day filled with hallucinations, signaling he was going mad.

Luke’s parents booted Luke out of the house promptly at 8:20AM for his morning exercise. He paused a moment on the forest trail to catch his breath. Being a bookworm, he was the least fit person on the planet.

To the right, a wood nymph sat on a huge moss-covered oak tree. She sang of the wind and water, lakes and rivers.

Luke walked on. Heart racing a mile a minute and with ragged breath, Luke trudged up the gentle trail slope. People greeted Luke on the trail. Luke just nodded since he was too tired to speak.

The people thinned out, leaving him alone. The wind died down and stillness descended.

The trees and shrubbery closed in and made a tunnel. The silence deepened. Soon it was a pressure that squeezed Luke’s brain and body. On he continued.

Just as Luke felt as if he couldn’t take the pressure any more, the silence let up and the path opened up. It was now an ordinary silence, and not the silence of the Void.

The world was different. He was now at the top of a cliff. Off in the distance was an unknown town surrounded by farmland. The air was warmer and it seemed like evening. Luke pulled out his phone and it said, 5:23 PM.

*Where the hell am I? It feels as if I’m half way around the world,* Luke wondered and put his phone away.

A baby cried.

Looking around, Luke found no one. “Damn it,” Luke swore. “Where is everyone?” *Why would anyone abandon a baby?*

Luke looked down the nasty slope. There was no way he could go down that slope and rescue that baby. That was a job for someone who was physically fit and a mountain climber. But there was no one, and that baby needed help now.

Luke spent two minutes in indecision, and then tentatively moved his foot off the path. His foot slipped and he grabbed a tree for dear life. He ended up scratching himself and ripping his t-shirt, but he was safe.

Looking around, Luke realized the best course of action was to move parallel to the cliff to a gentler slope. Any other route meant losing the child or finding her when it was too late. He took his phone out again, but discovered he had no reception.

Putting plan into action, he scuttled rightward. He slipped again and landed at the edge of the ridge. One mistake and he would tumble over a hundred feet down the white limestone slope.

Looking up, Luke realized he could easily rescue himself, but that would mean abandoning the child.

A part of Luke’s brain said, ‘*The tumors in your brain are causing you to hallucinate’.* Another part asked, ‘*Can you be certain?’*

The child cried again. He had to go on. He couldn’t risk a child’s life on the off chance that he was wrong.

Heart thumping more from fear than exertion, Luke inched sideways on the slope.

Luke arrived at a junction where he had to jump to another location. Again he had a choice. Abandon the child who was so close or make the leap. For a moment he was lost in indecision. The baby cried and he jumped. He missed.

Luke tumbled down the cliff more than a hundred feet and crashed into a tree.

“Damn! I hate this,” Luke cursed as he rubbed a sprained ankle and a sore back.

Below were more cliffs and danger. Strangely enough, there was an easy path upwards towards safety. It was as if the world was taunting him.

Every part of his body screamed in agony as he trudged towards his destination. Again he slipped. This time he saved himself, but not before ripping more of his t-shirt and gouging his already-bloody arm.

Battered and bruised, Luke finally arrived at the bottom of the cliff. The child’s voice was much louder.

Luke checked his cell. It was 6:14PM. He had been descending for almost an hour. He continued on.

Finally, after hobbling through the forest for another ten minutes, Luke found the little bundle of joy, and it was a – doll. The crying stopped.

Luke couldn’t believe it. He had risked his life, badly bruised his body and sprained his ankle for a stupid crying doll.

Luke staggered the rest of the way and collapsed near the doll.

The doll was a beautifully crafted work of art, resembling a sixteen-inch-tall cat girl. She had long, electric yellow hair flowing down to her waist, cat ears, and a tail. For clothes, she had Mickey-mouse type white gloves, bloomer type pink shorts, a black t-shirt with pink polka-dots saying ‘Girl Power’, black stockings and pink shoes. A pink ribbon rested on her head. There was no question. The doll was worth a fortune. The craftsmanship was superb and in mint condition. Now the question was who would just abandon such an expensive doll?

Well, it had no owner. That meant he could take it for his niece. She would love it.

Luke picked up the doll and was surprised to find how heavy it was. It felt like a living creature with bones, skin and muscle.

Luke placed the doll on his lap and rested back. The doll smiled at him with one blue and one green cat eye.

Movement to the right caught Luke’s attention.

A young woman of perhaps twenty approached with a red lion the size of a horse. It had flames for a mane and the tip of its tail was a ball of fire. That was obviously a hallucination. The girl was a hottie. Her Chinese red hair and blue eyes made her face sparkle.

“That’s a beautiful spirit beast you have there,” the woman said in French. For some reason Luke could understand her, even though he never studied the language.

Luke wondered if he was dreaming, but his aching body said otherwise.

“This isn’t my doll,” he said slowly. The appropriate words just came to him. A thought came to him. Perhaps this seeming understanding of French was just part of his delusions.

Not knowing what else to do he just went with it. After all, the dream was getting interesting, with the addition of a cute girl.

“I found her a few minutes ago. I heard a baby crying and followed the sound here. When I did, I found this Princess Annie doll. I don’t know why anyone would abandon such a pretty doll.”

“You think I’m pretty?” the doll asked in a cute, squishy sort of voice. She flew onto Luke’s shoulder and hugged his face.

Luke looked at the woman to see if she heard the voice. She did. However, she didn’t seem surprised.

“Who are you talking to Millie?” a twenty-year-old young man with purple hair asked. He spotted Luke and asked, “What happened to you kid? Did you get mauled by mountain lions?”

“I heard the cry of an abandoned baby, and almost killed myself trying to reach it,” Luke explained. “Then I came here and discovered I was chasing a toy.”

“I’m not a toy,” the Princess Annie doll said angrily. “How rude.”

“I’m Felix and this is my spirit beast Rona,” Felix said, pointing at a purple grizzly bear. The purple matched Felix’s hair color. “I never heard of anyone just finding a spirit beast. Normally you need to summon one. How old are you kid?”

“I’m fifteen,” Luke said, feeling annoyed that the two were treating him like a child. He didn’t bother to mention that he turned fifteen two days previously.

Felix nodded. “I got my spirit beast at the age of sixteen, like everyone else. He’s been my companion ever since. Let’s go to the gathering and have a healer look at you. Then we’ll help you find your parents.”

The two helped Luke painfully up and helped him walk. Ten minutes later they arrived at a large pickup truck. The bear and lion jumped on the truck bed and the two helped Luke into the back seat.

“By the way kid, what’s your name?” Felix asked.

“I’m Luke,” Luke replied.

“And I’m Princess Annie,” the doll added. “Luke, am I a real princess?” she asked.

“No Annie,” Luke replied. “You’re a doll someone created. I don’t know. I just met you.”

“By the way, I’m Millie and my partner’s name is Gracie,” Millie said, finally introducing herself.

Felix started the pickup and they drove down a country road. Within minutes they arrived at a European style town. They passed through and arrived at a golf course.

The golf course was hosting a festival. Thousands of people milled around the greens, along with a swarm of spirit beasts. Concession stands dotted the area.

One tent had a red cross on it. They headed there. A healer touched Luke’s forehead and his injuries healed. A name tag said, Healer Sera.

“That’s incredible,” Luke exclaimed. “Is there anything you can’t heal? I don’t suppose you can cure brain tumors, can you?” He laughed, feeling embarrassed.

“You don’t have brain tumors dear,” Healer Sera frowned.

“Yes I do,” Luke argued. “The doctor showed me an x-ray. There are tumors in my visual cortex, auditory and pineal gland, among other things.”

“Those aren’t tumors dear,” Healer Sera replied. “They are brain structures you inherited from your parents. Didn’t your parents tell you about your unique heritage?”

“Does that mean those are real?” Luke asked, pointing at the bear and lion. “What about everyone’s hair and eye color?”

“Yes all this is real,” the healer said, looking intently at Annie. “Apparently you were adopted and raised by a human family. That’s strange. How did a human family adopt you? You should have been adopted by a wizard family. You must have driven your parents crazy, seeing imaginary creatures all around the place.”

“This Unknown Road is getting weirder every second,” Luke muttered as a wave of dizziness gripped him.

“You got that right Luke,” Millie said with pride. “That’s the difference between humans and wizards. Humans are always looking to find Pleasantville, while we wizards were born on the Unknown Road.”

“I was born in Pleasantville,” Luke replied and told them of his dream and the events that followed. That attracted a large group of curious people and spirit beasts.

“I wonder if this means that something interesting is going to happen,” a guy that looked like Santa Claws mused. “We’ll find out tomorrow when Prince James gives his speech.” He then laughed and his stomach jiggled like a bowl full of jelly.

Annie’s stomach growled. It was easy to hear since her stomach was inches from his ear. Luke’s stomach growled at the same time.

“Come, let’s go eat,” Millie said.

Luke waved bye to Healer Sera and they headed for the concession stands.

At the food stands, Luke discovered that the prices for the food were in Euros. Luke pulled out his wallet and found only US dollars.

“Why is everything in Euros?” Luke asked.

“Because we are in France,” Millie replied.

“How the hell did I land up in France?” Luke asked in surprise. He paused and then added, “That explains why everyone’s speaking French and why it’s evening here.”

“You obviously have the power of teleportation – an extremely rare talent,” Felix said. “I am a potentmancer and Millie is a pyromancer.”

“Don’t worry Luke,” Millie said. “I’ll pay for you. What would you like to eat?”

“Pizza or hamburgers, and thanks,” Luke replied.

“I’ll have the same,” Annie added.

“Did you say you want to eat people food?” Felix asked in surprise.

“That’s right, mister,” Annie replied. “My little tummy is hungry.”

“Okay,” Felix said, looking confused.

They ordered people food for Felix, Millie, Annie, and Luke. They got spirit beast food for Felix’s and Millie’s spirit beasts at another stand.

Food bought, the group found a table and sat down to eat. Annie stood in front of a medium coke that was bigger than her and a hamburger and fries. Nearby, people looked at her but didn’t comment.

Luke ate his burger and fries, curious to see how much of her burger Annie could finish. Despite her tiny mouth, her burger and fries disappeared faster than Luke’s.

Annie slurped the last of her coke and lay down on the table. Her stomach bulged into the air, making her look pregnant. She rubbed her stomach happily and said in her cute squishy voice, “That was good.” She was the picture of bliss.

All the weird events of the day rushed up to greet Luke. He closed his eyes, slumped against Millie, and fainted.

MC900065312[1]~

Luke awoke in bed. It was evening. “Damn. Those were some freaky dreams,” he muttered.

Yawning, Luke turned his head to the side and found Annie lying on his pillow. Her stomach was back to normal, and she was back to having a slender body. Luke jumped out of his bed in fright and screamed.

“Are you okay dear?” Jane called worriedly.

“Yes mum,” Luke replied hurriedly. “I just stubbed my toe.”

A moment later Jane entered the room. Annie jumped onto Luke’s shoulder and waved at Jane. “Hello mummy,” she called and smiled.

Luke was about to gag her, but then discover that Jane neither saw nor heard Annie.

Jane hugged Luke and said, “Tell me if you start hallucinating and we’ll rush you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine mother,” Luke said, not wanting to stress his mother more than necessary.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get that,” Jane said. “You just relax and get better.” She exited the room.

Feeling depressed, Luke sat back on the bed. How could he tell his mother that he was getting delusional and seeing tiny cat girls? And feeling them. He could feel Annie’s weight on his shoulder.

“How rude,” Annie said angrily and placed her hands on her hips. “I’m not heavy.” Luke was about to argue with his delusion, but changed his mind.

“Luke, your friend from school came to visit,” Jane called.

“Okay mum,” Luke replied. Who could that be? He didn’t have friends, since he was too shy, and everyone ignored him.

Felix entered the room and looked around. He noted the stacks of books on the floor and the overflowing bookshelves. Roma the purple bear sniffed the books and said, “What a boring life.”

“That’s quite a book collection,” Felix said, ignoring the bear. “I expect nothing less from the smartest boy in school,”

“Thank you Felix,” Jane said gratefully. “I’m glad he has good friends like you.”

“What’s the matter, Mrs. Russell? You seem sad,” Felix said.

“We discovered that Luke has brain tumors,” Joe said as he entered the room. “It’s been hard on all of us.”

“How do you know he has brain tumors, Mr. Russell?” Felix asked.

“I’ll show you,” Joe said and headed for his room. A minute later he came back with an envelope filled with x-ray charts. He showed them to Felix.

