The Princess  
 and the  
 Dragon

**By**  
**Trevy Burgess**

*The Princess and the Dragon*

by Trevy Burgess

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 and the  
 Dragon

To become a level 99 wizard is to master all lessons life has to offer.

It takes many lifetimes to achieve the level of a supreme master,   
but the rewards are endless.

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Part I -   
The Princess and the Dragon Apprentice

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1. Opening the Gates of Magic

Behind every mystery  
is a deeper mystery waiting to be revealed

The sun shone brightly on orientation day at the wizard’s academy. Students from all over the country thronged the Initiation Temple of the prestigious school.

“I’m finally going to be taking my wizard’s initiation. I’ve been waiting for this since I was eight,” the over-caffeinated Mark screamed.

Sixteen-year-old Mark had ruby-red hair, large emerald green eyes, and a fine manly moustache of which he was proud.

“Calm down. You’ll get a heart attack if you get any more excited,” Harry, Mark’s best friend chuckled.

Physically, Harry was buck-ugly. Mark liked teasing him about that. Strangely, the girls seemed to like him. They all thought he was mature, with his long blue hair and sparkling blue eyes. There was no explaining good taste.

“How can I calm down? Don’t you realize we’ll soon be able to control the very forces that shape and sustain the Universe? How cool is that?” Mark was almost jumping up and down.

“You’re right. That is cool,” Harry agreed.

“Quiet,” a blond girl to the right scolded them. They ignored her.

“Welcome to the Royal Academy of Magic. My name is Headmaster Emerson. Here you shall learn the mastery of yourself and the world. It is an honor and privilege to serve, which you will soon find out…”

The speech continued for what felt to Mark like hours. In the meantime, Mark daydreamed about the initiation.

Emerson’s next words interrupted his reverie. “I would like to introduce first-year-student Princess Jane. She will be our new student council president. Princess Jane, please say a few words to your fellow first year students.”

Jane had waist-length light-green hair and lavender eyes. Purple eyes were the mark of royalty. She also had soft kissable cheeks and a button nose.

“She’s so cute. I wish I could give her a hug,” Mark remarked.

“I wish I could do more than just hug her,” Harry agreed and hugged himself. He made kissing sounds.

“Perverts,” the blond girl sneered as she glared at them in disgust.

Mark felt flattered at being called a pervert. He grinned at her and said, “So, my dear, would you like to go out with me? We could do perverted things all night long.”

She looked at him in shock and horror and walked away. Mark shrugged. At least he tried.

The applause died down as Jane stepped onto the podium. “Hi everyone, I’m a little nervous about being student body president. I have never done anything like this before. Please take care of me.” Jane bowed and everyone applauded.

“Thank-you Princess for that speech,” Emerson said. “Now for some business before the initiation ceremony – The student council lost several members when they graduated last year…”

Mark put his hand up immediately. “Me. I would like to volunteer to be on the council,” Mark shouted, waving his hands.

Everyone laughed at his childish enthusiasm.

“Mr. Markus Lucas of the Draco clan has kindly offered to serve on the council. He has the highest entrance exam score of all first year students. He also has experience tutoring children. I think he would be a good candidate for vice-president of education.

“His job will be helping organize study groups and making sure tutors are available for those who need them. It is school policy for all students to join a study group.

“Mr. Lucas, would the position of vice-president of education be acceptable to you?” Emerson asked.

“Yes Ma’am,” Mark called back.

“Would anyone like to run against Mr. Lucas for the position of vice-president of education?” Emerson asked. No one spoke. She hit the podium with her gavel.

“Would anyone like to run against Mr. Lucas for the position of vice-president of education?” Emerson asked a second time. Again, no one spoke. This confused Mark. Why would no one want to serve? It would be a great opportunity to work with the real live princess. It was a no-brainer. A second time the gavel sounded.

“Would anyone like to run against Mr. Lucas for the position of vice-president of education?” Emerson asked the third and final time. A third time the gavel came down.

“I hereby appoint Mr. Markus Lucas to the position of vice-president of education for the student council. Congratulations Mr. Lucas.”

Everyone applauded his nomination.

“We have one more position to fill. That is the position of treasurer. I would like to open the floor for nominations,” Emerson called.

“I would like to nominate Harry for the position,” Mark called out and raised his right hand.

“No way,” Harry whispered into Mark’s ear and pulled down Mark’s arm. “I don’t want to serve on the council.”

“Why not,” Mark asked. “It will be fun and you could work with the princess. In the end, we’ll have the privilege of saying Princess Jane is our friend. How cool is that?”

“That would be cool,” Harry agreed reluctantly.

Viewing that as consent, Emerson spoke. “Mr. Harry Banks is the son of a wealthy business owner. His entrance exam grades were excellent and he has financial experience helping his father at work.

“Are there any other nominations for the position of treasurer?” Emerson asked. As before, there were no volunteers. As before the gavel came down three times.

“Mr. Banks, would you care to fill the role of treasurer? We need you,” Emerson asked anxiously.

With both Mark’s and Emerson’s pressure, Harry reluctantly nodded his head.

Emerson beamed a smile of relief. “I hereby appoint Mr. Harry Banks to the position of Treasurer for the student council.” Everyone applauded the nomination.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is time for the main event – the initiation ceremony. Please be quiet and clear your minds. Other than that, you don’t need to do anything.”

For the first few seconds, nothing happened. Then the room became quiet. The silence weighed down on Mark and pressed against his ears. The room darkened and he felt himself floating.

The darkness was blacker than ebony and the silence was eternal. An infinite plane of stygian blackness appeared in the void. It seemed perfectly smooth and featureless. Then Mark noticed circles on the plane. The circles spread out like ripples on a rainy day pond.

Mark rose higher. Above him appeared a similar surface like an infinite sheet of paper. It too had circles like the surface of a rainy day pond. Above and below those appeared other sheets of blackness fluttering in the void. The number of sheets was beyond counting.

Mark felt a gentle tug and he drifted downward to the first sheet. As he approached, the circles converged under him.

The blackness of the sheet dissipated and shapes appeared. Streams of sound, color and movement flowed around the shapes.

Mark drifted closer. The surface shifted and the world appeared as from an infinite distance away. The world was flat and not flat at the same time. As he drew closer, the world inflated into three dimensions.

The kaleidoscope of sound, light and movement resolved itself into the Lay Lines of the earth. All physical objects glowed with the fire of Life. The glow of his fellow students out-shone the objects in the room in terms of intensity and complexity.

Mark merged with his physical body. The room lightened and normal sound returned. All was back to normal.

Mark pondered what he saw, knowing the fluttering things were only a fraction of what was shown to him.

Emerson interrupted his reverie. “Congratulations students. You have all successfully passed the wizard’s initiation. Regular school will begin Monday. Please don’t discuss what you experienced until at least tomorrow – Dismissed.”

A voice inside Mark’s head spoke. ‘Mr. Lucas, please come to the front of the room. I will introduce the rest of the student council to you.’

Mark glanced at Harry and walked forward. Half-dazed people bumped into him. Harry walked dumbly behind.

They stopped in front of the princess and headmaster. “Princess Jane, Mr. Lucas, Mr. Banks, I want to thank you for volunteering to help run the student council. It is a challenging job but well worth the effort. Please follow me and I will show you the council room and introduce you to the other council members.”

The group stepped out the back doors and walked across a bridge spanning a chasm. Mark looked down but couldn’t see the bottom. He did see a cloud floating below.

“We normally fill Council positions from 2nd and 3rd year students,” Emerson explained. “However, this year no one volunteered for some unknown reason.”

“I think I know why,” Mark said, smiling knowingly.

Emerson looked curiously at Mark. “What’s the reason may I ask?”

“Most people wouldn’t want to do these jobs because it’s too much work. Another reason is that working with royalty in a little scary. I’m having second thoughts now about my decision.

“However, my dad always said, ‘Act swiftly before fear can claim you. A Draco is always brave,’ Mark quoted.

“And my dad always says, ‘There’s a fine line between being brave and being a fool,” Harry scolded Mark.

Mark laughed, “You should have thought of that before you became my friend.”

They approached the end of the bridge and stepped on a path that took them to a large building. The 12 story structure was arrayed with flamboyant colors, which shone in the afternoon light.

“You have an interesting friend, Mr. Banks,” Jane commented.

They entered the building and proceeded down a corridor. At the end of it was a large atrium.

“He’s an eternal ten year old. I wish he would grow up and not worry me so much,” Harry replied.

“I see you’re relaxing around the princess,” Mark said and elbowed Harry.

They stepped into the atrium and Emerson pointed out the student council rooms. They entered and Emerson gave them a tour. “Students come here to organize clubs and deal with study issues.”

Older students milled about, busy working on needed tasks.

They walked down a corridor to a door marked, ‘Student Council Room…Faculty Only’. Emerson opened the door and stepped in.

“Council members, I would like to introduce our newest members. You’ve already met the princess. This is Mr. Markus Lucas of the Draco clan. He is our next VP of Education. This is Mr. Harry Banks. He’s our new treasurer.

“Mr. Lucas, Mr. Banks, this is Ms. Sylvia Larks, our VP of School Activities. Her job is to manage clubs and club activities. Every student must join at least one club.

“This is Mr. John Hankins, our VP of Public Relations. His job is to help organize social events and help everyone get along.

“Mr. Mama-Duke Bradley is VP of Social Concerns. His job is to deal with any concerns students have. Many students don’t have the courage to go directly to Faculty. He acts as a go-between for them.

“Mr. Maurice Brown is our secretary,” Emerson finished.

Harry and Mark bowed. “Please take care of us,” they spoke in unison. The others bowed in reply.

Emerson addressed the seasoned members. “Please give our new members a tour of the faculties. I have an errand I need to take care of.” With that, Emerson left.

“I’ve never heard of the Draco clan,” Mama-Duke said as he led the tour.

“That’s not surprising,” Mark replied. “The world is filled with countless clans. I’m only surprised that so many people don’t belong to a clan. You probably belong to a clan you don’t know about.”

The school grounds covered over 1200 acres of land, some of it being rainforests and swamps. It bordered the palace grounds to the north.

The grounds contained school buildings, administrative buildings, a cafeteria, a gym, and training facilities. Those served both the academy and a university for advanced magical studies.