“This looks like an x-ray of my own brain,” Felix said. “I even have a soft spot on the top of my skull. Do you want to feel it?” Felix lowered his head for the parents’ inspection.

Joe tentatively touched the top of Felix’s head and then jerked his hand away.

“I don’t understand. How can you have the same condition?” Joe asked, confused.

“That’s not a condition,” Felix replied with a smile. “Luke and I are different from ordinary humans. There are millions of us. Those dark spots are nerve gangli-gangli-somethings-or-others. There are similar structures throughout our bodies. They are called chakras. It has something to do with quantum – I don’t understand the science mumbo jumbo. Legend has it that gods descended thousands of years ago and modified some humans. I am one of those descendents. Here, put these goggles on.” He handed goggles to the parents.

The parents looked uncertain but did as instructed.

Jane screamed and Joe took a startled step back.

“Don’t be afraid,” Felix said. “This is my friend Rona. He won’t hurt you.”

From the embedded speakers in the goggles, they heard the creature say, “Hello Luke’s parents. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Annie waved at the parents and said, “Hi mum, dad, I’m Princess Annie.”

Jane removed the goggles and said, “Can we please sit down?”

They headed to the living room to get comfortable. The parents put the goggles back on.

“I spoke to the elders of our people and they gave me permission to speak to you,” Felix said. “They also gave me those goggles for you to keep. Please don’t show them to anyone else. They are for your exclusive use, when you’re with your son.

“Annie and Rona are what we call spirit beasts. We summon them in a coming of age ceremony at the age of sixteen. It’s strange that Luke has one, since he’s only fifteen…”

“Would you like something to eat?” Jane asked. She removed the goggles and headed for the kitchen.

“Sorry Felix,” Joe said. “What you’re showing is overwhelming my wife – and me.”

“Don’t worry sir. I’m almost trough with my story,” Felix said.

Felix picked up the remote control and turned on the TV. They watched TV in silence as Jane fussed in the kitchen.

Finally Jane came back with a tray of food. A glass of coke lifted off the tray, floated into the air and tilted. It slowly drained into thin air.

Jane screamed and dropped the food, making a mess on the living-room floor.

“Mrs. Russell, please put your goggles back on,” Felix commanded.

Jane did as instructed and discovered the tiny cat girl floating in thin air, drinking the coke. She removed the goggles and the cat girl disappeared, but the glass remained hovering in mid-air. She placed the goggles back on and heard a cute squishy voice saying, “D-licious.”

Luke and Felix cleaned up the mess.

“Sorry about that Mrs. Russell,” Felix said. “Spirit beasts can be a little out of control when they are first born. Luke, tell your parents about your dream and your experiences up to now.”

The parents listened to the story, not knowing what to make of it.

“I hope I have laid your fears to rest about Luke’s health,” Felix said. “He is of the wizard race.”

“I don’t understand,” Joe said. “How did this happen? Both of us are ordinary humans and there’s no question that he’s our son. I saw him being born.”

“I don’t understand either,” Felix said. “However he is on the Unknown Road all wizards thread. It’s now impossible for him to ever reach Pleasantville.”

“But we were hoping he would marry Mary-Ann and have plenty of children,” Jane said sadly.

Mary-Ann was a sweet girl, but Luke found her annoying in her mundane way of looking at the world, and her lack of an adventurous spirit.

Felix looked at the indicated picture on the wall and whistled. “She’s a hottie. Luke, you were destined to live in Pleasantville. Unfortunately, your destiny has changed. Only heartbreak comes about when wizards and humans try to live together.

“Mr. and Mrs. Russell, I would like to take Luke to the wizard gathering,” Felix said. “Prince James will be making an important announcement. I promise to treat your son like my very own baby brother.”

“What do you think dear?” Jane asked.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Joe said. “The demonstration Felix gave us is very convincing. More importantly, Luke is healthy.”

“All right,” Jane said reluctantly. She then said, “Luke, remember to pack plenty of clean underwear. Also, take a shower every day and wash you-know-where.”

“Mother,” Luke exclaimed, feeling embarrassed. He headed for his room and Annie followed.

“Don’t forget your toothbrush,” Jane added.

“Tell us about yourself dear,” Jane said while they waited.

“Also, you and Luke’s hair and eyes look different when I look through these goggles. Why is that?” Joe asked.

“Hair color reflects the primary element a wizard yields, as well as their fundamental personality,” Rona the bear said. “Purple is the color of power and royalty. Luke’s silver color tells us that he’s a portalmancer. He can create portals to any location he has previously tagged.”

“I was born in Russia in a wizard family,” Felix began. “My life was filled with friendly spirit beasts such as Rona and scary ones such as that grim reaper over there,” Felix said, pointing out of the window.

On the street was a figure in a black hooded cloak. The bottom of the cloak was frayed and jagged. There were no feet. The reaper turned to them and exposed a skull for a face. Behind it a ghost followed. The ghost looked like a carton ghost with a white blobby cloud body with tail and black holes for eyes.

“That reaper is leading that soul to the afterlife, where it will choose to either reincarnate as a human, a wizard, or go on to another plane of existence,” Felix explained.

Just then a two foot tall black spider with glowing red eyes scurried across the living-room floor. It dove into the wall and disappeared. Ripples briefly appeared on the wall as a sign of its passage.

Jane screamed at the sight of the spider.

“What are those things made of?” Joe asked.

“Dark matter,” Felix replied. “Normally they can’t interact with regular matter. However, through the intervention of a wizard they can.”

“Does dark energy exist?” Joe asked.

“Of course,” Felix nodded. “That’s what we wizards use to do stuff. When I focus my mind, I can pull in the dark energy and then direct it. The energy interacts with the chakras within our bodies in different ways, giving each wizard unique abilities. As Rona said, I am a potentiomancer by nature. I have the natural ability to enhance or diminish the skills and abilities of those around me.”

“I went to school to learn about magic and spells, such as…” Felix focused and the lights turned off and then on. “Unfortunately, learning new spells can be challenging. As a result, most wizards rarely learn more than a few hundred spells in their life.

“Fortunately we have machines, so we don’t have to learn that many spells. One of the devices we have is the portal, which allowed me to come here from France to meet you. The nearest portal is in Seattle Center. I then drove here to Redmond from there.”

“What does your eye color signify?” Joe asked.

“I’m ready,” Luke said and entered the living room with a large backpack on his back. He had no problem carrying it since most of the time the backpack was filled with books and his laptop. Annie sat on his shoulder.

“Bye son,” Jane said and hugged Luke. “Be a good boy. Study your lessons well. Make plenty of friends. Also, I wouldn’t mind if you find a girlfriend.”

“I know you’ll make a great wizard when you grow up,” Joe said.

“Bye Luke’s parents,” Felix said. “People will contact you later.”

Luke waved goodbye to his parents and sat in the front seat of Felix’s pickup. The purple bear sat in the large truck bed and they drove off.

“Nice pickup,” Luke commented.

“Thanks Luke,” Felix replied.

As they drove away, the air seemed to distort and they appeared to recede into the distance faster than they were moving. Within moments the distortion disappeared and they were gone.

“Freaky,” Joe said and headed back into the house.

New adventures

Every step away from the familiar   
is one step on the Unknown Road

Luke focused on the golf course as they drove away. The traffic sounds disappeared and a deep silence fell upon the car. The silence became oppressive like before and Luke felt like he was travelling through a tunnel. Beyond the tunnel was a kaleidoscope of colors.

The tunnel effect disappeared and sound returned. They were back at the fairgrounds. No one was around and it was dark.

“That was freaky,” Felix exclaimed. “You really can teleport. Millie and I are staying at a nearby hotel. It’s 4:17 AM. It’s time for me to get some sleep.”

They left the fairgrounds. After a ten-minute drive Felix said, “Welcome to Switzerland. That city is Geneva, where we’ll be staying.”

They arrived at the hotel a short drive later. Stepping into a hotel room, Felix pointed at a bed and said, “You can take that one.” Felix took the other and slipped into bed.

Luke went to the washroom and examined his hair. It was silvery. More disturbingly, his eyes were electric yellow, just like Annie’s hair.

Annie pulled out a toothbrush from who knows where and began brushing. It was a strange sight, since the brush head was almost as big as her head.

After brushing his teeth, he tried to go to the toilet but couldn’t. That’s wasn’t surprising, since Annie was still sitting on his shoulder. It didn’t matter. He didn’t need to go.

Luke turned off the lights and went to bed. Annie rested on his stomach and went to sleep. Luke slept as well. The culture shock had drained his energy. It’s not every day that your world turned upside down.

Hours later Luke woke up when he felt Annie licking his face.

“Good, you’re awake. We can have breakfast and then hear the prince’s speech,” Felix said.

“I only have American currency, not Euros,” Luke confessed. He went to the washroom, changed and brushed his teeth. Moments later he stepped out, dressed for the day. Again he couldn’t use the little boy’s room.

“Don’t worry about that,” Felix reassured when Luke exited. “We’ll worry about that later.”

There was a knock at the door just as they finished. Felix opened the door and Millie entered.

“Hi Luke, did you sleep well?” Millie greeted with a smile.

Millie looked so cute and mature that Luke felt overwhelmed with shyness. He opened his mouth and only a squeak came out.

*What’s the matter with you Fool? You’re not asking her out on a date, and she has no interest in a brat.* Luke looked down, took a breath and asked, “Why are you taking care of me?”

“You’re so cute,” Millie said and gave him a hug. That was better than Luke expected.

Millie released Luke and continued. “You’re a brand new wizard, with no one to take care of. We talked to our parents and they said they will help you, since you’re still a minor and have no wizard family.

A spark of hope ignited.

“So you’re brother and sister?” Luke asked hopefully.

“No,” Millie replied. “He’s my boyfriend.”

The hope came crashing down. He knew it was too good to be true.

Millie rubbed Luke’s head and said, “Don’t worry. You’ll find a girl, someone your age.”

“I’m a girl,” Annie pointed out.

“No, you’re a doll someone created,” Luke replied. “Annie, who created you and why were you abandoned?”

“I don’t remember anything before seeing you Master,” Annie answered.

“You must have summoned her,” Felix suggested.

“Why would I summon a sixteen-inch-tall cat girl?” Luke asked. “Also, even if I knew it was possible, I wouldn’t know how to do it. There has to be another reason why she’s here. Then again, there has to be a reason why I’ve become a wizard, even though I was born human.”

“You think too much,” Felix said. “Who cares why it happened? Just enjoy the ride.”

“And that’s why you had such bad grades in school,” Millie scolded.

There was a knock on the door. Felix opened it and four adults entered.

“This is my mum and dad and those are Millie’s parents,” Felix said. “Let’s go eat.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Luke said.

“Dear, I heard that you’re a new wizard,” Felix’s mother said as she and the others followed Felix to the hotel’s restaurant. “What do you know about the wizard world?”

“Almost nothing ma’am,” Luke replied. “I was told that wizards are genetically modified humans, and the organs in our bodies can manipulate dark matter and energy, and we have spirit beasts as pets or something.”

They arrived at the restaurant and got food from the buffet style breakfast table. The spirit beasts got food specially prepared for them. The wizards and Annie got people food.

The group sat at a table and ate. Everyone in the room looked at Annie eating while pretending not to.

Felix’s mother began her story. “According to legend, over fifty thousand years ago gods came and modified a select group of humans. It is an extremely dangerous process. Those without the proper elements in their psyches couldn’t tolerate the process. Less than one percent survived.

“Those who survived the process discovered that they had strange powers. With the help of the gods, they created a global empire. They learnt the 20 basic categories of wizardry, and the process of summoning spirit beasts.

“Dear, do you know what Platonic solids are?”

“Yes ma’am,” Luke replied. “There are five of them. We have the four-sided tetrahedron or pyramid, the six-sided hexahedron or cube, the eight-sided octahedron, the twelve-sided dodecahedron, and the twenty-sided icosahedron.”

“Very good,” Felix’s mother praised. The other adults were equally impressed.

“All of natural law can be described in terms of geometry and mathematics. These laws control how forces and objects interact. Sorry, I’m getting off topic.

“We wizards can focus the dark energy through our chakras, and use it to manipulate dark matter. Unfortunately, dark matter doesn’t like to clump like regular matter, and so it takes an enormous quantity of energy to do something big, like summoning a spirit beast. As a result, every spring equinox, we draw on the power of the entire community to help our sixteen-year-old children to summon their spirit beast.