In addition, the grounds also contained a residential area with a shopping district that served the thousands of people who called the school grounds home.

After the tour everyone returned to the student faculty lounge. Monday evening would start their real work as council members.

Sylvia brought out snacks and everyone ate while they talked.

“What made you decide to join the student council,” John asked the three.

Mark normally would have answered first, but he was too busy eating.

“I had little choice in the matter. It’s expected of me to take a leadership role. When Annie is old enough, she too will take a council position,” Jane replied.

Everyone turned to Harry, since Mark was still eating. “Mr. Banks, what was your reason for joining,”

“I didn’t want to join but Mark forced me. He always does everything on the spur of the moment and then drags me into it,” Harry replied gloomily. “Please call me Harry. I hate formalities.”

“Me too,” replied Jane. “Please call me Jane in informal situations. Too much formality makes me feel left out.”

Everyone agreed to be informal.

The group turned to Mark and stared at him in amazement as he continued to stuff his face. “Mark has the metabolism of a ten-year-old boy. He never gets fat,” Harry replied.

Mark put down his sandwich and stared angrily at Harry. “Will you please stop treating me like a ten year old? How many ten year olds do you know that have moustaches as fine as mine?” Mark stroked his moustache.

“I’m two months older than Harry and he still treats me like a brat.” Mark swallowed the last half of the sandwich in one bite.

“As Harry said, I volunteered on the spur of the moment. I thought it would be fun to be friends with a real live princess,” Mark replied and grinned at Jane. Jane looked down and blushed.

“Has anyone seen ‘*Walking with angles’*,” Sylvia asked.

“I loved it, but it made me cry at the end,” Jane responded.

“Wasn’t it the life story of Jane Briers?” Ester asked.

“Janet Briers,” Mark replied around bites of cheese. Damn, Mark cursed. He didn’t want to comment but it slipped out.

“You watched that? I thought boys didn’t like that sort of thing,” Ester asked.

“I had no choice,” Mark said, with face bright red. “Mother forced me to watch it, saying that a Draco must understand women.”

“Boys should understand girls,” Jane agreed.

“Have you ever watched an immersive novel where the main character is a boy?” Mark asked Jane.

“You mean the immersive novel, and not just the movie?” Ester asked, surprised.

In an immersive novel, you become the main character and experience everything the character experienced. Some people watch immersive novels for entertainment, but most people use them to increase their wizard level quickly. Watching one of these novels puts enormous stress on one’s mind and body, since the viewer takes on a whole different persona.

“You don’t know my parents. My dad always said, a ‘*Draco is always courageous’* and my mum always said a ‘*Draco is always wise’*. They didn’t seem to realize that it can mess up a nine year old’s head.” Mark forgot what gender he was after that.

“I only like watching normal adventure movies, with plenty of swords and sorcery. That’s what real men should watch.” Mark leaned back and wondered what else to eat.

“Isn’t immersive novels with female main characters rated mature for boys? How were they were able to make you watch that?” Jane asked.

“Both my parents were supreme-masters at the time. Bypassing the age restriction was a simple matter for them,” Mark replied. “They both achieved supreme-master status at around 417 years of age. They want me to beat that record and are convinced I can do it. They ascended from this plane of existence about two years ago, at the age of 435.”

“Damn! Your parents are slave drivers,” John Hankins admired. “It’s incredible that they ascended at such a young age.”

“I hear mastering the genders are a pre-requisite for becoming a supreme-master,” Harry noted. “I’ll be happy to just reach Master Wizard, when all aging stops and we regain the vitality of youth. I don’t need to go any higher.”

“You and me both,” John agreed. “With enough skill to live a comfortable life and eternal youth and vitality, I would be a very happy man indeed. Yes, only a fool would want to go beyond that.”

Mark agreed fully. “If only level 70 wasn’t so hard to reach. It doesn’t matter, since we have plenty of time.”

“Exactly what are wizard levels,” Jane asked?

“Wizard levels represent how much experience a person has yielding magic in any one particular incarnation. The more experience a person has, the higher their level. It’s also connected with a person’s spiritual growth, but the connection is rather complex. Your teacher is the best person to explain it,” Maurice answered.

“All I can say is that the ascension is truly news-worthy, since it’s so rare.” Maurice yawned. “It’s time for bed,” he said and headed for the door. Everyone followed.

Outside, the royal limo waited for Jane. She stepped in and zoomed off. Mark and the rest headed for the residential area.

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Mark and Harry registered at the same time and had asked to be in the same classes and share an apartment in the residential area. Their request was granted.

The apartment had a living room, kitchen/dining area, washroom and two bedrooms. They moved in the day before and most of the stuff was still in boxes.

As Mark stepped into the apartment, he realized how tired he was. Excitement had prevented him from sleeping for the last week and everything caught up to him.

“I’m going to bed,” Mark called and entered his room. He flopped onto the bed without undressing and fell asleep. He dreamed.

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Mark looked around. The now familiar enormous sheets of stygian blackness fluttered in the darkness. Far off in the distance two sheets wobbled and sections of the sheets bulged towards each other. They bumped.

There was an explosion on each surface. Mark looked closer. The explosion expanded and cooled. The stuff of the explosion condensed into glowing spirals, blobs and filaments. The fluff moved away from each other. Mark looked closer at a particular spiral. It swarmed with billions of glowing dots, circling around a dark center that drew everything towards it.

Mark drew closer to one of the arms of the spiral. He focused on one particular light. It glowed yellow. At close range it looked like an enormous ball of fire. Circling around it were embers.

Mark focused on the third ember and approached. It expanded in size. It looked familiar. Understanding dawned. This was the Earth, as seen from outer space. He had witnessed the creation of the universe from conception to the present.

The earth expanded in all directions as he rushed towards a painful collision. He stopped two thousand feet above the surface. Below him were the school grounds. To the right was a featureless expanse of trees surrounded by a twenty foot high wall. That was the palace wall. But where was the palace?

Out of curiosity, Mark attempted to cross the wall, but an unknown force prevented him from entering. Mark moved away, realizing that the palace grounds were forbidden territory.

Mark saw birds cross the barrier and disappear. He didn’t question what he saw, but drifted back to the school grounds and over the dormitories.

Mark fell like a rock. He braced for the impact…and awoke in bed. He went to the washroom, and went back to sleep.

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Mark awoke to light shining through the window. He jumped out of bed, quickly dressed and brushed his teeth. He forgot to brush his teeth last night. His mother would have scolded him and told him and told him, ‘A Draco is always well-groomed’.

Mark knocked on Harry’s door. “Wake up lazy bones. It’s time to explore our new school and hunt for some cute girls. Also get some breakfast. The fridge is empty.”

Mark returned to his room and decided to unpack. First things unpacked were his clothes. He placed them in the closets and drawers. Boring stuff finished, he unpacked his collection of posters. They included pictures of majestic dragons, beautiful princesses and islands floating in space.

Following that were the action figures and his collection of anime. This took him the longest time. It’s important to arrange the figures correctly. The damsel-in-distress must stand beside the scary dragon. The valiant knight must fight the hordes of darkness. The naughty devil must chase the cute and innocent angel.

Mark heard Harry’s door open. He obviously just woke up. “Are you ready yet?” Mark called, annoyed. Teenagers were such lazy bums. *I’m a teenager, aren’t I? So why am I not like that?* Mark wondered.

“Mark, go ahead without me. I need to finish unpacking and take a shower, and check my email. Then I have to phone Stephaney. We’ll be meeting later on.”

Stephaney was Harry’s girlfriend and was one year older than him. She took the wizard’s initiation the previous year.

At times like these, Mark felt left behind. He needed a girl.

Mark stepped out of his room and looked at his best friend. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Messy hair, morning breath and a 5 O’clock shadow greeted him. Harry scratched his face and headed for the washroom.

Mark wondered why Harry needed so much grooming each day. He put on his shoes, glanced at the mirror to make sure his moustache was okay, and then opened the door.

“I’m leaving,” he called and stepped out into a beautiful sunny day.

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“I’ll be back in a minute Annie,” Jane called as she headed for the washroom. It was lunchtime at Jane’s favorite restraint. Annie, Jane’s little sister, sat back and waited for lunch to be served. After lunch, they would go clothes shopping. There was no such thing as too many clothes, when you’re a princess.

“Look at that cute red-hair boy with that moustache,” one high school girl said to another. Annie looked around and saw the boy stuffing his face with hamburgers. He was lean with no body fat and had good muscle mass. He had mischievous green eyes that twinkled. She liked him instantly.

The boy stopped eating and looked at the high-school girls. He wiped his mouth and walked towards them. He grinned at the girl who complimented him and said, “Hi, my name is Mark. What’s your name?”

“My name is Wendy and this is my friend Johanna,” the girl replied, blushing.

Mark took her hand and kissed it. “Pleased to meet you Wendy – you’re a very pretty girl. How would you like to go out with me?” Mark grinned at her.

“I’d love to go out with…” The girl did a double-take. She covered her mouth in shock. “What the hell am I saying? You’re just a ten-year-old boy.”

Johanna looked curiously at Wendy and said, “If you don’t want him, I’ll take…damn you’re right. He is only ten. Why did I think he was an Academy student?”

Mark looked at them in aggravation. “I’m sixteen years old and I can prove it.” He took out his ID card and showed it to them. “See, I’m sixteen. I took my wizard’s initiation yesterday. Cone on ladies,” he said. “What’s wrong with going out with someone who is slightly younger than you?”

Both girls giggled at that. “Why don’t you ask one of those girls out?” Wendy pointed at a group of grade school girls. The youngest must have been eight. The oldest was eleven.

“I can’t go out with them. I’d be arrested for being a pedophile. I’m sixteen years old. I want to go out with someone my own age,” Mark said, visibly agitated.

“You’re so cute,” Johanna said and patted Mark on the head. She had to reach up because of his height.

“I’m not cute. I’m manly, with a manly moustache,” Mark whimpered. He took his useless ID card and put it away.

Mark wished he was more like his friend. No one ever questioned Harry’s age. Some people even thought that Harry was eighteen or nineteen. His girlfriend certainly did.

Off in the corner booth, Annie giggled at the show.

“What are you looking at?” Jane whispered upon returning.

“That ten-year-old boy over there is trying to make a pass at those high-school girls. He’s so funny,” Annie said a little too loudly and giggled again.

Mark heard that. He stomped his foot. “I’m not. I’m not. I’m not ten years old. Why can’t anyone believe me?” Tears flowed down his face. Mark returned to his seat and dropped some money. Shoulders slumped, he headed towards the door.

“You like him, don’t you Annie?” Jane asked, briefly wondering why Annie thought Mark was ten years old. Annie nodded. “I like him too. Let’s invite him over.”

“Hey Mark,” Jane called. Mark turned around and wiped his face. He saw Jane and his face brightened. The crisis was over.

“Princess, what are you doing here?” Mark called and walked towards the sisters. They met him half way.

“You know the princess?” Johanna asked in surprise.

“We both joined the student body council yesterday. Jane is council president and I’m VP of Education,” Mark said. “I assume you’re both second year students. If you have any problems, just drop by and we’ll help as best we can. Now if you’ll excuse me ladies.”

Mark followed the sisters to their seats. As he left, he overheard the women whisper, “He’s such a hottie. Maybe we should visit him in the council hall.” That was a typical response that drove Mark crazy.

Jane and Annie entered the booth and Mark followed. Annie sat between them. “So this is your cute sister.” Mark smiled at Annie.

“Hi Annie,” Mark said. “I’m Mark. I’m a first year student at the Magic Academy. I serve the student body council, just like your sister.”

“I’m Annie and I’m eight years old.” Annie held out her hand and Mark shook it. “Pleased to meet you, Princess,” Mark replied.

“How old are you, Mark?” Annie asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark shook his head. “All I know is that I was born almost six months before your sister. In theory, I’m sixteen.”

“How come you feel ten years old?” Annie asked, confused.

A thought entered Mark’s head. “That’s because I insulted the goddess of time. I told her that she had a big nose.” Mark picked up a piece of Broccoli and placed it on his nose. Annie giggled.

“As punishment, she turned me into an eternal ten year old. Just joking,” He said.

“Mark, did you watch the movie, *The Princess and the Dragon*?” Annie asked.

“Yes, it was a fun movie. The princess was really cute. That reminds me; your birthday was two weeks ago, wasn’t it? Do you have the princess doll from the movie?” Mark asked.

“I was hoping to get it for Annie but the shipments were cancelled because of a warehouse fire that destroyed everything,” Jane explained.

“I have it,” Mark said proudly.

Annie looked at Mark in awe, “You do?”

“My uncle Arthur knows people and gave me one. If you want I can ask my uncle to give one to you. I’ll give him a call now.”

Mark took out his cell phone and dialed. “Hi Uncle Arthur,” Mark said.

“Hello my favorite nephew,” Uncle Arthur screamed in Mark’s ear. Mark moved the phone in front of him to prevent himself from going deaf.

“Uncle Arthur, I’m having lunch with Princesses Annie and Jane…” Mark started.

“You’re going on a date with both princesses - You lucky dog? That’s my boy. Ha-ha-ha,” Uncle Arthur laughed so loudly that Mark thought everyone in the restraint heard him. People turned to look.

“Uncle Arthur, you know *the Princess and the Dragon* figurines you sent…” Mark was again interrupted.

“Say no more, my boy. I’ll send them some. Remember to kiss the girls for me,” Uncle Arthur replied.

“Uncle Arthur, please don’t put anything stupid on the box. Better yet, just send it over to me and I’ll pass it along,” Mark said hastily.

Annie reached her hand out for the phone and Mark gave it to her. “Hi Uncle Arthur, thank-you for the present,” she said.

As expected, Uncle Arthur laughed again and Annie had to jerk the phone away from her ear. “That’s the least I can do for the girlfriend of my favorite nephew. Talk to you later dear - Click.”

Annie handed the phone back to Mark.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mark apologized. “Uncle Arthur can be embarrassing.” Mark turned to Jane. “Remember to tell your security guys that a package will be coming for you. I don’t want your parents finding out. They will misunderstand. Uncle Arthur doesn’t seem to realize that there are some things in this world you can’t joke about.”

Mark looked at Annie’s eyes for the first time. He leaned towards her with mouth open.

“Purple grapes,” Mark exclaimed. Annie’s eyes looked like purple grapes. Annie jumped.

“I have to remember to go grocery shopping. I just moved in and there’s nothing in the fridge,” Mark said. “I assume you are both going shopping for clothes?” Mark asked.

“How did you know?” Jane asked.

“What else would two elegant ladies be doing on a beautiful Saturday afternoon? I guess I should let you two go. You have plenty of shopping to do,” Mark said.

“What are you doing today?” Jane asked.

“I have nothing planned.” Mark got up and waited for the ladies to exit.

“Why don’t you come and help us shop?” Annie asked.

“Sure, why not,” Mark said and followed them out of the door.

A royal limo pulled up in front of them. An elderly gentleman stepped out and opened the door. The princesses stepped in. Mark hesitated. This was the first time entering a royal limo.

“Please step in Master Mark,” the old dude said.

“Thanks James,” Mark said and got in. The limo pulled away.

“This is so cool. This is the first time I’m riding in a royal limo,” Mark said and looked out the window.

“You’re such a kid,” Annie said. She giggled when he turned towards her.

They were at the store ten minutes later. The three passengers stepped out and the limo sped away.

They stopped in front of *Pilchards and Sons*. It was famous for the quality of product sold, as well as the extreme prices.

They stepped in and stopped at one of the boutiques in the store.

A lady stepped in front of them and bowed, “Princess Jane, Princess Annie, Mr. Mark, welcome to *Pilchards and Sons*. How may we serve you?”

“Annie needs a cute dress for her first day at her school Monday. Also, Mark and I need new outfits for our first day at the Magic Academy,” Jane said.

“I don’t need anything,” Mark protested. “I’m just keeping you company.” He didn’t like shopping for clothes. He thought it was a waste of time. Besides, a real man should wear clothes that are practical and functional, unless he was going to a formal event.

“Nonsense dear, everyone needs a new set of clothes – especially a handsome young man such as yourself.”

An effeminate man wrapped an arm around Mark’s waste and guided him to another boutique. “Please call me Guido. We employ specialized magic and a refined sense of fashion to make sure you are well dressed.”

Chairs, posters and manikins filled the boutique. Sales reps serviced their customers.

Guido guided Mark to a changing room. “I have the perfect outfit for you dear. I’ll be right back.”

A minute later, Guido brought back a set of clothes and a matching pair of shoes. He hung the clothes on a hook. “Call me when you have changed dear,” he said and left.

Mark changed and looked at himself in the mirror. He was amazed at what he saw. He looked mature, with a hint of elegance that never existed before. His moustache enhanced the clothes and the clothes enhanced the moustache.

“Guido,” Mark called.

Guido stepped into the room. “Why, don’t you look manly? You look like a young man of at least twenty,” Guido said.

Mark smiled at the compliment. It felt good being told he looked older than he really was. It was also slightly disturbing. How did they know he was sensitive about his age? Was he reading too much into it?

“You may be expensive, but damn,” Mark admired. “I definitely have to come back again.”

“Why thank-you dear, that’s the best compliment a fashionista can get. Let’s go show the princesses how good you look.” Guido guided Mark back to the original boutique.

Both princesses stepped out. Annie looked at Mark in awe. “You look good, Mark. I give you permission to date my sister.”

“Thank-you Annie, you look beautiful in that dress of yours,” Mark replied. He turned to Jane and said, “You’re going to turn quite a few heads Monday.”

“So are you,” Jane replied.

Mark turned to Guido and Guido led him back to the changing room. Once back in his old clothes, Mark asked, “How much do I owe you?”

“Princess Jane told us to put it on her card,” Guido said and handed a bag to Mark. They headed back to the lobby.

“Jane, you shouldn’t have bought such an expensive thing for me. You barely know me,” Mark objected. “I only came to keep you company.”

“It’s the least I could do for getting those dolls for Annie,” Jane said.

“Those dolls didn’t cost me anything,” Mark grumbled. They headed for the door.

“Bye-bye dear, hope to see you back soon,” Guido called. Mark waved a hand behind him and stepped out with the princesses. Seconds later, the limo pulled up.

“We’ll drive you home,” Jane said and stepped in. They drove off.

Ten minutes later they were at Mark’s apartment. As they approached, Mark looked at Jane and said, “Remember to warn your security guards about the package.”

Mark turned to Annie. “I think you know what embarrassing things Uncle Arthur will say in the attached letter. Please don’t take it seriously. He can be an idiot sometimes.”

The door opened and Mark stepped out. “See you Monday Jane. Bye Annie. Bye James.”

Mark looked at Annie as the limo drove off. Grapes would be nice. Mark decided to drop off his booty and go grocery-shopping.

2. The First Day

We all must start somewhere,   
though some start before they are ready

“Get up lazy bones or we’ll be late,” Mark called. “You know how long it takes for you to get ready.”

“Damn kids, always getting up too early,” Harry mumbled.

“This damn kid is two months older than you. See you in class,” Mark said and left.

He had on the new outfit. He considered wearing his regular clothes, but remembered that his mother would have scolded him, saying ‘*A Draco is always considerate of the feeling of others.*’ Jane would want to see him wear his new costume.

Mark ate a sandwich while walking. It was drizzling today, but Mark didn’t care. He arrived early at class and got a window seat. He watched the students trickle in, trying to decide who he should ask out on a date.

Harry arrived just as the bell rang.

The professor greeted the class. “Good morning class, I’m Professor Rover, your homeroom teacher. You will be spending the entire day with me today, where I will teach you the basics of what you will learn. Tomorrow, other professors will teach you what you need to know on the various branches of magic. Before we begin, let’s introduce ourselves to each other.”

One by one, the students introduced themselves. Once that was done, Rover continued the lecture. “In your three years of Junior High, you learnt about information technology and gained problem solving skills. Therefore, I consider it a waste of time to teach you facts that you should be able to find out for yourselves.”

Rover paused and looked around the class. “You shall spend the next three years applying your problem-solving skills to finish assignments we shall give you. I don’t care how you complete the assignments, just as long as you complete them and don’t do anything illegal.

“The purpose of these assignments is to create a foundation for all your future development as wizards. As such, there are no shortcuts…” Rover said.