“It’s a coming of age ceremony that everyone looks forward to. I can still remember when I summoned Sera. She is my best friend.”

Sera sat beside her master. She was a mermaid with purple hair, purple eyes, and purple tail. She wore a purple tank-top.

Looking around, Luke noticed that most spirit beasts were of the same gender as their masters. That made Luke self-conscious. He hoped that people didn’t think that he was strange.

“But there are spirit beasts everywhere,” Luke objected.

“True,” Felix’s mother replied. “However, you can’t just tame one. In the summoning ritual, the teen releases a signal into the world and a spirit beast responds. If you look closely, wild spirit beasts feel alien. Companions, on the other hand feel familiar. Also you can always tell who a spirit beast belongs to.”

“Yes I notice now,” Luke replied. He refrained from mentioning the gender difference. Instead he asked, “Why is Annie’s hair yellow?”

“It happens on occasionally, and it is more common when biological genders differ. However, note how your eye color and her hair color are the same. Your yellow eyes tell me your secondary element is lightning and you are good with computers and electronics.

“Annie is aligned with water, and nature. However, her alignments are weaker than if she had both eyes of the same color.

“Felix has both primary and secondary elements as purple, so his element is extra strong.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Millie’s dad replied.

“In the time of the beginning, people with a strange power were born,” Felix’s mother continued. “They had the Power element. They had the natural ability to lead and could both enhance and diminish the power of other people. Not surprisingly, they rose to positions of authority and became kings.

“In the beginning these people appeared randomly, but later only kings sired them.

“Twelve thousand years ago, a major world war broke out, threatening the world. The gods intervened, and gave us one fundamental law. We must not interfere in the lives of humans. Previously, wizards treated humans worse than animals and threatened their extinction. The gods stopped casual contact, presumably to observe how their experiment would progress.

“Unfortunately, since the war destroyed civilization, we have few records of that age.

“The kings established territories and these became our current countries, eventually.

“As you can see, I have purple hair,” Felix’s mother continued. “This is the outward sign that I am the king of Russia. Felix, having purple hair, will take over when I retire. For the record I am King Helga Jameson, and my husband is Queen Leyland.”

Luke giggled at the idea of a man being called a queen.

“In the wizard world, the title of king and queen doesn’t refer to gender, but to power. The king yields the power element and the queen is the spouse of the king,” Helga explained.

“Sorry,” Luke apologized, blushing.

“Most countries are divided up into states, provinces or parishes,” Helga continued. “Noble families came into being to preside over these areas. Harry is the duke of the state of Washington in the United States. Susan is the duchess of Washington.

“That gives Millie the title of princess, since she is the daughter of the reigning duke. My son is crown prince.”

“So I just happened to come across royalty, and they just happened to befriend me,” Luke said in surprise.

“There are no coincidences dear,” Helga said. “Felix should have mentioned that,” she scolded.

“Who cares?” Felix shrugged. “Nobility and royalty aren’t that important. I mean we haven’t had an emperor since forever, and the world is fine.”

“Emperors have the ability to draw on the power of everyone on earth,” Helga explained. “We haven’t had one since just before World War I.

“Since the line of succession has been broken, there is no telling when or where the next one will come.”

A fleeting thought in Luke’s brain said, ‘*perhaps I’m the one.’*

As expected, Annie heard the thought. She fell down on her back and laughed. She her held her stomach and waved her legs in the air in merriment and said, “You, the emperor of the world? That’s the funniest thing I heard in my first two days of life.”

Feeling embarrassed, Luke tried to grab her. She scooted away and continued laughing.

“The emperor is distinguished by having one white eye with a black pupil and one black eye with a white pupil,” Helga explained. “And the lack of an emperor is no laughing matter. It could cause another world war, or worse.”

“Like it did world war 1 and 2,” Luke said, nodding.

“How am I supposed to address you? Is it okay for a commoner to associate with you?” Luke asked.

“Of course dear,” Helga assured. “Our children have taken a liking to you, so treat them as you did before.”

“If you say so, majesty,” Luke said uncertainly.

“Don’t worry about stupid titles Luke,” Felix said and gave Luke a hug. “I like you and that’s the only thing that matters.”

Millie gave Luke a hug from the other side and said, “I like you too.”

“I want a hug too,” Annie called and hugged Luke’s face.

“You made fun of me and now you want a hug?” Luke asked, still feeling upset that she embarrassed him.

“That’s only because I love you,” Annie replied by way of an apology.

He couldn’t stay angry at her. She was only a baby.

Annie got off and headed for more food.

“She’s quite a glutton,” Susan commented.

“She’s a growing girl,” Luke defended.

“It’s fascinating to see her eat so much,” Leyland said. “You have an interesting spirit beast.”

“Thank you,” Luke said, flattered.

Annie finished eating and then preened herself like a cat. She then jumped on Luke’s head and said, “Let’s go everyone. It’s time for some fun.”

“It’s hard to see where I’m going with your feet dangling in front of my eyes,” Luke complained.

Annie switched to sitting cross-legged and said, “Let’s go chauffeur.”

“Yes master,” Luke said and got up.

Everyone headed out to the parking lot. They drove down the road, crossed the border and entered France. Moments later they were at the fairgrounds and parked their rides. It was the same area Luke first arrived. Comfortable chairs were set for them.

“Butterfly,” Annie said excitedly and chased after the creature. “Don’t go away pretty butterfly. I just want to hug you.”

“Don’t wander off too far Annie,” Luke called worriedly. “I don’t want you getting lost.”

“Don’t worry Luke,” Susan reassured. “A spirit beast always knows where its master is, and security has ensured that there are no dangerous spirit beasts around.”

Just then giant screens appeared in the sky. Prince James appeared and smiled at the audience. “Greetings, fellow wizards,” he greeted. “Thank you for coming.”

“Prince James is the last emperor’s descendent and our current surrogate emperor. People are pushing to name him full emperor,” Helga explained.

“Last month one of our wizard nano-probes disappeared,” the prince continued. “We don’t know who stole it or why. My sweet baby sister was so worried that she suggested we speak to the oracle. Annie, Donna and I entered the oracle’s chamber and the oracle spoke.

“It said that a time of testing is upon us. However, before we could continue, we would have to make a sacrifice. Without hesitation my sweet sister happily offered to be that sacrifice,” Prince James said and got choked up.

An attractive woman, who appeared to be James’s wife, stepped up and comforted him.

By now everyone was in shock and horror.

“Princess Annie was much loved by everyone,” Susan said, visibly disturbed by the tragic news.

“Why is everyone’s so sad?” Annie asked.

“Because Prince James’s baby sister was sacrificed to the gods,” Helga replied.

“What does sacrifice mean?” Annie asked.

“It means killing someone to appease the gods,” Luke replied.

“What does killing mean?” Annie asked.

Luke wasn’t sure if Annie was being bratty, or if she really didn’t understand. “It means sending someone away, never to be seen again,” Luke tried to explain.

“That’s so sad,” Annie said, finally understanding. “Will you one day go away?”

“Yes Annie,” Luke said. “That is the fate of all people.”

On screen, the wife continued, “Annie disappeared before our eyes and the oracle spoke. It said the sacrifice was accepted and it would make an announcement on the summer solstice.”

The camera zoomed out to show the entire stage.

A wrinkly old woman without eyes appeared out of thin air on the stage. She sat on a rough-hewn wooden chair. The camera zoomed in on her and she spoke.

“Find the consort of the emperor and you shall find the emperor,” the oracle intoned in a creepy voice.

“We shall give you a series of challenges you are obligated to participate in. If even one of you should succeed, then the way to the stars shall open out to your race. If no one succeeds, than your race will die and we shall implant nano-probes in all humans, and observe how they fare,” the oracle continued.

There was a pause as people digested the message.

*‘So I got the missing nano-probe’*, Luke mused. He didn’t say anything since the oracle was discussing the fate of the world.

The oracle continued. “The candidates for the competition shall be anyone who won who should have lost.”

The assembled people broke into argument. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Felix asked to no one in particular.

No one answered so Luke did.

“When I was in grade school, I participated in a race with students in my class,” Luke began. “The race was simple. The students would cross the gym, run back, and then go back again.

“Everyone crossed the gym and went back. Being the slowest, I was the last to reach them. Then I noticed something strange. No one was moving, even though the race wasn’t over. I hesitantly ran the last lap and won the race. I won even though I should have lost.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

“So everyone thought that there were only two legs to the race, when in fact there were three,” Millie nodded. “So you won because you were smarter than them.”

“No,” Luke disagreed. “The instructions were clear.”

“Luke is right,” Helga said. “The first one or two might have been confused. That doesn’t explain why everyone stopped.

“The only reason everyone stopped was because they assumed the others were right and just followed the herd, allowing Luke to win, proving he was an independent thinker. It also proved he can win despite all odds.”

The oracle spoke. “Of the around 146 million wizards in the world, some 23 thousand wizards have been chosen as champions to represent your race in this challenge. Those who refuse to participate will forfeit their lives.”

A shiver ran down Luke’s spine. He was now in a life or death challenge, where the future of the world was at stake.

“That’s not fair,” Helga said angrily. “Luke is only a little boy.”

“I’m fifteen,” Luke said defensively.

“The first challenge will be a test of courage,” the oracle continued. “Each of you will have a different challenge. You have one week to complete it.” The oracle disappeared.

A golden card appeared in front of Luke. He nervously picked it out of the air. His face then went white as he read the one sentence on the card. He looked terrified.

Felix grabbed the card from Luke’s hand and read it out loud. “Ask Jennifer out on a date. Who’s Jennifer?”

“Only a girl I’ve had a crush on since forever,” Luke confessed. “For the longest time I’ve wanted to ask her out on a date but I’ve been too scared. I don’t think it’s possible for me to do this.”

The screens once again showed the prince. “Good luck Champions. The future of the wizard race, as well as all people on Earth rests on you.” The screen disappeared.

“Don’t worry Luke,” Millie reassured. “We’ll help you ask her out.”

Felix gave Luke a big grin and said, “We need to get rid of that virginity of yours as soon as possible.”

“Don’t be a pig Felix,” Helga scolded.

“Where is she now?” Millie asked.

“She works at the Dress Barn,” Luke said.

Overhead an announcer said, “Greetings people, we shall begin the spirit beast summoning ceremony in an hour. Families, make sure your kids are ready.”

“Come on Luke, the faster you do this, the faster we can get it over with,” Millie said.

“But it’s the middle of the night over there,” Luke complained.

“We can wait a few hours,” Felix said. “That’s no big deal.”

“I thought wizards and humans can’t date,” Luke argued, trying to find more excuses.

“Stop being a crybaby,” Annie scolded. That sounded weird coming from her. “How can you become emperor of the world with that attitude? Beside you’re not going to marry her.”

“Who said I want to be emperor of the world?” Luke grumbled.

“Come on let’s go Luke,” Felix said and grabbed him by the arm. “Bye mum, dad, see you later,” he called as he headed for his car, with Luke in toe.

“Bye mum, dad,” Millie said as well and followed the two.

The three got in and drove off.

After ten minutes on the road, Felix asked, “What’s the matter Luke? You need to concentrate and take us to your town.”

“I know,” Luke grumbled. He didn’t really want to go back. He thought of returning home, but he didn’t feel like that either.

Luke thought of his parents. They would cry if something happened to him. He focused on what was important and visualized his home.

Unfortunately, that didn’t work. “You can do it,” Annie whispered in his ear. He held her in his arms like a doll. *Why do I need to do this? I don’t need to date since I’m only fifteen, and I have Princess Annie to cuddle with.*

Food – There was a restaurant in Redmond he loved. He could take his friends there to eat.

With that thought the world became silent. The tunnel effect enveloped them and they drilled their way through the Earth to the restaurant. The kaleidoscope outside the tunnel was still there like before, but now he felt he was travelling through the mantle of the earth.

A fleeting thought came. What if they got stranded in the middle of the planet? The tunnel wobbled in response to Luke’s nervousness. His fears were disrupting their passage. Panic set in and Luke focused on their destination. Fortunately they were almost there.

The tunnel curved and approached the destination. They slowed in preparation for exit. The tunnel effect dispersed and they arrived at a parking lot.

Heart still beating fast, Luke gave directions on how to get home. In minutes they were at the house. “You two can sleep in my room. I’ll sleep on the couch,” Luke said as he stepped out of the car.

“We can’t sleep together,” Millie complained. “We aren’t married.”

“What? You’ve never done it?” Luke asked in surprise. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that,” he apologized and blushed. “Then Millie can sleep in my room and Felix and I will sleep in the living-room.”

Luke checked his phone. “It’s 2:35AM,” he said and opened the door.

Night time preparations done, Luke slid under the blanket in the living room and closed his eyes. Unfortunately he couldn’t sleep. The very important meeting was stressing him out.

Fear

Some fears are justified,   
but most aren’t

Luke woke at 10:37AM, Saturday morning.

“Morning sleepy head,” Jane called. “How come you’re not sleeping in your room?”

“Felix’s girlfriend Millie is sleeping there,” Luke replied. “I’m going to take them to the mall.”

“Okay dear,” Jane said. “Have breakfast before you go. What happened to your dolly?”

“That’s not a doll mum,” Luke said, feeling embarrassed. “She’s a living creature who chose to be with me for reasons I don’t understand.”

“Here dear, put this on,” Joe said and handed Jane her goggles.

She donned her goggles and saw Annie, as well as two other spirit beasts.

Annie waved to Jane and said, “Hi mum.” She gave Jane’s face a hug.

“I can feel her,” Jane said, surprised. She picked Annie off her face and looked at her carefully. “She’s like a real doll. She’s very pretty.”

“Thank you,” Luke replied, and then felt embarrassed.

“I’m starving,” Annie said. “Let’s eat.”

Millie entered and said, “Hi Mr. Russell, Mrs. Russell, I’m Millie Rockefeller. This is my partner Gracie.”

“Pleased to meet you dear,” Jane greeted. “I’ll make sandwiches. What do your friends eat?” she asked, referring to Millie’s and Felix’s partners.

“They don’t eat people food,” Millie said. “Annie is unusual. She’s the only spirit beast I know that eats people food. She also eats as much as a normal person.”

“Hey, I’m a growing girl,” Annie said angrily.

Jane entered the kitchen and began preparations. Lunch prepared, they sat at the table.

Joe stared at Annie in wonder. “It’s hard to believe she can eat more than her body weight in food.”

“And not gain a pound,” Jane added.

Luke nodded. “She’s like an anime character.”

“Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Russell,” Felix said. “It’s time for us to leave. Come on Luke.”

They exited and drove away.

“Chill out Luke,” Felix said. “Talking to girls is the easiest thing in the world.”

“Perhaps for a cool guy like you,” Luke sulked.

“You’re such a kid,” Felix laughed. “Remember, women like men who are strong. Demonstrate that strength and you can get any woman. The trick is to take what you want and she will be putty in your hands.”

“Don’t teach Luke your bad habits,” Millie scolded.

Felix just laughed.

They entered the mall parking lot and found as spot. Felix guided Luke in and they approached the store.

“There she is,” Luke said quietly.

“Damn, she’s hot,” Felix whistled. Millie kicked Felix in the shin and he hastily added, “But not as hot as you.”

“That’s better,” Millie said. “Now go and ask her out on a date.”

Luke opened his mouth but nothing came out. Felix shoved him and he reluctantly approached. He could feel the gaze of his new friends boring into his head. He was trapped. He couldn’t go forward and he couldn’t go back.

Two ladies bumped him as they entered the Dress Barn. ‘*Okay Luke*,*’* Luke said to himself. ‘*I’m just buying a dress for my mother.’*

With lie in place, he entered the store. He then walked next to Jennifer while pretending he was looking at dresses. Jennifer turned around and almost bumped into him.

“Oops, I’m sorry,” Jennifer apologized. A moment later she recognized him. “Hi Luke, what brings you here?”

“You know me?” Luke asked in surprise.

“Of course,” Jennifer replied. “You’re the smartest boy in school. What brings you here? Are you buying a dress for your mommy?”

“I…I….I…” Luke sputtered.

Annie kicked Luke hard in the back of the head. “Will you go out with me?” Luke blurted out.

Jennifer looked at Luke in surprise. “I’m sorry Luke but I’m already seeing someone.”

Luke had the overwhelming urge to flee in embarrassment. He felt a sharp pain in his head the moment he turned his head towards the door. Annie had once again kicked him in the head.

“That’s okay Jennifer,” Luke said with a smile as he regained his composure.

“You’re a cute boy,” Jennifer consoled. “I’m sure you’ll find a nice girl. I know you will.”

Luke smiled and said, “Thank you. See you around.” He waved bye and left.

Luke approached his friends and they greeted him with a hug.

“I knew you could do it big guy,” Felix said as he messed up Luke’s hair.

“I don’t remember ever being more terrified in my entire life,” Luke confessed.

“But you did do it,” Millie said happily.

“It’s all thanks to Annie,” Luke replied. “If it weren’t for her, I never could have done it.”

“What did she say?” Millie asked.

“She didn’t say anything. She just kicked me in the head. With her I’ll either become the bravest person in the world, or my skull will crack open like an egg,” Luke said and rubbed his bruised head.

“It helps if you wear army boots,” Annie explained in her cute squishy voice and showed steel-clad Frankenstein-monster-like boots to the gang.

Felix laughed. A moment later a card appeared in front of them. Luke picked it out of the air and read it. “Congratulations Luke,” Luke read aloud. “You have overcome and will be allowed to move on. Keep in mind that the battle with fear is eternal.” The card disappeared.

“What’s the matter Luke?” Millie asked.

“If we fail, billions of people will die and I have a feeling this might be my easiest challenge,” Luke replied.

“It’s all right Luke,” Annie said and hugged Luke’s face. “I’m here for you.”

“Thanks Annie,” Luke said and rubbed her head.

“All this excitement has made me hungry,” Annie said.

“You’re always hungry,” Luke said with a laugh. “Okay we’ll go to my favorite restaurant. It’s an all-you-can eat Chinese restaurant, perfect for a tiny piggy.”

“I’m not a piggy,” Annie said angrily. “I’m a cat.”

“I’ve never seen a cat eat like you can,” Luke said.

Annie replied by blowing a strawberry.

“I’m just teasing you Annie,” Luke said. “I’m just happy this challenge is over. Now let’s go eat. I’m paying.”

“If you’re paying, then I’m eating,” Annie said.

The gang headed out. Soon enough they arrived at the restaurant. Entering, the waiter showed them to a table set for four people, and the gang went to the serving line.

Annie grabbed a plate and lifted it. People screamed and moved out of the way. Luke grabbed the plate and said, “Damn it. Isn’t there a way to make – disguise Annie as a human so we don’t freak people out?”

“There are illusion pendants, as well as spells,” Millie said.

“For the time being I’ll help Annie get food and let’s hope no one notices,” Luke said. “Annie, tell me what you want.”

Food in hand, they sat at their table and ate.

“This food is excellent,” Felix said. “I have to come back again.”

“Yup,” Annie said as she stuffed her face. “Okay servant, get me another plate and pile it high with only the best.”

“Yes master,” Luke said and headed for more food. He returned with two plates and Annie continued eating.

“I’m stuffed,” Millie said. “I don’t think I can eat anything more.”

“Of course you can,” Annie said. “There’s always room for jell-o.”

Luke finished eating and just stared at Annie. She was covered with food and she was having a glorious time eating. There was something about Annie that was bothering him.

Everyone finished eating and Luke paid for four people. The waiter was surprised and Luke had to explain that the fourth person had left.

As they left the restaurant, Luke looked at Annie. She was clean once again and her hair was perfect as usual. That wasn’t surprising since she was a cat spirit. Something else was bothering Luke.

While driving back to Luke’s place, Luke blurted out, “Annie should be visible.”

“Why do you say that?” Millie asked.

“Because of the amount of food she has eaten,” Luke replied. “There is a saying, ‘You are what you eat.’ She has eaten regular food, so she should be visible to ordinary people.”

“I don’t know about that,” Felix said. “However, you’re a smart guy so you must be right.”

They arrived home and entered. The parents were out in the yard doing work. “Hi dear,” Jane said. “That was fast. Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes mum,” Luke replied. “I guess I should be leaving. I have studying to do. There’s so much wizards my age know that I know nothing about. See you later mum and dad,” Luke said and gave his mum a kiss.

“How come I can see Annie? I don’t have my goggles on,” Joe asked.

“She ate too much people food,” Luke said. “She’ll turn invisible again if she eats spirit beast food. I think.”

“What will happen if people ate that?” Joe asked.

Millie said, “I tried some as a little girl. It tasted disgusting. Then I got scolded, but no one mentioned what would happen.”

“I guess they didn’t want you to eat pet food,” Felix suggested.

“No,” Joe mused. “Stories about the Fey forbade people from eating their food. Those who do were whisked into the land of Fey, never to be seen again.”

“Scary,” Felix exclaimed.

“How do you know so much?” Millie asked.

“We aren’t as separated as you might think,” Jane said. “We do share the same planet. I’m sure I passed wizards on the street countless timed, without knowing.”

“There are some 146 million wizards in the world,” Luke said. “A war nearly destroyed the planet over 12 thousands ago.”

“Atlantis,” Joe said, nodding his head.

“After that, the gods forbade wizards from interfering with humans,” Luke said.

“That makes perfect sense from a historical and biblical perspective,” Joe said. “It also explains features archaeologists refuse to admit.”

“This is so exciting,” Jane exclaimed. “I can’t wait to reexamine human history.”

They waved bye and drove off.

“Do know what?” Luke asked. “I know nothing about wizard culture and I know nothing about Annie, who seems different from other – did she turn visible because I assumed she should turn visible or because of the food? She was invisible when we left the restaurant. No one saw her.”

Luke focused on the hotel.

“Being a wizard isn’t always fun,” Felix said. “All of us get challenged starting when we reach…”

The sound of Felix’s voice disappeared as the tunnel opened and they entered. Luke stared out the window at the kaleidoscope of colors. This time he intentionally ignored the trip through the planet. A moment later they were out.

“…puberty. By the way, let’s go back to the hotel to get our stuff, and then we can go to my parents place,” Felix continued as if there was no interruption.

“What challenge did you receive when you reached puberty?” Millie asked.

“I became extremely shy when I turned twelve,” Luke said. “The more self-conscious I got, the more I felt as if there was a spotlight shinning on me. I felt as if I had an absolute existence that was beyond the physical.

“To me, my existence is the greatest treasure in the universe, filling me with eternal gratitude.

“I’ve been trying to figure out the meaning of existence ever since. The good news is that I now know souls exist, but I still don’t know what souls are.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

“That’s interesting,” Millie said. “How many humans do you think have woken up to true self awareness?”

“I doubt more than one percent of the human population,” Luke replied as they got out of the car. “Most people seem to take their own existence for granted. They think God and souls are external to then.

“I mentioned this to one guy. He said it’s natural for teenagers to feel self-conscious, and that it would go away.

“Are you saying that is the true reason I survived being implanted by the lost nano-probe?”

“That’s right,” Millie agreed. “Self-awareness is the key. Around ten percent of wizard children die when they reach puberty, because they don’t have what it takes to be a wizard.”

“That’s horrible,” Luke exclaimed.

“I know,” Millie agreed. “On the bright side, wizards never die from chronic illness and old age. They only die from failed challenges.”

“What a ruthless society,” Luke said in disapproval.

“I know,” Felix said in resignation. “We have no say in the matter. The gods do that for reasons no one understands.”

“Most wizards consider humans to be nothing more than animals,” Millie said. “Only the law of non-interference has protected them throughout the centuries.”

“Many of my friends and relatives would be happy if all humans were injected with the nano-probes,” Felix said. He unlocked the hotel room door and they entered.

Luke grabbed his backpack and they headed out. “I just got up two hours ago and now it is night. I’m not ready to go to sleep.”

“I guess that’s the downside of travelling around the world,” Felix agreed. “Don’t worry. We don’t do world travelling all the time.”

“Except right now,” Millie said. “We still need to go to Russia.”

“We’ll take the portal to Saint Petersburg. The closest portal is in the Hermitage,” Felix said as they drove away.

“Have you been to the Louvre?” Millie asked. “It’s too bad it’s closed now. Many of the masters such as Van Gough were wizards.”

“Van Gough went mad and committed suicide,” Luke commented. “Don’t forget the ear thing.”

“Well, no one ever said being a wizard was easy,” Felix said a matter-of-factly.

“The good news is, we don’t spend all our time on the Unknown Road,” Millie assured Luke. “Most of the time we live ordinary lives like regular humans.”

“The closest portal is under the University of Geneva,” Felix said as they drove.

Luke gazed out the window and thought of Paris, the city of love. He wanted a girl. Puberty was a pain.