“What about immersive novels?” Mark asked as he raised his hand.

“Immersive novels could be considered a shortcut,” Rover said slowly. He looked around the class and considered. “I better talk about immersive novels now, before someone gets hurt.

“In an immersive novel, you relive the life of another person. You do gain skills and knowledge through the books, but at a price.” Rover paused for dramatic effect.

“It’s extremely hard on your mind and body and some people have gone insane because of it. People have even died,” Rover added.

“If it’s so dangerous, why isn’t it banned?” a girl named Ester asked.

“It was originally illegal, but that only made the novels go underground. Without proper controls, a great many people got hurt. Unfortunately, just like illegal drugs, the government was useless in trying to stop the use of immersive novels,” Rover said.

“Psychologist Hampton Pearson Draco was able to push legislation to make it a controlled media. He argued that controlling it would save more lives than forbidding it outright.

“Now, to watch an immersive novel, you need a psyche test before and after the experience. This has actually caught quite a few undiagnosed mental health problems among those who wanted to use the novels.

“Coming back to the topic at hand, immersive novels can and do increase your wizard level. However, you can never go beyond rookie level for any given element you train with.

“That may not seem much. However it can shave several years off your training schedule and get you past the boring stuff and to the place where magic becomes fun.

“I won’t prevent you from doing it, since I myself have done it. I only ask that you be careful. For in-depth knowledge of immersive novels, please see the notes. Any more questions before we continue?” Rover looked around the room but no one said anything.

Rover continued the lecture. “Getting back to the subject at hand, the assignments we give out are specifically designed so that you can build on your skills and knowledge. They came about from thousands of years of work, and they are the minimum for the job at hand. Therefore, you must pass every assignment before proceeding. This is true even if you have used an immersive novel.

“Study groups are essential to the process and each of you will join at least one group. Each group will have between three and seven students.

“You raise your level every time you master a specific life lesson. This allows you to summon greater power. The order lessons are learnt depend on the person and the path of knowledge they choose. However, people of the same level tend to yield the same amount of power, so don’t be disappointed if a class mate learns a lesson before you do. You will surely master lessons your class mate finds hard.

“By the time you complete schooling you shall all have become level 30 rookie wizards in your primary element. From then on, it is up to you to achieve level 99 and become Supreme Masters.”

Rover paused and looked over the class. He continued speaking. “Strictly speaking, magic is unnecessary since our level of science and technology is sufficient to meet all our needs. In fact, many people consider it a waste of time to learn magic. After all, anything you can do with magic can be done a thousand times more easily with technology.

“Therefore, the first assignment is answering the question, ‘Why study magic?’ For the next ten minutes, write your reasons for wanting to learn magic. We will then share our answers.”

Ten minutes later, Rover interrupted the class. “Okay class, please stop writing.” Rover stepped in front of the class.

“Desire is what drives the circle and moves the world. The greater our desire is, the greater our results. Magic is shaped by our beliefs and desires, which constantly change. The suggestions of others also affect the results.

“This is unlike technology, which is independent of our beliefs and desires and the beliefs and desires of those around us.

“Therefore, why learn something that is so unreliable? Who wants to answer that first?”

Mark raised his hand and yelled out, “Magic is cool.”

Everyone laughed. “Yes, magic is definitely cool. Anyone else,” Rover asked.

“Magic allows us to get closer to the gods. The initiation allows us to pray more powerfully,” Ester, a girl in conservative clothes answered.

A boy with a golden mane, yellow eyes and a large frame stood up. “Magic isn’t cool, like that idiot Draco said. Magic isn’t for supplementing the gods, like that religious nut Whalen said either.

“Magic is about POWER. It allows us true mastery of the universe and all that’s in it. Any fool can blow up a building with dynamite. However, can a non-magician turn that same building into Swiss cheese or conjure a demon to do his bidding?

“No technology in the world can do what magic can do, when magic is used to its fullest extent.” Harimau Tiikeri sat down. His group of cronies applauded him.

“We stop aging when we reach level 70 and we can then live forever,” John Hanson spoke in a quiet voice. The short kid with stubble sat down when the class turned towards him.

Eventually everyone had their say. Rover continued his lecture.

“In the beginning, all existed in a quantum sea of possibilities. Consciousness came along and projected an image into the void. This brought about the beginning of the world. Many minds came together to decide how the world should work. As a result, the physical laws of the universe came into being.

“To perform magic, you need two things. First, you need an image of what you desire. The clearer the image you have in your mind, the better and quicker you will get the results.

“Second, you need to overcome the inertia of the universe and the expectations of those around you. When a spell is cast, it’s a battle of wills for all those concerned. Whoever has the most dominant will wins the contest.

“This is why we prefer using well known spells. The use of these rituals has created expectations of what should happen. The more often they are used in everyday life, the more dependable they become.

“The power of a spell can be increased greatly when many people cast the same spell together, eventually becoming physical law when the universe agrees upon it.

“However, just saying the spell or performing the ritual won’t do anything, most of the time. That is because our consciousness is too bound to the physical world to act freely.

“There are exceptions, such as when someone or a group of people pray with intense desire. This is because emotion is the driving force behind all magic.

“In fact, a fanatic can cast spells that are impossible for a sane person of the same level.” Rover paused at this. “On this note, I need to give you a warning. Try not to use magic when your feelings are especially worked up or you might do something you might regret.”

Rover paused for the warning to register. He continued. “Relying on emotions alone is too unreliable to be of practical use. So what do we do for consistent results? The answer is the initiation. The initiation allows us to move away from the physical and see the world from a more expanded viewpoint. We become level-one wizards when we pass the initiation.

“It’s time to share what we saw during the initiation. Who wants to go first?”

Mark wanted to answer. Unfortunately, he couldn’t explain what he saw, even to himself.

Ester Whalen looked at the ceiling with a look of rapture. “I saw the gods and they smiled at me.”

“It’s obvious you’re going to be a cleric,” Rover replied.

“I rose above the world and saw the lay-lines. They converged and divided, bringing life energy to the world. I also saw the life energy of people and things. It was incredible,” Harry said. Most of the class agreed on that vision.

Mark wondered why no one mentioned those strange black surface thingies with the circles and the all-pervasive void. This was one of the few times he was without words and remained silent.

“Excellent. You saw what you needed to see. Seeing slightly beyond the veil starts your journey to mastery and magic is born.” Rover smiled at everyone. The bell rang. It was lunch time.

Everyone left but Mark stayed behind. “Professor, I saw strange black surfaces with ripples in them, like a rainy day pond. They seemed to contain the universe, but they were only 2-dimentional.”

Rover looked at Mark in surprise. “That’s a very advanced seeing. Read up on holograms…I’ll email you a list of subjects you should research. For the time being, you don’t need to worry about those things. You won’t need that knowledge for centuries. Now go for lunch.” Rover headed out the door.

Mark went to the cafeteria with Harry. He looked for Jane but didn’t see her. That wasn’t surprising. This was a big school, servicing the needs of the entire nation.

Mark ordered four hamburgers, double fries, a milk shake, and strawberry ice-cream, with grapes on the side. That was the advantage of being under-weight – you can eat anything you want.

Both boys sat at a nearby table. “How come you aren’t eating with Stephaney?” Mark asked.

“I thought I’d keep you company on the first day,” Harry replied.

“Dude, if I had a girlfriend, I’d be spending all my time with her rather than with a guy. There she is. Go snoggle with her,” Mark commanded. “I’m going to scope out all the cute girls. Perhaps I can catch one.”

“Okay, if that’s how you feel,” Harry replied and reluctantly left.

Mark looked around him. If only there was some magic that could help him find the girl that would accept him for himself, and not treat him like a brat. That couldn’t be helped. He just had to create a list of available girls and check them off one at a time.

Lunch finished, Mark returned to class and talked to classroom students. He had to find which girls were dating and which girls were free, and approach the free girls in private. Perhaps he should ask them out for lunch or coffee. If he could tutor them, that would be even better.

The bell rang.

“Welcome back class. We shall now discuss two important tools all wizards have.

“The first is known by many as the book of knowledge. It is part of your heritage as wizards. It gives you access to the Akashic Records of the Universe. You will however only be able to use it at its most basic setting, because of your current knowledge and skill level. As you mature as wizards, your ability to use the book will increase.

“I shall now enable the book for you.”

A large screen appeared In Mark’s mind. It looked like his computer monitor at home. There were several icons present. The best description for it was like having turned on a second computer monitor.

The first monitor showed what he normally saw when he looked out at the world through his eyes. This was monitor 1. Monitor 2 showed the Book of Knowledge. It was both freaky and exciting at the same time.

“Click on the Library icon students,” Rover instructed. “As you see, it’s just like a web browser. You look for whatever you want in the search box.

“Now close that and let’s look at the other icons. We have music, videos, and our own memories we can relive.

“The map icon allows us to know where we are at all times. Be warned, the map won’t work in some areas. The reason for this is interference from various magical sources. For instance, you won’t be able to map out the Royal palace and some government properties. They have security that prevents all intrusion from anyone less than a supreme master.

“That’s not surprising since dozens of supreme masters were involved in creating the security system.

“Also, it won’t work in the Sea of Chaos. That’s only because your level is insufficient to deal with it…”

“What exactly is the Sea of Chaos?” a girl named Sharon asked. Mark felt excited by the question. She was a cute girl, and before the class started, he discovered she wasn’t dating anyone. This was a great opportunity.

“The Sea of Chaos is near Bermuda in the North Atlantic Ocean,” Rover explained. “It was created over twelve thousand years ago by the ancient civilization called Atlantis. They were trying to understand the fundamental nature of reality. Unfortunately, one of their experiments failed and damaged the fabric of the universe, not to mention destroying their entire continent.

“As a result, stuff from other realities seep in. It’s a dangerous place few people venture in. I’ll give you links to additional information in the study notes. Coming back to the subject at hand…”

“Do people live there?” Sharon asked.

“Yes. There are countless islands floating in the Sea of Chaos.” Rover looked around the room and spotted Mark. “As a matter of fact, the Draco clan owns an island in that Sea…”

“That’s because they are idiots,” Harimau declared.

“Please Mr. Tiikeri, there’s no reason to be rude. Just because your two clans are ancient enemies doesn’t mean you two can’t be friends.”