Annie stuck her head out the window. Her hair flowed gracefully back like ribbons in the wind.

Within minutes they arrived at the university. They stopped in front of a non-descript garage entrance that was marked as closed.

Felix placed his credit card against a card reader on a nearby concrete pillar.

“Where to, Prince Felix?” a voice asked.

“The Hermitage please, with a detour to the main shaft,” Felix replied.

The barrier lowered and they drove in. The passageway headed downwards and then turned to the left. In front of them was a silvery distortion in the tunnel. They drove through.

On the other side was another tunnel, perhaps 100 feet in width. Lining the tunnel was portals to other places. Felix followed a line on the ground into a main area. It was a huge shaft several thousand feet in diameter. A spiral ramp, at least 500 feet wide, encircled the shaft. Various types of vehicles zoomed past on the ramp. Flying vehicles went up and down the central shaft. The place was bustling with traffic.

Felix stopped his pickup at the railing of the ramp and got out. The others joined him at the railing.

Luke glanced down a bottomless pit and got vertigo. Looking up, the shaft seemed endless.

“This is called Nexus. It’s the convergence point for all that is. Freaky, isn’t it, how anyone could build this place?” Felix said excitedly. “This is just one of many shafts. Most of the paths are closed off to humans. If one of you succeeds, then a few of these doors will open up to us. I love visiting because it’s so cool. What do you think of this place?”

“I don’t know,” Luke replied nervously. “It’s giving me a strange sensation, as if I’m cut off from the rest of the world. I can see this giant shaft with people coming and going from those corridors.

“But this isn’t just a freakishly huge building. I feel this place is something that is beyond my comprehension. This place is starting to give me the willies.”

“Maybe we should go,” Millie said nervously. “Portalmancers have senses we don’t have. Being outside of the universe for too long isn’t a good idea for him.”

“I’m sorry,” Felix said worriedly as he reentered the pickup. The others got in and Felix followed the path. They returned to the tunnel they came from and entered a portal.

“Home sweet home,” Luke sighed.

“You’ve lived in Saint Petersburg?” Felix asked in surprise.

“No,” Luke denied. “I live on planet Earth and I’m happy to be back. That place was starting to get to me. It was so…I don’t know. I think what we saw was illusion for the convenience of us mere mortals.”

Felix didn’t know what to say so he said, “Welcome to the Hermitage, one of the most beautiful museums in the world.”

They drove on and parked. “This is the Winter Palace.” They entered and approached a guard sitting at a security desk.

The guard got up and said, “Evening Prince Felix, Princess Millie.”

“Evening Igor,” Felix said. “This is Luke. Do you have a room for him?”

“Yes highness,” Igor said. “Here is his key. I’ll show you the room.”

They walked up a marble staircase and entered a hallway lined with Renaissance paintings. They entered a wing off limits to the general public.

“This is your room sir,” Igor said.

“Thank you Igor,” Felix replied courteously. “Have a good night.”

“You too, highnesses, honored guest,” Igor said and left.

“My room is there, my parent’s room is there and Millie’s room is there,” Felix said, pointing out the important landmarks. “Most of the rooms are empty. It gets lonely living in a museum but what can we do?”

Luke unlocked the room and entered a bedroom built for a prince. The carpet was richer than the one outside. Several paintings lined the walls, including a Rembrandt Luke recognized from a book. Priceless artifacts filled the room.

Annie dashed in and looked around. She spotted the bed and jumped onto it.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to stay in such a fancy place?” Luke asked nervously.

Felix just shrugged. “I’m sorry this room is so pompous, but this palace was built for the emperor of Russia, and the Hermitage is an historical landmark. Don’t worry about making a mess. This room was meant to be lived in.”

“Tomorrow morning we’ll give you a tour of the place,” Millie promised.

“I don’t suppose you have internet?” Luke asked. “It doesn’t matter. I have some e-books to read.”

“We have internet,” Felix replied. “The network password is Millie, with a capital M.”

“Thanks,” Luke said. “I don’t think I could go to sleep. I just got up.”

“Luke, I need to give you a word of warning about this palace,” Felix said. For the first time Felix was serious. “You must never leave your room between 2:00 AM and 4:00 AM, ever. 3:00 AM is the witching hour when the barrier between worlds is thinnest. Not even the guards come out then. It’s that dangerous.”

“If you wanted me to wet myself, congratulations, you just did,” Luke responded, feeling terrified. “Why are we staying here instead of a regular house or mansion?”

“That can’t be helped,” Felix sighed. “One of the jobs of the nobility and royalty of the world is to maintain the balance of the world. The mystical focal point of Russia is here at the Hermitage.

“All nobility and royalty of this country are required to stay here at least one night a year. The same is true of all visiting nobility and royalty. My parents, on the other hand, are required to spend at least one lunar month a year here.”

Feeling terrified, Luke pleaded, “Seeing that I am a commoner, I would rather stay at a hotel. At least there evil spirits don’t walk the corridors.”

“I’m sorry Luke but you’re not a commoner,” Millie said.

“Don’t be stupid,” Luke shouted in terror. “I *am* a commoner. My parents are commoners. Their parents were commoners. There is no wizard blood in our family and I was born a human. I am as common as they come. You are nobles and royals because of your blood. There is nothing special about my blood.”

“It’s all right Luke,” Millie said gently. “Would you like us to stay with you tonight?”

“That would be nice, although a hotel would be nicer,” Luke nodded and wiped sweat from his forehead. He watched as Annie rolled on the bed and played with a ball of twine. She was entangled and struggled to get free. Where did that ball of twine come from?

Felix took out his cell and dialed. “I need a favor. I need a spare bed moved into my room for tonight…Thanks.” He hung up. “Put your stuff away and we’ll say hi to my parents.”

“What time is it?” Luke asked.

“It’s 11:23 PM,” Felix said, frowning. “My parents are sleeping. Tomorrow we can go clubbing.”

“But I’m only fifteen,” Luke objected, forgetting for a moment his fear.

“Don’t worry about that,” Felix said. “Being a wizard may not always be easy, but it can be fun.”

“There are plenty of things to do in this city that doesn’t involve alcohol,” Millie chided.

“Yes, but where’s the fun in that?” Annie asked. Luke laughed.

“I need to put my stuff away,” Millie said.

“Me too,” Felix said.

The two and their spirit beasts headed for their rooms while Luke got ready for the night.

Pajamas on, Luke setup his laptop and surfed the net. Annie sat cross-legged on the table in front of the laptop.

“Luke, the bed is set up,” Felix said.

“Okay Felix,” Luke said. “It’s past twelve. I guess I need to go to sleep.”

Luke got up and followed Felix out of the room.

Felix’s room was similar to Luke’s, except that it had personal touches. The room also had two king sized beds.

“Don’t you have beds in sizes other than huge?” Luke asked. “It must have been a pain getting that in.”

Felix shrugged. “They tend to be overeager to please.”

“We should go to sleep,” Millie said and got in Felix’s bed. Their two spirit beasts rested on the floor, unable to join their masters on the bed.

Luke got into the second bed and Annie curled up in a ball on Luke’s stomach.

Felix turned off the lights and went to bed too. It was now dark.

Luke lay in bed listening to Annie breathing. He couldn’t get to sleep since it was afternoon for him. Also, he wasn’t used to sleeping on his back, and he didn’t want to disturb his little cat friend.

Someone walked slowly down the hallway, whistling a lonely tune. Luke checked his cell phone. It was 2:36 AM. That meant that no one should be in the hall. Who could that be?

There was a crashing sound and Luke almost jumped out of his skin. Shadows moved outside as the winds blew.

Luke felt fear rising in him. There were monsters out there wandering the hallways and lurking in the shadows of the night.

A chilling thought entered Luke head. *What if my powers pull in those creatures? Would my powers break whatever protection spells they had in place?*

Luke felt the barrier between the mortal world and some hell dimension weakening. His fears were accelerating the process. If he didn’t do anything, he would plummet into the pit of hell and be trapped forever.

Even now creatures of the night were closing on him, waiting for 3:00 AM, when they were free to drag him down into the depts.

Something scurried across the room making soft clicking sounds.

Luke lay on his side as the shadows seemed to take on a tangible form. Annie pressed against Luke’s back, protecting his back from monsters.

The moon broke out behind clouds, illuminating the room with its silver light. It also highlighted things sane people didn’t believe in.

Luke wished desperately that he was back home where magic didn’t exist, and neither did monsters. Closing his eyes, he imagined a bubble of sunlight surrounding him and Annie. His friends didn’t need help since they were protected by slumber.

Slowly time ticked on. It was the longest night of his life.

It’s a Wizard’s Life

There’s more to a wizard’s life   
than scary monsters

Luke woke to find Annie licking his fact. Her tiny whiskers tickled his nose. Morning light shone through the window. Luke groggily got out of bed.

Annie went on all fours and stretched, and then walked about with her feline grace.

“Luke, did you have a good night’s sleep? There’s nothing like sleeping in your own bed,” Felix greeted Luke with a yawn.

“Sure, if you don’t mind being surrounded by monsters,” Luke replied. “I’m glad I’m a commoner. I better change.”

Luke went to his room, brushed his teeth and changed. “Well Annie, let’s eat and then explore. This is going to be fun. Very few people can say they slept at the Hermitage like a prince.”

Luke exited his room and found the Millie, Felix, and their parents in the hall.

“Hi dear, did you sleep well?” Helga asked.

“Yes majesty,” Luke replied. “Your son told me that all nobility and royalty are required to spend one night a year in the place of power for the countries they visit.

“What’s going on? Do I have to return to France, Switzerland and the States and stay in their places of power, even though I am in theory a commoner?”

“I’m sorry dear but you’re not an ordinary boy,” Helga replied. “As far as anyone knows, you’re the first human who has been converted since the beginning. The gods changed you for a reason and the experts I’ve consulted are clueless as to why.

“That’s not surprising. Vital information tends to disappear when challenges get issued, forcing us to discover what we need on our own.

“As a result, it is best we treat you as a noble for the time being, until we sort everything out. When dealing with the gods, it’s best to proceed with caution.”

“Don’t forget, the first two wizards you met were my son and Millie. That wasn’t a coincidence. The gods brought you there so you could meet,” Leyland said. “Let’s go eat.”

They entered the dining room. A few Russian nobles sat at the tables while waiters served them.

Luke noticed something about the people being served. They were all of noble blood and every one of them was well dressed. Even Felix with his laid-back attitude had quality clothing. He, on the other hand, was dressed like a commoner.

“Right this way, majesties,” a waiter said and seated everyone. Luke took the menu and noticed that there were no prices.

“What are you planning for today dear?” Helga asked.

“I was thinking of taking a tour of the palace. I’ve never been in a place more beautiful,” Luke replied.

“Then I’ll give Luke a tour of the city in the evening,” Felix added.

“It will take a week to see all the artwork in the Hermitage. The Winter Palace alone has over 1500 rooms. By then your eyes will be popping out of their sockets,” Gerald warned.

“I was just planning on wandering around the grounds,” Luke said. “For one thing, Annie would probably get bored. Annie, have you decided what you want to eat?”

“Yup,” Annie replied. “I’ll have blini with jam and milk.”

Leyland raised his hand and the waiter came. The group ordered food. Not surprisingly, the waiter was surprised when Annie ordered food.

“Luke, normally a boy your age would be going to school,” Helga said. “However you’re different. You’ve finished standard human school, but you don’t know anything about the magical world. We are thinking of sending you to wizard school in the fall, and giving you a tutor so you can catch up, if that’s okay with you.”

“You would do that for me?” Luke asked in surprise. That response hit the parents like a sledgehammer. They looked as if they wanted to get up and give him a hug.

“Of course dear,” Helga said. “You’re part of our family now.”

Luke bowed his head and said, “Thank you.”

“That’s okay dear,” Helga said. “Felix always wanted a baby brother.”

“I have the whole week free until the next challenge,” Luke said, trying to change the subject. “Unfortunately I don’t know how to prepare.”

“In terms of knowledge and experience, everyone is the same when it comes to the challenges the gods issue. If we are meant to succeed, then they will give us the tools to succeed,” Gerald advised.

“Sometimes they issue challenges that can’t be won, no matter how much power and knowledge we have,” Helga added.

“In the human world, there is no destiny, challenges and stuff,” Luke mused. “In fact, life has no meaning at all. Everyone is just a cog in a machine that no one built and which has no purpose.”

“That’s so sad,” Millie said.