Mark smiled at Sharon and said, “If you want, I can take you on a tour of the Sea. It’s filled with incredible things.”

“That’s a splendid idea,” Rover said. “We can have a field trip. It will help you grow as wizards. If there are no more questions, let’s get back to the subject at hand.”

Rover checked his notes. “You will need to adjust your privacy settings.

“Please keep in mind, everything you learned about internet security and privacy in Junior High still applies – more so in fact, since your world will be opening out beyond your imagination…”

Mark clicked on an icon marked ‘*People First’*. Mark looked around and saw name tags above everyone’s heads. Beside the names was a box marked ‘Relationship’. Some read, ‘single, dating’, while others read, ‘single, not dating’. A few people had question marks, indicating that information was either not known or was private.

There was also a box called ‘*Asked Out*’ above the heads of the ladies. This box was checked for the three ladies in the class he had previously asked out. For a moment that surprised him. He didn’t expect everyone to have that feature. Mark thought about it and realized that he must have subconsciously created it.

“Mr. Draco,” Rover called. Mark looked around and realized that he was the only one sitting. Everyone laughed at him. Not surprisingly, Harimau had the loudest and most obnoxious voice. Sometimes it was really hard to ignore that fool.

Mark got up and pressed the memory rewind button to five minutes. He fast-forwarded to see what he missed.

The information played out in his second screen.

In review, Rover said, “The second important tool a wizard has is their wand. Everyone, please get up and follow me.” Everyone, up and headed for the door. Rover looked at him and said…Mark stopped the playback.

All 24 students followed Rover out of the door.

They followed Rover down several halls and out the building. Soon enough, they entered a temple with a moat. A previous class passed them on the way out.

The inside of the temple was adorned with images of various deities. Just like the Initiation Temple, this temple had twelve sides. Each corner had twelve pillars. Each pillar was marked with the sign of the zodiac. Also around the temple were twelve braziers of flames. In the center of the room was a platform, with seven steps leading up to it. In the center of the platform was a foot-high twelve-sided rose-marble alter.

“Attention class, please allow me to introduce Master Wizard Jackson, our wands expert. He will fit you with your wands.”

“Hello students,” Jackson said. “A wand is a device that helps amplify your magical abilities. Their secondary purpose is to help maintain the stability of our world.

“Each wand is unique to you and you alone. No one can use another’s wand and they will last you the rest of your life. They cannot be broken, they cannot be lost, and they cannot be taken from you.

“Transcendent beings supply the wands to us, as their construction is beyond our understanding.

“A wand’s appearance is different for everyone and can change during one’s lifetime. That being said, most wands have a similar appearance.

“Now students, please form a line at the foot of the dais.”

The students formed a line. Mark got distracted thinking about wand construction and ended up last.

“Okay Ms. Whalen, please step up to the altar and kneel. Clasp your hands in prayer and wait,” Jackson said.

Ester did as instructed. Above the altar, a swirling mass of colored light formed. It condensed into a rosary. The rosary descended and landed in the center of the altar.

“Ms. Whalen, please bow in thanksgiving, pick up your wand and descend the steps,” Jackson instructed.

One by one, students climbed the steps and took their wands. Harimau climbed the steps. A folded hunting knife appeared in front of him. “Sweet,” he exclaimed, bowed and took the knife.

As he descended, he pressed a button. A wicked-looking blade unfolded. He looked around, trying to decide what to stab.

“Mr. Tiikeri, please put your wand away,” Jackson scolded. Reluctantly, Harimau complied.

Second to last was Harry. His wand resembled a walking stick a leprechaun would use.

It was finally Mark’s turn. Mark walked up the steps of the dais, knelt nervously at the altar, and clasped his hands in prayer.

Please mum and dad, let me have a nice wand. Mark waited. Nothing happened.

Please mum and dad, let me have a nice wand. Again nothing happened.

Please mum and dad, let me have any kind of wand. Still nothing happened.

Please, anyone who’s listening – let me have any wand.

“What’s going on?” Ester asked. “Why isn’t he getting a wand? Is he a bad person?”

Everyone was in shock. “No Ms. Ester, everyone is entitled to a wand. It’s the law,” Jackson said, confused. “There was no record of this failing before.”

Feelings hurt, Mark descended the steps. How could his parents betray him like that? He felt like crying, but didn’t want to do so in front of that asshole Tiikeri. That would give him just another excuse to make fun of Mark.

Thankfully, Harimau didn’t say anything, possibly because he wasn’t paying attention. He was too busy carving his name in one of the sacred pillars. No doubt the whole world would know about it next week – the only person in the entire Universe without a wand.

“I’m sorry Mr. Mark. I don’t understand why you didn’t get a wand. Do you have anything in your position that could possibly be a wand?” Jackson asked.

Mark shook his head sadly. “Everything I have is of this world. If I do have a wand, it’s either lost or stolen. Maybe Ms. Whalen is right. Maybe I’m being punished by the gods.”

The girls converged on Mark and gave him sympathy. It felt good being surrounded by all those cute girls.

“The good news is that wands aren’t essential. You’ll just have to work harder than everyone else. I’m sorry I can’t be of any help,” Jackson sympathized.

“Okay everyone,” Jackson said, addressing the class. “All those who have wands, make sure you use them when practicing magic. As I mentioned before, their secondary purpose is to help maintain the stability of our world.”

“Okay everyone, please follow me,” Rover said and left the temple. Everyone followed him.

Feeling sulky, Mark trailed behind the class. Harry hovered worriedly next to Mark, like an over-protective elder brother.

Rover led everyone to an isolated garden. In the center of the garden was a granite pedestal. The top held a compass with six areas, like the slices of a pie.

The slices of pie had the symbols for Earth, Darkness, Water, Air, Light, and Fire inscribed on them. Each was colored according to its element – Brown, Black, Blue, Green, White, and Red. Outside the pie was a featureless gray area.

Rover continued the lecture. “We shall now discuss the six elements of magic.

“To begin, we have the four basic elements, which are Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. They represent the physical plane, emotional plane, mental plane, and astral plane of existence. Over ninety percent of everyone will have an affinity with these elements.

“Then we have the attribute magics of Light and Darkness. These represent the Yin and Yang of life. The remaining ten percent of you will have an affinity with these elements.

“As you can guess, the darkness element is controversial. However, it is part of life and must be understood.

“At birth we are born without any magical affinity. In the most ancient texts, this was referred to as the void element, represented by the gray area. The significance of that has long since been lost.

“At puberty everyone aligns themselves with one element based on their personality and other influences. This is their dominant element. Magic cast using this element is easiest to use and learn. Magic cast with its opposite will be the most difficult.

“You will be assigned to various classes based on your affinity. This way, you can start using magic as soon as possible.

“Next semester you will attend classes in your adjacent elements. These are elements that are adjacent to your own on the element wheel.

“In your second year, you will learn to combine your primary element with your adjacent elements.

“Finally, in your third year, you will learn about your opposing elements. As before, you will learn about combining all elements together. This will give you the foundation for all your growth as wizards.

“As before, line up in front of the elemental dial.” Rover waited for everyone to comply.

Mark ended up last, since he was too upset to join the line. Instead, he just stood in the corner and pouted.

“Okay Mr. Tiikeri, place your hands on both sides of the dial and focus your attention on the center,” Rover instructed.

Harimau did so and the hand of the compass snapped to Fire. “Of course it would be fire,” he gloated.

Harimau walked away with a big grin, opening and closing his hunting knife. Mark could only look jealously at the knife.

One by one, everyone discovered their primary element. Only Mark and Harry remained.

Harry pressed a button on his walking-stick-shaped wand and it shrank down into a pen. He put the pen into his pocket.

Mark felt a twinge of jealousy at the sight of such a cool wand.

Harry stepped to the dial and the hand pointed at Earth. Harry nodded knowingly and stepped away.

Mark lumbered to the dial and placed his hands on the sides of the dial, not caring where the hand pointed. Unfortunately, the hand didn’t care either. It spun lazily around and refused to stop.

“It seems you don’t have a primary element. That’s odd,” Rover said in surprise.

“That’s because he’s a big fat baby who never reached puberty,” Harimau laughed. “What a loser.”

Mark felt worse than before. Now no girl would want to date him. He couldn’t decide whether to cry and run away or to hit Harimau.

“Shut up asshole,” Harry shouted at Harimau, angrily.

“Mr. Tiikeri, another outburst from you and you will get detention. Do I make myself clear?” Rover warned.

“Yes sir,” Harimau replied.

“Mr. Draco, you don’t have a primary element. In theory that means you can learn all types of magic with equal ease, or difficulty. What will you choose?” Rover asked.

“Choose Earth,” Harry suggested.

“Okay,” Mark said.

The lesson continued. Mark didn’t pay much attention to Rover. Both the lack of a wand and primary element weighed heavily on him.

First, he couldn’t get a girl, which was a sign to the world that he was an adult. Then he couldn’t get a wand, which was a sign to the world that he was a wizard. Now, the lack of a primary element told the world he was a big fat baby.

Mark decided that he wouldn’t be surprised if he discovered he was a sludge monster, rather than a dragon, come next year. If that happened, he would have no choice but to change his name and live a boring life and die a boring death.

Mark needed someone to hug and he didn’t want to hug a dude. If only Aunt Flo was here.

His aunt, Flowing Waters, took over as Mark’s legal guardian when his parents turned into transcendent beings. She was always happy to give Mark hugs and kisses when he needed them, and even when he didn’t need them.

Class ended.

“Come on Mark, let’s go eat,” Harry said and placed his hand on Mark’s shoulder.

“I’m not hungry,” Mark said grumpily. Harry guided Mark out of the garden. They left the academy grounds and headed for the shopping district.

Both entered an all-you-can-eat Chinese food restraint. A waitress escorted them to a table.

“Come on, let’s get some food,” Harry said.

“I’m not hungry,” Mark said and sat down.

Harry knew what to do. He had to get Mark to eat.

Harry went to the buffet line and quickly piled food on a plate. He brought the plate back and placed it in front of Mark.

“I’m not hungry,” Mark mumbled.

Harry stuck his face next to Mark’s face. “If you don’t eat, I’ll feed you – mouth-to-mouth.” He said the last three words slowly and deliberately.

Mark cracked a smile. He reached out and grabbed chopsticks. He took a bite of food.

That felt good. He took another bite of food and then another. The more he ate, the better he felt. Mark ate in earnest.

Harry looked at Mark with relief. His adopted baby brother was back to normal. Harry found it amazing how quickly kids could bounce back. All Mark needed was food in the bottom-less pit he called a stomach.

Satisfied with the state of his friend, Harry went to the buffet line for food for himself. Mark joined him seconds later, having finished the food on his plate.

Multiple plates later, Mark leaned back on his chair and rubbed his stomach.

“Man, I’m stuffed,” Mark said, eying the desert table.

“You should be,” Harry replied. “I think you just bankrupted the restraint.”

“I think we should get back to the school. We have a whole bunch of council stuff to do, this being our first day,” Mark said and got up. They paid and left.

While returning to campus, Uncle Arthur phoned. “Hello Mark. How’s my favorite nephew doing?”

“I’m doing great, Uncle Arthur. What’s up?” Mark asked, holding the phone a foot away from his face.

“Are you free over the weekend? I want to buy you a gift as a reward for taking your wizard’s initiation and entering school. You are now a man,” Uncle Arthur said.

Mark blushed with happiness – he like being called a grownup. “Thank-you Uncle, but I don’t need a present.”

“Spoken like a true man. Ha-ha-ha,” Uncle Arthur laughed. “I also need you to help my fiancée’s move. By the way, I just got engaged. She’s a cutie pie. I’ll pick you up Saturday morning and return you Sunday evening.”

“Okay Uncle Arthur, see you Saturday.” Mark hung up.

“I’m glad you have somewhere to go for the weekend,” Harry said. “I will be spending the weekend at Stephaney’s house. She’s going to discover her Second Form on Friday. I want to celebrate with her.”

“Remember to do naughty things to her when you see her,” Mark said.

“Like what?” Harry asked, smiling.

“You know – naughty things. Teenage boys are supposed to do naughty things to cute innocent girls.” Mark opened the door for Harry to enter the main building.

They crossed the atrium and entered the student council room. The other members were present.

“Mark, the package arrived yesterday. You can’t believe how happy Annie is with the present,” Jane said excitedly.

“Did Uncle Arthur write anything embarrassing on the package?” Mark asked.

“It was from Hanna Cortes,” Jane replied.

“Who’s Hanna Cortes,” John asked.

“You don’t know Hanna Cortes?” Jane asked, surprised. “She’s a beautiful and famous actress. The last movie she starred in was *The Princess and the Dragon*.”

“Disney movies,” John nodded.

“That’s not true. She also acted in the romantic comedy, *a Surprising Twist*. It was considered the best movie of the year last year by *Rolling Stones*. She even won an Emmy for her part. She’s becoming rather popular among teenage girls. She’s one of my heroes,” Jane replied.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Harry asked, not caring about romantic comedies. “Can anyone show me the ropes?”

“I can help you out until you’re comfortable,” Maurice said. They walked to another room.

Sylvia guided Jane to a second room.

“I’ll help you with the VP of education stuff. Follow me,” Mama-Duke said. They went to a third room. Mama-Duke showed Mark the location of the various resources and the list of study groups. Mark didn’t see any problem with the system and returned to the main hall.

The only thing remaining was to wait for students wanting help. In the meantime, Mark did his homework. It consisted of setting up his email account and personalizing his Book of Knowledge.

He logged onto the VP of Education account of the student council, after a few minutes of fussing around. Now he could do his council work anywhere he went.

Emerson entered. “Time to go home now,” she said. “The next few days will be busy for you as everyone registers for various activities.” She left.

“Jane, Harry, would you like to join me in forming a study group? We have to join at least one,” Mark said.

“Can another friend join?” Jane asked.

“No problem,” Mark said. There’s space for four more people. Give me the name and I’ll add it.”

“Nancy Radcliffe, daughter of Duke James Radcliffe,” Jane replied. “We are childhood friends.”

“Jane, you have a boyfriend or future husband, don’t you? I hear royal marriages are all arranged. After all, you don’t have much to choose from. Is he in our year?” Mark asked.

“I have four suitors. The youngest is a year younger than me and the oldest is six years older than me. There’s no one in our year,” Jane said.

“That’s too bad. In that case, our study group now has four people. We can add three later if we want…By the way, does suitor mean boyfriend? Since I’m friends with a princess, I might as well learn about these things,” Mark said. He knew the answer but wanted to make small talk.

“Suitors are potential husbands. I will eventually marry one of them but I don’t know which,” Jane said.

“I always thought these things were pre-arranged. I guess I was wrong,” Mark said.

“You’re right, that’s normally the case. However the four families have been arguing about who I should marry, ever since I was two. They’re still arguing,” Jane replied in a resigned tone of voice.

“You should be allowed to choose since all four have equal claim. Anyway, I’m glad I’m not royalty. You’re bound by too many rules. Good night everyone,” Mark said.

Mark headed for the door, feeling tired. He arrived home and went to his room.

Mark sat at the computer and picked up a pocketknife. It had a full cutlery set of fork, spoon, knife, and bottle opener. It had a red handle with a strap. He rarely used it since he didn’t like getting it dirty.

Mark unfolded the fork and held it in his hand, with the strap dangling down. It felt good in his hand. It wasn’t a real wand, but it would do.

Mark got up and practiced wand waving. He was good at this since he had been pretending to be a wizard since he was eight.

Mark watched anime until 10:00 PM, when he almost fell asleep on the computer. He got up and did his bathroom stuff. He went to bed and cuddled his favorite stuffed bear. Seconds later he fell asleep.

3. Earth

They who master Earth   
Masters Life

Mark got up bright eyed and bushytailed. Today was the day the fun started, when he could practice real magic.

The sun was shining, telling the world how wonderful it was to be alive. The birds were chirping, calling people out to play. The pine scented breeze caressed cheeks and tickled noses, showing people how wonderful life can be.

Surprisingly, Harry got up on time. He stepped out of his room just as Mark finished washing his face and combing his moustache.

A thought crossed Mark’s mind as he left the washroom: *How come I don’t have to shave like Harry does?*

It didn’t matter. He never had an interest in shaving. Even as a child, he thought the idea of shaving was too much trouble.

They headed for school. Arriving early, they waited as students trickled in.

The bell rang.

“Okay class, let’s get started,” Rover sad.

“To begin, let me get rid of some misconceptions about magic. Being a wizard doesn’t automatically mean you’re spiritually advanced. Anyone who has reincarnated at least two or three times may become a wizard and graduate from the academy.

“On the other hand, there are many people in the world who never become wizards, yet are capable of ascending to the next plane of existence.

“The size of our spiritual world increases as we gain spiritual knowledge and understanding. Eventually, the size of our spiritual world becomes sufficient to allow us to transcend the physical plane.

“Wizardry is unnecessary for any of this.

“In the beginning, there was no wizardry. Everyone lived a life without magic, reincarnating as both men and women in order to gain spiritual knowledge…”

“Not me,” Harimau interrupted. “I’ve always been a man.”

People chuckled.

“I’m sure you’re a very manly man, Mr. Tiikeri,” Rover said. “However, I can assure you that in a previous life, you incarnated as a woman. That’s just the way of the world. If it weren’t for that, you wouldn’t be in this class now.”

Rover turned to the class and continued, “Mastering the genders is essential for transcendence. However, you don’t need to worry about that now…”

“What about parallel lives?” Ester asked.

“A parallel life is a life where one soul splits into two parts and both parts reincarnate at the same time. One could be male and the other female. As a general rule, neither is aware of the other,” Rover explained.

“In other words,” Mark said. “There could be a female Tiikeri – a large-breasted female Tiikeri out there…” Everyone laughed.

Harimau’s face turned red.

“That’s unlikely,” Rover said. “Living parallel lives is exhausting, which is why few souls do it. Besides, we all have infinite time, so what’s the rush?

“Getting back to the subject at hand, in the beginning there was no wizardry. There was however plenty of interest in the supernatural.

“Various religions sprang up to help explain the world and control it. Unfortunately, no matter how hard people prayed, nothing happened.

“When things went as the supplicant expected, people said the prayer was answered. If things didn’t go as expected, it meant that the supplicant didn’t have enough faith.

“One day, someone discovered the secret of the initiation. They discovered how to step away from the physical and get a whole new perspective on life.

“This allowed their prayers and magical rituals to gain real power. Secret societies formed, where this knowledge was passed down from master to student.

“As time passed, something disturbing happened. They discovered that the use of magic was disrupting the fabric of reality. As a preventive measure, transcendent beings decided to supply wands to wizards. The wands both helped the wizards yield their magic and kept reality stable…”

The bell rang. “I just emailed you some study material. Be sure to read it before class tomorrow,” Rover said as everyone left for the next class.

Mark stepped out of class and approached a girl walking alone. “Hi Samantha, how would you like to go out on a date with me?” he asked.

“I’m sorry…What’s your name?” Samantha asked.

“Go to your desktop and click on the icon ‘People First’. You’ll see both my legal name and my nickname attached to me,” Mark replied.

“Thank-you Mark,” Samantha replied. “I’m sorry Mark but you’re too young for me,” she apologized.

“That’s okay, I understand. See you later,” Mark said and left.

Mark approached a second girl, with the same results. By the time he reached his second class of the day, he was able to ask out a total of six girls.

Mark wasn’t worried. There were over five hundred girls in his year alone. There had to be someone who was interested in younger men.

Mark entered class as the bell rang. Students filled the class, all seeking knowledge of earth style magic.

“Welcome boys and girls. My name is Professor Peterson. I’ll be teaching you about Earth style magic.

“In my opinion Earth magic is the most important of the four lower magics.

“Earth magic is all about nature and the cycles of life. We use it to help purify the land, improve the harvest, and enhance health. Without it, our modern lifestyle would have destroyed the earth and us ages ago.

“Earth magic is also used in construction and physical divination, also known as dowsing.

“It is by far the least dramatic of the four lower magics. No one will notice when it’s done correctly,” Peterson said.

“Okay everyone, please follow me outside.” The class followed Peterson out the back door and into a vegetable garden. “Everyone, please walk around the garden and breathe in the essence of the garden.”