“Where’s the food? I’m hungry,” Annie said and spread jam on buttered toast.

Luke looked at Annie and realized he was fond of the little cat. “You’re the best spirit beast in the world Annie. Did you know that?”

“I know,” Annie replied to an obvious question. “This jam is good. You should try some.”

“Who or what are the gods?” Luke asked.

The food arrived and Annie said, “Finally. I was about to waste away into nothingness.”

“Some people think they are beings from a higher plane of existence,” Helga said. “Others think they are aliens, performing weird experiments. There’s so much we don’t know about the world and what’s beyond.

“We don’t even understand the weird powers we have.”

“Do gods such as Zeus and Athena exist?” Luke asked.

“Is there a cat god?” Annie asked.

“Yes and no,” Helga replied enigmatically. “Nothing can be proved scientifically. However we do get visitations from time to time. Reality is not the hard and fast thing people think it is. It depends on the plane of existence you’re working on.

“You’ve already touched on other planes of existence. Some of them can be downright scary.”

Luke nodded. “I risked breaking my neck looking for Annie when I half climbed, half fell down that cliff near *Golf et Country Club de Bossey*. The fear I felt then was different to what I felt last night. Being a wizard can be scary.

“This orange juice is good.”

“Luke, you already have parents, so think of us as your uncle and aunt,” Helga said.

“Okay…Aunt Helga,” Luke said hesitantly. The air seemed to change and he felt as if he belonged with the others, as if he were visiting relatives for the first time.

“I love milk,” Annie said and lapped up the milk like a cat from a bowl. She paused for a moment and said, “It tastes better this way,” answering Luke’s unasked question.

“If you’ll excuse me kids, we have an appointment with the president of the United States,” Helga said and both she and Leyland got up and left the dining room.

That statement brought home the fact to Luke that he wasn’t dreaming. “Is the president a wizard? Is that allowed?”

“Yes, it’s allowed,” Felix said. “We wizards are still citizens of the countries we belong to, and can hold any office any other citizen can hold. However, we aren’t allowed to use magic to perform our official duties or get elected.

“However, in this case, the president is human. The rules allow us to contact the heads of state of all legally recognized countries.

“This can be a pain, since the leaders are always trying to get us to use magic on their behalf.

“We must also obey the same rules humans do while in public. We are forbidden from revealing that magic exists to the general public. They must find that out for themselves.”

“According to the experts, humans will discover magic when their level of science is sufficiently advanced,” Millie said. “In fact, they are already taping otherworldly powers as they explore quantum mechanics.”

“Enough of that science mumbo-jumbo,” Felix said. “It’s time to get rid of those ratty clothes of yours.”

“I have to go to the lady’s room,” Millie said and got up.

“That’s a good idea,” Felix said. “Luke, do you need to go too?”

“No thanks,” Luke replied. “I just went.” He waited as his two new friends heeded the call of nature.

Deed done, they entered the pickup and drove away.

They drove around two blocks, and then crossed the Móňka River. Moments later they were at their destination.

“This is a very pretty city,” Luke commented.

“You have’s seen anything yet, but thank you,” Felix replied. “This city has a lot of history. Some of it is rather bloody. There is the store.”

They entered an expensive looking store named *Brunello Cucinelli*.

An effeminate looking man approached. His spirit beast was a green-haired nymph wearing a tank-top and a mini-skirt.

The tank-top was so short that Luke could almost see her ample chest peaking below. They were like magnets that forced Luke to stare.

Luke’s adolescent urges went on overdrive and he felt the urge to do perverted things to the girl. She was quite a hottie.

Feeling jealous of the man, Luke forced himself to look away. *Damn, I need a girl*.

“Greeting, highnesses,” the man said and gave them a bow. “How may I serve you?”

“Hello Georgi. This is my friend Luke,” Felix said. “He was converted into a wizard by the missing nano-probe a few weeks ago. My parents decided to adopt him and now he is my baby brother. We need some clothes for him.”

Georgi looked at Luke in surprise. “I didn’t hear anything on the news.”

“That’s because we only met two days ago and my parents made the decision this morning,” Felix said. “I’m sure the official announcement will be made in a day or two.

“Right this way, highness,” Georgi said and guided Luke to a mirror with three panels. He then felt Luke’s entire body with his delicate fingers. That was a disturbing sensation.

“What are you looking for, highness?” Georgi asked.

“Some semi-formal evening clothes for mingling with VIPs and some informal day clothes,” Felix said.

Georgi thought for a moment and then grabbed clothes. “Right this way sir,” he said and guided Luke to a changing room.

Luke quickly changed and emerged.

“My, don’t you look handsome dear,” Georgi said. “You’ll be the bell of the ball.”

Feeling uncomfortable, Luke just stood and endured in silence.

“I like it,” Felix said. “We’ll take it. And now for the casual wear,” he added.

This time Georgi gave Luke a silk shirt and another pair of pants. Luke emerged feeling uncomfortable. The clothes were a little too fashion-forward for Luke’s tastes.

“My, I could just eat you up,” Georgi commented. “Doesn’t he look handsome?”

“Luke, you look uncomfortable,” Millie commented.

“I'm sorry but I'm not comfortable with these kinds of clothes. I was born and raised as a traditional boy in the US,” Luke apologized, feeling hot under the collar.

“You really should embrace your inner feminine,” Georgi insisted.

“Perhaps another time,” Luke promised. His ears felt as if they would catch fire. “Right now, I'm trying to get used to being a new wizard, in a world of magic, spirit beasts and monsters. Not to mention being friends with royalty.”

Luke looked at himself in a mirror. Annie was sitting on his shoulder. She was holding a stick and roasting marshmallows over his bright red ear.

“What?” she asked. “I like roasted marshmallows.” The marshmallow caught fire and she blew it out.

Felix laughed. “I heard people getting hot under the collar in embarrassment, but not hot enough to roast marshmallows.”

“Me neither,” Georgi agreed. “You certainly have a fascinating spirit beast.”

“She’s the best in every category,” Luke agreed, no longer feeling so hot.

Georgi looked at Luke sadly and sighed, “You shouldn’t suppress who you are dear. Very well, I fully understand you now. I’ll give you more masculine clothes.”

Georgi walked away and came back a minute later with the promised clothes.

The new outfit was similar to Felix’s outfit. That satisfied Luke. “This is perfect,” he said.

“We’ll wear it out,” Felix said as he handed a credit card to Georgi.

“Come back again when you are ready for clothes that suit you,” Georgi said as he waved them out.

“Thanks Felix,” Luke said as they headed for the truck. He felt guilty for letting Felix pay.

“No problem baby brother,” Felix replied happily. They entered the pickup and Luke put the bags in the back with him. “Now that you look decent, let’s go exploring.”

The next stop was the Dali museum. Annie flew directly to the sculpture of Salvador Dali’s giant moustache and floated in the center. “Take a picture of me,” she called and Luke obliged.

They entered the museum and Annie went from painting to painting. People stared and pointed. “Look mum, there’s a cat girl floating there,” a little girl pointed.

“Don’t be ridiculous dear,” the mother scolded. She then did a double-take and said, “Good grief. You’re right.”

People stared and pointed. Luke felt increasingly uncomfortable as he became the center of the commotion.

Annie sat on his shoulder and a twelve-year-old boy said to his friend, “Look there. That guy is playing with dolls.” That made Luke’s face turn red in embarrassment.

“Annie, become invisible to all humans,” Luke whispered.

“Okay,” Annie replied. She got off Luke’s shoulder and sat on a sculpture.

“Where did that cat girl go?” someone asked.

“What cat girl?” a woman asked. Moments later, people dispersed. No doubt people would attribute the incident to mass delusion or something.

Luke felt relief. It was okay for wizards to see Annie, since they understood such things. However, being seen by humans only caused problems and embarrassment.

“Luke, mum said you need to meet Prince James,” Felix said. “He wants to know what happened to the missing nano-probe.”

“I understand,” Luke replied as his heart skipped a beat. “When do we need to leave?”

“Mother said we need to leave for Switzerland in about three hours,” Felix replied. “You’ll be using your other clothes faster than I expected.”

“I need to shave and shower,” Luke said worriedly. “I don’t want to smell like a pig when I meet him.”

“Too late for that,” Annie said and held her nose. Luke blew a raspberry at her.

“We had better be going,” Felix said and they headed out.

During the trip back Luke didn’t say anything. Instead he reviewed in his head the events of the last few weeks. They arrived at the Winter Palace and Luke ran up to his room.

Luke stared at himself in the mirror and discovered that he didn’t need to shave. His face was smooth and there were no stray hairs. He quickly showered and put on his new semi-formal clothes. He then nervously paced back and forth while Annie sat cross-legged on his head.

“Luke, you’re making me nervous pacing back and forth like that,” Felix grumbled.

“I’ll say,” Annie replied. “I’m getting dizzy sitting here.”

“I can’t help it,” Luke replied. “I’m going to be meeting the de facto king of the world. His beloved sister was lost because of the nano-probe I now possess. I wouldn’t be surprised if he blamed me. Also, I don’t feel comfortable being around important people.”

“Aren’t I important?” Felix asked with a smile.

“I suppose so,” Luke replied. “It’s not the same. You’re my best friend, not some big-wig.”

“I’ll forgive you then,” Felix replied with a smile.

Someone entered and asked Felix a question. Luke ignored him and stared out the window.

“Luke, are you packed for your overnight stay at Geneva?” Felix asked.

“Yes,” Luke replied. The man picked up his bag, bowed and left. “How do I address the prince?” Luke asked.

“You address him as Your Royal Highness when you first greet him and when you leave. After that you call him sir,” Felix said. “Come. Let’s get going. I’ll give you a tour of the palace while we wait for our appointment.”

“Thanks,” Luke smiled.

“No problem,” Felix replied. He slapped Luke on the back and almost knocked him over.

They stepped out of the room and headed downstairs. After a few minutes of wandering around, they spotted a tour group.

“Let’s join them,” Felix suggested and led the way. “Don’t worry. They know me.”

The tour was amazing, but eventually one painting bled into another.

“It’s time to go,” Millie said.

They went to the parking lot and jumped into the pickup. In moments they headed through the portal into Nexus.

“Geneva is the center of the world,” Felix explained. “The focal point shifted sometime after the end of World War I.”

As before Luke felt the otherworldliness of Nexus. Moments later they exited. They parked in a large indoors parking lot and headed for the elevator.

The elevator ascended two floors and emerged into a lavish lobby. Felix led everyone through double doors and onto a garden filled with trees and flowers. Luke ran to a railing a hundred feet away and looked over the edge. Far below, Luke saw a tiny town.

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“Welcome to Camelot,” Millie said when she joined Luke.

“Are you serious?” Luke asked. “I thought King Arthur was a myth.”

“Events of the wizard world leak into the human world all the time,” Rona said. “Your parents mentioned the Fey, which is another name for spirit beasts. Humans just dismiss it as fairytales. That’s fine, since it can’t benefit them.”

“This city is two thousand feet above Geneva,” Millie explained.

“An invisible flying city,” Luke exclaimed. “That’s so cool.”

Turning around, Luke stared at the city. The city was composed of thousands of densely-packed buildings resting on a hill. Aerial walkways connected many structures together. Flying around multiple spires were dragons.

“Oh my god, that’s so cool,” Luke said in wonder.

As Luke stared, an attendant approached. The attendant looked like a pompous windbag. “Prince James is ready to see you.”

“Aren’t we early?” Felix asked.

“The previous engagement was cancelled,” the man said. He turned around and walked back the way he came.

They reentered the lobby and walked down a long corridor lined with sculptures and fine works of art. Next stop was an elevator ride twelve stories up. Finally they arrived at an audience room. The prince sat behind a desk framed by a large picture window.

“Majesty…,” the attendant began. He got interrupted when Annie rushed in and asked, “Hi Jamzie. What’s up?”

“Annie, don’t just rush in,” Luke called as he entered. He was back to feeling nervous.

“Kindly control your spirit beast,” the attendant sneered. “She is violating all manner of protocols, as are you.”

Annie ignored them. Instead she laughed and said, “Jamzie looks as if he swallowed a bug.”

“My little sister always called me that,” James said quietly. “Why did I forget that?” Right then James didn’t look like the king of the world, but just a guy who still mourned the loss of his beloved sister.

Annie pressed James’ cheeks together, forcing his lips into a pucker. She laughed again. James hugged Annie and cried silent tears.