After ten minutes Peterson spoke. “Now come here and smell the rich aroma of this fresh earth. Put your fingers into it and feel its texture. Doesn’t it feel good? Doesn’t it make you feel alive? This is what Earth magic is all about.”

The bell rang. “The sinks to wash your hands are there. See you after recess,” Peterson called.

Mark found he actually enjoyed the lesson. “Wasn’t that fun?” Harry said. “Being close to nature is the best.”

“You are absolutely right. I feel like rolling around naked in the earth,” Mark agreed.

“That’s the spirit. Only by being close to Mother Earth may we feel its heart,” Peterson praised.

The bell rang again and Mark realized he forgot to ask any girls out.

Peterson’s next class was the same as before, except that they had to feel the Earth with their bare feet.

The lunch bell rang. “For homework, I want you to read the first four chapters of *Earth is your Mother*,” Peterson called.

“All that walking on earth has made me hungry,” Mark said.

“You’re always hungry,” Harry noted. “If I ate half the amount you did, I’d weigh twice as much as an elephant.” They headed for the cafeteria.

“Speaking of elephants, your girlfriend is getting her second form Friday, isn’t she? I can’t wait for next year to get my own second form. I wonder what kind of dragon it will be,” Mark said.

“What’s this talk about me and elephants?” Stephaney asked. Harry jumped as he hadn’t seen her approach.

Mark opened his mouth to say something, but couldn’t think of anything that was witty and not insulting.

“I bet you can’t wait for Friday. I have to wait one whole year to find out what dragon I’ll become,” Mark said, completely changing the subject.

“What makes you think that you’ll be a dragon?” Stephaney asked.

“That’s because I’m a Draco. Some clans have an affinity for certain magical creatures,” Mark replied. “See you back at class, Harry. I’m going to eat, and then go hunting. See you later Stephaney.”

“How do you keep track of every girl you asked?” Stephaney asked. “You must have asked hundreds of women since I first met you a year ago.”

“I don’t know,” Mark shrugged. “By the way, do you have any girlfriends who are interested in younger men?” Mark asked. “See you later you two. Remember to do stuff I can’t do.”

“Doesn’t it bother you to be rejected so many times?” Stephaney asked.

“At first, yes,” Mark nodded. “Now it’s more a game to me than anything else. However, I’d like to be rejected for something other than age. Maybe they could reject me because of my moustache, although I don’t think that’s possible. It is after all a cool moustache.” Mark stroked his moustache. “See you later.”

Mark wandered off to fetch food.

By the time lunch finished, Mark had asked and was rejected forty-seven times. It was a good day.

4. Sea of Chaos

Lost in the Chaotic Sea,

We find shelter in unexpected places

Early Friday evening, Annie sat in her room playing with her dolls. She loved her new dolls Mark sent her.

“Would you like some tea, Mr. Dragon?” Annie asked.

She picked up the dragon and spoke for it. “Don’t mind if I do, Princess Annie. By the way, I love that dress you’re wearing. It must be worth a fooortune.”

“Yes, indeed it does and thank-you for noticing. Have some cookies.” Annie placed toy cookies in a tiny plate in front of the dragon figurine.

Jane entered the room. “Annie, dad wants us,” Jane said.

“Okay Sis,” Annie replied, and got up. She followed Jane to her father’s office.

Sitting behind his desk was their father, Ravenswood, king of Washington.

Also present was a strange man in his late thirties.

“Jane, Annie, this is Mr. Adam Daphnis Draco. He invited us to his home. It seems that the actress Hanna Cortes will be giving a private concert for them. He asked us if we want to come,” Ravenswood said. “Would you two like to go?”

“Yay,” Annie said. She clapped her hands.

Jane was also excited. She too wanted to see the famous actress, and perhaps get her autograph. “Okay,” she replied.

“Excellent,” Ravenswood said. “We shall leave tomorrow at 9:00AM - good night you two.”

Annie returned to her room. She couldn’t sleep that night.

Early next morning, Annie got up and dressed. Lady Becky, Annie’s lady-in-waiting, helped her pack for the over-night trip. Annie went for breakfast.

Her mother, Marjorie, queen of Washington sat at the table.

“Mum, dad, isn’t it great? I’m going to see one of my favorite actresses,” Annie said excitedly.

“That’s nice dear,” Marjorie said. “Stop talking and eat.”

Annie ate quietly, annoyed at how unexcited the family was.

Meal finished, they headed for the palace’s main entrance. Parked in front was an elegant and beautiful mega-yacht.

Adam, the man from yesterday, waited.

“Good morning, Majesties, Highnesses,” Adam greeted with a bow.

Adam turned to Ravenswood and said, “This is a pleasure yacht designed exclusively for royalty. It’s equipped with the same features installed in the Drac assault vehicles I told you about yesterday. As such it is suitable for ambassador work.

“I think you’ll be impressed with how well it can help you protect your family in an emergency. We call this class of vehicles chariots and they can handle most things the Sea of Chaos can dish out.” Adam waited for them to enter.

They entered a lounge taking up the entire width of the chariot. Ravenswood looked around in amazement and said, “I could host heads of states in this yacht.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Adam said happily. “The washroom is through that door if you need it. Please follow me to the sundeck.”

They entered an elevator and rose to the sundeck. Comfortable chairs awaited the family.

The chariot lifted off the ground, taxied through the monstrous main gates and past the security guards. It ascended into the sky.

The ground fell away and they zoomed eastwards.

“What kind of armaments does this carry?” Ravenswood asked.

“Our main guns can fire two thousand rounds a minute, and reloading is automatic,” Adam replied.

“We can launch multiple types of missiles. Our tracking system can track a target almost a thousand miles away in many parts of the Sea of Chaos…”

“That’s impossible,” Ravenswood exclaimed.

“We’ve had the system forever, but we chose to keep it in the family. We don’t like giving out military equipment that can threaten us.

“However, we will offer this system exclusively to you since you are our favorite monarch, and Washington is our favorite country.

“Tiikeri Arms can’t develop the type of tracking we have because they don’t live and work where we do.”

Annie stood by the railing and watched the landscape fly by.

A woman in her sixties entered with drinks and snacks. “This is my daughter, Camay,” Adam said.

“How come she looks older than you?” Annie asked.

Adam smiled at Annie and said, “I think you know it’s not possible to judge a wizard by appearance.”

“Mark,” Annie exclaimed. Adam smiled and gave her a secret wink.

“What’s a mark?” Marjorie asked. Annie giggled.

“Princess Annie, how would you like a tour of this chariot?” Adam asked. He turned to the others and said, “You’re free to join.”

“I’ll pass,” Jane said. She sat on a couch and daintily drank tea.

“I think I’ll join you,” Ravenswood said, looking more like a kid than a monarch.

Tour over, they returned to the sun deck in time to see the east coast.

“We are over the water,” Annie commented, surprised.

“That’s because we crossed the continent at over twelve times the speed of sound, Princess Annie. Best of all there is no sonic boom.”

Adam turned to Marjorie. “How do you like the ride so far Majesty?”

“This ride is more comfortable than the planes I’ve flown in before,” Marjorie admitted.

“That’s because it uses our proprietary technology that can’t be mass produced,” Adam said proudly.

Far off in the distance was a huge wall of storm clouds. “We’ll be slowing down soon,” Adam said. “I believe such beauty should be enjoyed at leisure.”

The chariot slowed down and descended to a slightly lower altitude almost as he spoke. They approached the solid seeming wall. Thunder and lightning boomed. In seconds, they entered the clouds.

Within the Sea, you could see surprisingly far. Multi-colored lightning flashed off in the distance. Towards the right, a ball-shaped cloud formed, turned into a Homer Simpson head, and then exploded.

They passed by an island hovering in mid-air. It had trees and a lake on it. Magical animals frolicked.

Jane joined Annie at the railing and both gazed around in wonder.

“Isn’t this place incredible? Since this is a convergence point for multiple realities, you never know what you’ll encounter. This is why we made our homes here, since it’s so cool,” Adam said proudly.

“What kind of magical creatures are you and your daughter that you can fly so easily here?” Marjorie asked.

“We are an unusual clan in that all our members are dragons. I am a fire dragon,” Adam said and blew a fire ring. “My daughter is a water dragon. She likes dousing me with water when she gets angry at me.

“Few other clans can claim exclusive allegiance to one type of magical creature,” Adam finished.

“The Tiikeris are tigers,” Annie commented.

“That’s right,” Adam agreed. “You’re engaged to Prince Dilbert Tiikeri of Switzerland, aren’t you? What kind of person is that prince?”

“Dilbert is an idiot. He’s arrogant, cruel, boring and rigid,” Annie said in disgust. “I feel like hitting him whenever I see him.”

“Spoken like a dragon, Princess Annie,” Adam laughed. “I don’t know if you know this, but dragons and tigers are natural enemies. They always fight when they meet.”

“Are you saying they will have a horrible marriage?” Marjorie demanded.

“If Princess Annie becomes a dragon, then it will be hell for her,” Adam stated. “That’s life, isn’t it? We all have to live with what destiny gives us.”

“Look, there’s a flock of dragons there,” Annie exclaimed and pointed. “Are those your relatives?”

“The correct term is a conquest of dragons. Those are natural dragons, unrelated to humans. We humans borrow their power, as well as the power of other magical creatures when we get our second magical form,” Adam explained. “They in turn borrow our power when some of them choose us as their second form.”

Adam turned to the king and queen. “I hope you don’t mind this little tour. Just say the word and we’ll hurry to our destinations.”

“We are in no hurry. The whole weekend was scheduled for this trip,” Ravenswood assured.

“I’m just happy my daughters are having fun,” Marjorie replied.

“Let me refill your drinks. We made sure we were well stocked for the trip,” Adam said.

Just then, turbulence shook the chariot. “Sorry about that,” Adam apologized. “Even our magic can’t make the trip through the Sea of Chaos completely bump free.

“Look down there. You don’t see that very often,” Adam pointed at a location far below. The king and queen got up to take a look.

Clouds rushed in to a central point as if being sucked down a drain. As it converged, the center glowed. It became brighter, then too bright to look at. “Brace yourselves. We are going to have some turbulence,” Adam warned.

The light exploded. After a few seconds, a brilliantly colored nebula formed. The turbulence hit and Annie dropped her glass. “That’s okay Princess Annie, we’ll get you another glass.