Luke felt a little jealous that someone was hugging his spirit beast. Clamping down on his feeling, he turned to the attendant next to him and said, “Yo Jeeves, how about giving us a tour?”

The man looked at Luke in anger and said, “I’m not your butler, I’m…”

Luke interrupted him with a glare and a head-flick towards the prince.

The man sighed and said, “Come this way.”

They exited and Luke said, “So Jives, what do you do for fun in this city? It’s only 4:07PM.”

“I’m not your butler,” the man said angrily. “I’m Prince Gregory of Switzerland.”

Luke wasn’t impressed by the man, who was definitely a windbag. “And this is Prince Felix of Russia,” Luke said.

Luke glanced back into the room and discovered that the prince had fallen asleep. “We need to pass the time until the prince is ready.”

“Very well,” Gregory said grudgingly. “Please follow me.”

Gregory didn’t bother giving a tour but just wandered the halls. The others followed and Luke realized the insides of all palaces and castles looked pretty much the same. The only thing that differed was the individual works of art and the building style.

Gregory’s phone rang. He answered and said, “The prince is ready to meet you.”

They returned to the audience room and found the prince standing in the center of the room.

“I’m sorry about that,” James said sheepishly. “I don’t know what came over me. Thank you for letting me borrow your spirit beast.”

Luke nodded. “I guess you need to know about me. About a month ago I was walking down a path when something hit me in the head. I woke up in the hospital. For a few weeks I thought I was going to die from brain tumors…”

“Please sit down,” James interrupted. “Why did you think you were dying of brain tumors?”

“Because I was born a human and the special structures we have look like tumors in a standard x-ray,” Luke explained. “Last Thursday I was transported to the cliff above Les Terrasses de Genève in Bossey, France and found Annie there…”

“You can’t just find a spirit companion,” Gregory sneered. “You can only summon them.” James glared at him and he flinched.

“Moments later I met Felix and Millie,” Luke continued. “They decided to take me under their wings. The next day I saw you on the screen and discovered that the gods had selected me to compete in their competition. I completed the first challenge and am now waiting for the second one.

“I don’t know who hit me with that nano-probe or why I was selected. I don’t even know why Annie chose me. She doesn’t remember anything before meeting me.”

James asked countless questions and finally said, “Thank you. At least I know that the nano-probe is safe. The gods selected you for a reason. I’m counting on you to do your best and win this challenge.”

“Yes sir,” Luke said meekly.

“Jamzie, do you have anything good to eat here?” Annie asked. “I’m starving.”

James looked at Annie in surprise.

“Luke’s spirit beast likes to eat people food,” Millie explained.

“That’s not possible,” Gregory sneered.

“Annie is special,” James said. “My meeting with you was the last one for the day. Please come and eat with my family.”

Gregory excused himself and left.

“Okay,” Annie said and they followed James. In moments they arrived at the emperor’s royal suite.

“Dear, I invited a few people for dinner,” James said. “This is the boy who was implanted with the missing nano-probe.”

“Hello everyone,” Annie said and waved from the top of Luke’s head.

“Pleased to meet you, majesty,” Luke said, placed his right fist on his chest and bowed. Annie remained attached to Luke’s head, like a hat.

“Luke, allow me to introduce my wife Donna. That’s nine-year-old Ben, seven-year-old Lisa, and five-year-old Finn,” James said.

As expected, Luke had to give his life story to Donna while the three children played. The kids became curious when they discovered that Luke was once a human.

“What’s it like to be a human?” Ben asked.

“Majesties, dinner is ready,” a butler called.

“Don’t forget a plate for me,” Annie added.

“Mr. Smith, please place Master Luke’s spirit beast on my right and Master Luke on her right, and then Ben. Prince Felix will be on my left and then Princess Millie, Lisa and Finn,” James said.

“As you wish, majesty. I shall add an additional setting,” the butler said.

They entered the informal dining room and Donna sat across from James.

“What’s it like to be a human?” Ben asked again.

“Being human is boring,” Luke replied. “They don’t have cool spirit beasts like the dragon your dad has. They don’t live in ancient mysterious flying cities the size of mountains. There is no magic and they are afraid of the infinite. Then again, they don’t have scary monsters.”

“So dear, what do you think of the wizard world?” Donna asked.

“This feels like a dream. I never would have imagined someone like me talking to someone like you,” Luke replied. “The world is so much bigger than humans understand. I suspect even wizards don’t understand how big the world is.”

“Do you mean Nexus?” Donna asked.

“Not just Nexus,” Luke replied. “Can’t you feel something just below the surface, as if we’re on the surface of an infinite ocean or the top layer of a giant onion?”

“Luke is a portalmancer,” Millie explained.

James nodded. “People like you are rare. I doubt there are more than a few hundred in the world.”

“What’s it like to teleport? I’ve never tried it,” Finn said.

“It’s instantaneous,” Felix said. “It’s sort of like crossing the portal into Nexus, except there is no portal. One minute you’re here and a moment later you’re at your destination.”

“Majesty, what is the best magic library in the world?” Luke asked. “I’m a bit of a bookworm,” he explained.

“That would be the Imperial Library in Athens, Greece,” James said. “It was founded around two thousand years after Atlantis shattered.”

“I need to prepare for the next challenge, but I don’t know where to start,” Luke explained. “Felix’s parents said they will get me a tutor.”

James nodded. “They spoke to me and said they think the gods want them to adopt you. However, they felt it was necessary for me to meet you before they made the announcement, considering your circumstances.”

“I hope they don’t do something embarrassing,” Luke said worriedly.

“Like what?” Millie asked. “You mean officially adopting you?”

“What’s so embarrassing about being called a prince?” James asked. “You do represent all humans of planet Earth. You are their official ambassador.”

“Besides, that’s an important step in becoming…mmm,” Annie said as Luke gagged her.

“Hush Annie,” Luke said hastily. “Not in front of the emperor.”

Annie squirmed free and asked, “Don’t you want to become…”

“No I don’t,” Luke said, cutting Annie off. “I’m just happy that magic is possible and that there is an infinite universe out there to explore.”

Luke turned to the prince and said, “Sorry about that, majesty.”

James looked back curiously at Luke and then at the others.

“They act more like brother and sister than master and spirit beast,” Felix explained.

“But what doesn’t he want to be?” James asked.

Annie dashed around James’ head. “Emperor of the worrrrld,” she shouted in an evil genius voice. “Wa, ha, ah, ha, ha.”

“Annie,” Luke shouted. Face red, he then turned to the prince and said, “Sorry about that majesty. Annie is just being silly. We don’t need a new emperor since we have you.”

James stared at Luke in surprise. “Are you saying this tournament is to decide the next emperor?”

Luke’s face turned redder and he said, “Maybe.” He then added, “We don’t need a new emperor since we already have a good one now.”

“I’m not qualified to be emperor,” James said simply. “I’m just acting as a proxy until the real one shows up. Now that you say it, that does explain the reason for the tournament.”

“But then what will you do after?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know,” James replied. “That depends on the next emperor.”

“What exactly did the oracle say?” Millie asked.

“The oracle said, ‘Find the consort of the emperor and you shall find the emperor,’” Luke replied.

“It can’t be Prince James, since that’s too obvious. Everyone would choose Princess Donna as the consort of the emperor. It can’t be Annie or I since neither of us is married. We aren’t even formal partners since we never participated in a summoning ceremony.

“I wish I had seen the summoning ceremony. However I was too worried about the first challenge. The only thing we can do is collect clues as we complete the challenges.

“Majesty, there is something I need to know,” Luke said.

“What is it?” James asked.

“I’m just a commoner,” Luke said timidly. “Do I have to stay in the places of power in each country? It’s scary.”

“I know,” Lisa sympathized. “That’s why I sleep with my mummy and daddy.”

“How old are you dear, ten, twelve?” Donna asked.

“I’m fifteen,” Luke said defensively. “It’s not my fault I have small bones.”

“Sorry dear,” Donna apologized.

“What’s wrong with small bones?” Annie asked. “I think small bones are cute. Just look at me.”

“I think you’re cute,” Lisa agreed.

“Thank you Lisa,” Annie said. “I think you’re cute too.”

“What about Ben and Finn?” Donna asked.

“I’m a boy,” Ben protested. “Boys aren’t supposed to be cute.”

“Don’t worry boys, you haven’t finished growing. You too Luke,” Donna added. “You’re still a kid.”

“He thinks he’s a grownup,” Felix said with a chuckle. “He tried to date a nineteen-year-old girl.”

“What’s wrong with that? She’s my classmate,” Luke said defensively. “I can’t believe the fate of the world depended on weather I could ask a girl out on a date.”

James looked curiously at Felix and Felix explained the challenge. He then added, “It was funny seeing a little brat asking a nineteen-year-old girl out.”

“Hey, you’re supposed to be my friend,” Luke said angrily. “And I’m not a little brat.”

“I’m your big brother,” Felix clarified, clearly enjoying himself. “That’s what big brothers do. They tease their baby brothers.”

“No fair,” Finn complained. “We don’t need big brothers.”

“But your lives will be so sad and meaningless without us,” Ben objected.

“Mr. Smith, show our guests to their rooms, and then bring them to the family room,” James commanded.

Luke’s room was large, but not pompous like his Hermitage bedroom. One stop later brought them to the family room.

Now that all the formalities were over, Luke asked, “What decides what kind of spirit beast you summon? Can you summon any kind?”

“The spirit beast reflects the wizard’s spirit. People can usually guess what kind of spirit they will get. My family and friends were certain I would get a dragon,” James said.

“Can you have more than one spirit beast?” Luke asked. “Can you fly on your dragon? Do they have special abilities? Will a spirit beast change if the person changes?”

“Yes, I can ride on Dramond,” James said. “Yes you can have more than one spirit beast, but it’s not common. A spirit beast grows as a person grows and develops. Ben, please get me the big book of Spirit Beasts.”

“Okay dad,” Ben said and left. He brought back a coffee table book that probably weighed 20 pounds.

“Here you go Luke,” James said. “This book has pictures and descriptions of the thousands of spirit beasts known to exist.”

“Thanks majesty,” Luke said and opened the book. Annie sat on Luke’s shoulder as he skimmed through the book.

“That’s a funny one,” Annie said and laughed.

“Not as funny as that one,” Luke said and pointed excitedly at another one. “Hey look, that’s the grim reaper we saw before.”

“This guy is a pubilibu,” Annie said. “What a funny name.” They both laughed.

“You’re both such kids,” Felix said and laughed.

“Whatever you say, grandpa,” Luke replied.

“Grandpa,” Finn said and giggled.

James turned on the TV and the news came on. The lady talked about the various happenings in the wizard world. It even had a weather report. After that they watched a comedy starring a wizard family forced to live as humans.

“Kids, remember to take a shower before going to bed,” Donna admonished as she got up.

“Oh man, I hate taking showers,” Finn grumbled. “I wish I had a cat familiar. Then I would never have to take baths.”

“Really?” Luke asked in surprise. He scanned forward and spotted the entry. “You’re right. It says the master of a cat spirit is always immaculately groomed. Hey look. It says that they are so clean that they never even need to go to the toilet. Come to think of it, I haven’t gone since meeting Annie.” Luke turned to Annie with newfound respect and said, “Oh Annie, you’re so cool.”

“If course I am and don’t you forget it,” Annie said proudly. She looked like the cat’s meow. Luke always found that expression odd, but now it made perfect sense.

“Good night everyone,” Luke said. He got up and headed for the room assigned to him. Luke stopped at the washroom and wondered if he needed to brush his teeth. Bowing to a lifetime of motherly scoldings, he brushed his teeth and then changed his clothes.

MC900065312[1]~

James sat down to breakfast as the maid poured coffee. Moments later Luke came staggering in like a zombie. Annie was rolled up in a ball on top of Luke’s head and sound-asleep. Both were still in their pajamas.

James got up and asked worriedly, “What happened to you two?”

Luke yawned and said, “I can’t put a book down once I pick it up. Before I knew it, it was morning. I only got half an hour’s sleep.”

“Thanks for the book. It was a fun book to read,” Annie mumbled in her sleep. Luke placed the book on the table and sat down.

“Luke, she’s talking to you,” Felix said.

“Orange juice please,” Luke replied. “Annie will have the same. Also milk in a bowl. Just call me Luke. I’m no royal.”

“That’s true,” Annie said as she stretched. “He’s just a royal pain.” She got down and drank orange juice.

Luke glanced at the woman’s spirit beast and woke up. The spirit beast was a bird woman creature with intense blue feathers. Although bird-like, she did have human features.

“You have a koninklijk,” Luke said excitedly. “The book says less than one in a million people can summon them. That’s so cool.”

“I’m sorry highness but you’re mistaken,” the maid denied. “She is just a common blue jay type.”

“No she’s not,” Luke insisted and Annie opened the book. She showed it to the woman.

Luke continued. “According to the book, koninklijks are often mistaken for blue jays. However there are distinctive differences. For instance, koninklijks have more vivid colors. Also, their bones are different. See how your friend moves?”

Coupling actions to words, Luke demonstrated the differences by moving the creature’s wing. “What’s your friend’s name? What’s your name?”

“Rosie sir,” the woman said shyly. “My partner’s name is Philly.”

“You’ve heard Philly play the flute, haven’t you?” Luke asked. “How do you explain that?”

“I’ve never heard Philly play the flute,” Rosie confessed.

James opened his hand and a flute appeared. He handed the flute to Philly.

Philly hesitantly put the flute in her mouth and played. The room filled with otherworldly music. Immediately she stopped. Complete astonishment showed on her face. That was reflected on the faces of everyone else in the room.

Before anyone could say anything, Luke urged, “Why did you stop? Continue playing. Rosie, accompany Philly.”

“I can’t,” Rosie objected. “I don’t know how to sing.”

“According to the book, spirit beasts are the outward manifestation of a wizard’s spirit.” Luke paused and then said, “That means you too have talent. Now sing.”

Philly began playing and Rosie sang. This time the room faded away, replaced by images of a jungle scene filled with birds.

The song ended. The jungle disappeared and all was back to normal.

“See, I told you,” Luke said triumphantly.

“I thought you knew nothing about spirit beasts,” James exclaimed in astonishment. “How did you know that?”

“I spent all night reading the book you lent me, majesty. Anyone who has read that book would know,” Luke explained.

“But that book has thousands of pages,” Donna objected.

“3842 pages describing the 108 families and 3287 known types,” Luke said with a yawn. “There were plenty of pictures and it was easy reading. It only took eleven hours. Oh man I’m feeling sleepy. My mum always scolds me for pulling all-nighters.”

Luke and Annie sat back down and ate.

“Just what are you?” Rosie asked in amazement.

“I’m just a guy who likes reading,” Luke replied between mouthfuls. “What is this thing I’m eating? It’s yummy.”

Felix laughed. “That’s my baby brother.”

Everyone ate in silence.

“Do you have any plans Luke?” Donna asked.

“I need to go to France and the United States and sleep in their places of power,” Luke replied. “By the way, is this Switzerland’s center of power?”

“No,” James said. “That’s below. You need to stay in one of Geneva’s hotels the night.”

“Oh man what a pain,” Luke grumbled. “After that, if it’s okay with you, I would like to come back here to Camelot. This is the coolest city I’ve ever seen.”

“What about the Hermitage?” Felix asked.

“No offense but that’s just a bunch of square boxes filled with expensive stuff. Now Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany is cool. There’s even a secret scary room that the mad king built,” Luke said with authority. “Have you ever seen shows such as Bizarre Homes? They show tree houses, houses shaped like flying saucers, and pirate ships.

“There’s even this house this woman built to appease the spirits. She was forced to build forever. As a result the place has staircases that go nowhere, fake doors, and doors with no floors on the other side. You just step through and fall twenty feet down.”

“You think national treasures such as the painting and works of art by the masters are just expensive stuff?” Millie asked, incredulously.

“Sure, they are nice to look at, but that’s just museum stuff,” Luke replied. “You can only look at them for so long before they get boring.”

“Luke, you may be a brain, but you’re still just a kid,” Felix said and laughed.

“No I’m not,” Luke said angrily.

“Luke, you’re welcome to come anytime,” James said with a smile. “I’ll keep your room reserved for you whenever you visit. By the way, have you seen the show, *Cities of the Underworld?*” James asked.

“That’s a great show,” Luke said excitedly. “I’ve always wanted to explore those cool places. What I don’t understand is where does all that garbage come from that clogs up the passageways?”

“I bet you drove your parents crazy, always wandering off somewhere,” Donna commented.

“H-how do you know?” Luke asked in surprise.

“Because you are a cat,” Donna replied. “Cats love prowling.”

“Luke, here’s some trivia for you,” James said with a smile. “The places humans have found are less than one percent of what’s present. All the most incredible places are hidden from humans by ancient spells.

“As an example, this island is almost two miles in diameter and both it and this city are ancient. No one knows who built it and it’s filled with abandoned passageways and secret chambers no one has seen in centuries.”

Eyes sparkling, both Annie and Luke said in unison, “That’s so cool.”

“I see you’re no longer feeling sleepy,” James said with a chuckle. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go to work. I have an appointment with a bunch of diplomats.” James bowed and exited while his kids and the others waved bye.

“I think I died and went to heaven,” Luke said excitedly. “I know I have. Can I go exploring?”

“You’ll get lost,” Donna said worriedly.

“Don’t worry majesty,” Luke assured. “It’s true I never know where I’m going, but I always know where I came from.”

“What do you mean?” Millie asked.

“When it comes to directions I always get lost,” Luke said. “However, I can always return to a destination I’ve memorized. For instance I’ve memorized this room, so I can return here whenever I want to. Isn’t that funny?”

“That’s because you’re a portalmancer,” Donna replied. “The more destinations they go to, the more places they can teleport to.”

“But it was like that before I became a wizard,” Luke insisted. “Someone had to always guide me to a specific destination. The only exception is if the destination is in my line of sight. Even then, I sometimes don’t see.”

“Before I go, I need to give you a warning,” Donna said. “This city is built on a hill. All parts above ground are safe for you. However, there is a vast cave system below. The further down you go the more dangerous it becomes. Eventually it connects to Somewhere Else. Travel too far down and even the most experienced portalmancers will get trapped. And you have no training.

“See you later kids.”

There was a chorus of “My mum” as Donna kissed her kids bye. She ruffled Luke’s hair and exited.

Millie suggested, “Come, let’s go to the Louvre.”

“What do you think?” Luke asked Annie.

“I’m really curious about the tunnels,” Annie said.

“Don’t you dare,” Millie scolded. “They are vastly more dangerous than being out at 3:00AM.”

Meeting The Inlaws

No matter how big a family gets,  
There’s always room for more members

Saturday rolled in and Luke didn’t get a chance to explore Camelot. He spent all his time travelling the world with his friends and fulfilling his duties.

Luke exited his room at the Hermitage and entered the dining room.

“Luke,” Jane called and waved to him.

“Mum, what are you doing here?” Luke asked in surprise.

“Don’t just stand there,” Jane scolded. “Give your mum a hug.”

“Son, we’ve been pushing you since you were a child because we knew you had the potential to be the best of the best,” Joe said. “I just never expected being adopted by Russian royalty was in your future. Do we need to call you your royal highness from now on?”

“Dad,” Luke shouted, feeling embarrassed.

“I’m not trying to steal your son,” Helga assured.

“Hi Aunty Helga,” Luke greeted. “What’s going on?”

“Since this is such a big occasion, we figured it was necessary for your parents to share,” Gerald explained.

“Queen – I mean King Helga explained everything to us,” Jane explained and adjusted her goggles.

“You don’t need to be formal with us,” Helga assured.

“That’s right,” Annie agreed. “Think of them as your in-laws or out-laws or side-laws.”

“That’s right,” Luke replied. “None of that changes the fact that you’re my parents. Even magic can’t change the past. As mum proved, the space-time continuum as defined by Einstein doesn’t exist, and so time travel isn’t possible.”

“People don’t normally think in those terms, but that’s my son for you,” Joe said with a laugh.

“I haven’t published the proof yet,” Jane objected. “I haven’t worked out all the mathematical details yet. King Helga gave me some useful information that I hope to incorporate in my theorem.”

“What is time?” Millie asked.

“Time is the dynamically changing present, as observed by an observer,” Jane said. “The past doesn’t exist, but is dynamically created from the karmic experiences of the observer, in order to explain an observer’s current circumstance.

“The future can be scryed by understanding the present and the psychological forces controlling human nature.

“The biggest mistake humans make is confusing what is a possibility with what is an actuality.

“Which is why people believe in infinitely splitting realities…”

“Can we talk about something else please?” Felix begged, interrupting Jane. “Not all of us are geniuses or the son of geniuses.”

“Prince Felix, no one is born a genius,” Joe scolded. “People become smart through training. Everything we have achieved has been through hard work.”

“Of course I think my son is a genius,” Jane said proudly.

“That’s why he could skip so many grades,” Millie agreed.

“No. He skipped grades because he’s a bit of a scaredy-cat,” Joe explained. “He wanted to run away from the bullies instead of facing them.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that dear,” Jane said angrily. “I can’t stand people who bully others just because they aren’t good at athletics or bad with directions, or because just he’s small.”

“And cute,” Annie added.

“And cute,” Jane agreed.

“Today is the next challenge, isn’t it?” Joe asked.

“Please be careful dear,” Jane said worriedly. “I can’t believe a bunch of people claiming to be gods are doing such bad things.”

“Yes mum,” Luke said. “The first one was easy. I only had to ask a girl out. I’m sure the next one will be just as easy.”

“Don’t worry mummy,” Annie reassured. “I’ll be there to kick him in the head should he mess up.”

“I know you’ll take care of him dear,” Jane said.

“Why are we just standing here?” Annie asked. “Let’s go eat.”

Everyone ordered food and Helga said, “Jane, we’ll be placing Luke in second year high school. This is because he has a spirit beast, just like everyone else in that grade. I hope you don’t mind.”<>

“Of course,” Jane agreed. “It would be awkward for him if he’s the only person in class with a spirit beast.”

“Did you tour the Hermitage?” Millie asked.

“Yes dear,” Jane replied. “We spent all yesterday. I can’t believe we got to see such a famous place. This place is so filled with history.”

“And monsters,” Luke added. “I hate sleeping in these places because they are so scary.”

“I didn’t see any monsters last night,” Joe objected.

“That’s because you weren’t using your goggles,” Luke said. “Try sleeping with them on between two and four A.M.”

“Is it really that scary?” Joe asked.

“I’ll say,” Annie replied. “I have to change his diapers every night.”

“Hey,” Luke said defensively. “I don’t wet myself.”

Annie just giggled.

After breakfast they went to a private lounge to talk.

Makeup specialists entered and fixed up their appearances. They were then escorted to a TV studio.

“Welcome everyone to Wizard’s Life,” the announcer greeted a camera. “Today we are speaking with King Helga and Queen Leyland. They have something amazing to share.”

“The story started almost two months ago, when the nano-probe went missing from the royal vaults,” Helga began.

The story unfolded from Luke’s point of view.

It was then Felix’s turn to speak.

“I bugged my parents to get me a brother when I was a kid,” Felix said. “Unfortunately, they never complied.

“Last year the oracle contacted me. It informed me I could get a brother if I succeeded in overcoming its challenge. It was a grueling challenge, but I overcame. Unfortunately, it never told me when.

“Then on June 20, I met a badly injured teenage boy. He looked like he fell down a rocky hill or was mauled by mountain lions.

“After hearing his story, I knew this was the promised brother.”

“What an amazing story,” the announcer extolled.

“My son has been rather taken up with Luke, and since Luke doesn’t have a wizard family, we decided to adopt him,” Helga said. “Of course, we got permission from his real parents.”

“What are your thoughts, Mr. and Mrs. Russell?” the announcer asked.

“We are glad he is healthy,” Jane said.

“We are surprised to find he is now the ambassador of the human race,” Joe said.

‘How does that make you feel?” the announcer asked.

“I’m not used to it,” Luke confessed. “I’m sure people think I’m rude when they call me highness and I ignore them.”

“Do you need to stay in the power places of the world?” the announcer asked.

Luke nodded and said, “I’m still not used to it. Fortunately, I have Annie to protect my back.”

“What do you think of all the royal treasures in the Hermitage?” the announcer asked.

“He viewed them as expensive trinkets that are only good for museums,” Felix said with a chuckle.

Out of thin air a card appeared. Luke took it and read aloud. “Archeologists have found an ancient site. You and several candidates will help with the excavation. It’s in Gobekli Tepe. Appointment is in two hours with Dr. Brady.”

The Ancient and the New

Sometimes history should be left in museums,   
but it should never be forgotten

Luke and three other candidates

“Hi all,” Dr. Brady said.

1. True story [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. True story [↑](#footnote-ref-2)