“That gives me an idea,” Adam said. A pillow appeared in his hand.

“We’ll go through that turbulent area for this demonstration.” Adam waited for a few seconds. “Okay, watch what happens when I throw this pillow.”

Adam threw the pillow and it bounced back into his hands. “Now I’ll make the pillow go through the force-field surrounding us.”

“There’s a force field surrounding us?” Marjorie asked, surprised.

Adam concentrated, and then threw. An aurora formed around the pillow as it crossed the barrier. The pillow disintegrated as it exited. Within seconds nothing remained.

“Cool, isn’t it, and dangerous? Even we can’t enter some areas of the Sea, because our magic can’t protect us there. Other places are too confusing to traverse. Don’t worry, we can avoid those regions,” Adam said smugly. “I hope you enjoyed my little tour. We should be arriving in a few minutes.”

Far off in the distance hovered an island with a bonsai tree on the top and mountainous terrain on the bottom.

“The island is over eighty miles in diameter and the tree is over sixty miles tall. Believe it or not but both island and tree are still growing,” Adam commented.

As they approached, they saw more details. The areas surrounding the bonsai and the mountains were covered with forests. From a distance, it looked like moss. “Some of those trees in that forest are over two thousand feet tall and a hundred feet wide. The wood has unique properties we’ve found nowhere else. It’s one of our secrets.”

They landed on a dock near a castle-like structure, near the base of the tree and besides a lake.

“Welcome to Dragonia, the ancestral home of us Dracos,” Adam said proudly.

“Wow, Mr. Draco, you have such a cool home. How come more people don’t live here?” Annie asked.

“Thank-you Princess for your compliment,” Adam said. “You really are a dragon.”

Annie blushed happily at that.

“Other clans do live in the Sea. Each has claim to their own island, but in my opinion Dragonia is the best. All you need to live in the Sea is a strong enough will to claim a vacant island, and the desire to live here,” Adam explained.

Adam turned to the king and queen. “With your permission, I would like to give your daughter the key to our home. It has the power to guide its owner here and only the owner may use it.

“It works in conjunction with our navigation system. We are happy to give this craft to Princess Annie for her personal use. Should the need arise, you may come here anytime you please, instead of waiting for one of us to pick you up.” Adam looked at Ravenswood and waited for an answer.

“Why are you being so generous to us?” Ravenswood asked suspiciously.

Adam frowned at Ravenswood. “It’s called a bribe. We would eventually like you to do business exclusively with us.”

That made sense. Ravenswood nodded. “I’ll consider it, but that will have to wait for Monday. I’m forbidden from doing business outside of normal business hours, except during wars and national emergencies.”

“I understand. However, this is a gift to Princess Annie, so your rules shouldn’t apply,” Adam smiled.

Very sneaky, Ravenswood thought. “What if I refuse?”

“I assure you it already belongs to her,” Adam said. “You may however forbid her from using it.”

Sighing, Ravenswood asked, “One more question. Why was Annie chosen and not Jane?”

Adam shrugged and said, “I have no idea. I was only told to give you this message.”

Ravenswood smiled and nodded. There was nothing he could do so he said, “Okay, I’ll allow it.”

“With your permission, I’d like to show Princess Annie how to use the navigation system. I’ll return her to you at lunch time.” Adam waited for a reply and the king nodded.

They stepped off the chariot and were greeted by an eight-year-old girl.

“We have some entertainment lined up for your family. Please follow Carol,” Adam said.

“Please follow me,” Carol smiled and bowed. Mother, father and sister left for the promised entertainment.

Adam waited for everyone to enter the castle. He turned to Annie. “Hello Annie, welcome to Dragonia. Please think of this as your new home. We’re all pleased that you have come. I’ll show you the navigation system like I promised,” Adam said, dropping all formality.

Annie followed him to the front of the chariot. “That’s the co-pilot’s seat. Please sit down,” Adam instructed.

Annie sat down and the console lit up.

Adam got in the pilot’s chair and pressed buttons. The chariot lifted up and they headed away from the island. In less than a minute, the island was lost from view.

“Now Annie, tell the computer where you want to go,” Adam said.

“Dragonia,” Annie said.

A hologram compass appeared above the console and pointed above and to the left. “Isn’t Dragonia behind us?” she asked, confused.

“That’s one of the problems with the Sea of Chaos. You can’t tell where anything is. Without a proper compass, a person could be lost here for the rest of their life.

“Other clans have their own ways to navigate in this space and find their own homes. Now I shall follow your compass and we shall return home.” Adam turned the chariot in the direction the arrow pointed.

Occasionally the compass would abruptly change directions and Adam would make a course corrections. Annie commented on that.

“It’s called the Sea of Chaos for a reason Annie,” Adam replied. “The dimensions aren’t stable.”

A few minutes later, the island was in sight. Adam guided the chariot in for a landing. The two stepped out and Annie got a surprise.

5. Coming of Age

Most of us grow up,   
but some never do

Mark got up at 7:00 AM Saturday morning.

The first week of school was no different than the schooling he had before. There were plenty of lectures, some homework, and school assignments. Unfortunately, he didn’t get to do any real magic, such as create golems or conjure demons.

Mark asked Rover when they would start to do real magic, and was assured that the ground work was more important than he could realize. In the end, he found out that he would only get to the good stuff next year, when he obtained his second form.

Mark wished he was full grown now and out in the real world, doing fun stuff, like his uncle Arthur.

He didn’t need to be that old though. Twenty-one would be perfect, since that was legal adult age. It was also drinking age.

He had no interest in alcohol. It was more about the freedom to do it than actually doing it. Yes freedom. Magic was all about freedom – freedom to explore the infinite possibilities and freedom to explore other realities. He felt sorry for most people. They were overly bound by rules and regulations.

He packed his overnight bag with the essentials. First came his teddy bear. For some reason he could never sleep without it. Next came his toothbrush and comb. Finally came some gadgets he liked carrying around. He didn’t need clothes since he was going home.

The doorbell rang. “Come in,” Mark called. There was no reply.

“I said, come in,” Mark called again.

“Okay I’m coming,” a voice boomed from behind him. Mark jumped. Uncle Arthur was always doing stupid things like that, but his jokes always got Mark.

Mark turned around and Uncle Arthur gave him a bear hug. Mark felt like all his bones were breaking.

“Always great to see you, my boy,” Uncle Arthur boomed. “Every time I see you, you seem to get bigger.” Uncle Arthur put Mark down.

“So this is your room, very manly,” Uncle Arthur said, looking at a picture of a scary castle, with an equally scary dragon guarding it. “Are you ready to go Mark?”

“Yes Uncle,” Mark replied and they stepped out the door. Mark locked the apartment and they headed for the parking lot.

Uncle Arthur’s chariot was parked there. “Here Mark, you drive.” Uncle Arthur tossed Mark the keys and they both stepped in.

Mark sat in the pilot’s seat and Uncle Arthur took the co-pilot seat.

Mark quickly went through the check-list and turned on the engines. Uncle Arthur entered directions into the navigation system. A compass appeared.

Mark followed the compass and they were on their way. Moments later, they arrived in Seattle. They hovered above the garden of an old house, since there was no space on the street.

They entered the house and Mark got the surprise of his life. There standing in front of him was Hanna Cortes.

“I don’t believe it. You’re marrying Hanna Cortes. How did that happen?” Mark asked.

“I’ve been in love with her for years, but was too scared to propose. Last week, your dad appeared in a dream and said, ‘propose to her, you idiot’. I proposed to her and she accepted.

“We’ll be getting married in two months. Ha-ha-ha,” Uncle Arthur laughed. It always hurt Mark’s ears to hear that screech. Hanna didn’t seem to mind.

“Hi Mark, it’s nice to meet you,” Hanna said, extending her hand. Mark shook it.

“What, no hug? That’s going to be your new aunt,” Uncle Arthur said and pushed the two together. He joined in a three-way hug. “Uncle, aunty, nephew - now isn’t this more like it?”

After the hug ended, Mark said to Hanna, “Thank-you for sending those dolls to the princess. She really loved them. I’m glad Uncle Arthur didn’t send them.”

“Are you saying I’m embarrassing?” Uncle Arthur asked. He gave Mark a noogie.

“When are you not embarrassing?” Mark asked.

“Come on, let’s get moving,” Uncle Arthur said. He went to the garage and opened it. Stuff needing moving filled the garage.

Uncle Arthur took out his wand and pointed it at the stuff. Everything lifted off the floor and moved towards the door. “Okay Mark, please open the back door of the chariot.”

Seconds later, everything was packed. Mark wondered why he was here since he wasn’t needed.

Hanna locked the house and everyone entered the chariot.

“Okay Mark, it’s time to give you your present,” Uncle Arthur said. “Do you know where *Pilchards and Sons* is?”

“I don’t need any clothes Uncle,” Mark protested.

“Nonsense, a handsome man like you can always use a new set of clothes,” Uncle Arthur said.

Mark laughed. “You sound like Guido. Very well, but only to make you happy,” Mark said.

Mark piloted the chariot to the store. He hovered the craft above the store and all three stepped on a platform. They descended. Mark looked up and saw nothing. Uncle Arthur remembered to use the invisibility cloak.

They stepped in and Guido greeted Mark with a kiss on both cheeks. “Good to see you back so soon. I knew you’d come back when you discovered real clothes. Come with me. I have the perfect set of clothes for you.”

As before, Guido gave Mark a set of clothes without asking what he wanted. This time, the clothes looked like something you’d wear for a special occasion.

Mark stopped for his uncle and future aunt to admire. “Excellent, we’ll take it,” Uncle Arthur said.

Clothes in hand, they stepped on the platform. “See you later dear. Have fun flirting with all the girls.” Guido waved at them as they ascended.

“Thanks Uncle for these clothes,” Mark said. “Are they for your wedding?” Mark asked.

“They could be worn then,” Uncle Arthur replied cryptically.

Mark frowned. Something was fishy but he, but didn’t know what.

Mark took the pilot’s chair and said, “Dragonia”. A compass appeared above the console. The chariot turned and they headed for the Sea of Chaos.

“Mark, this is the first time Hanna has entered the Sea. Let’s give her a tour of the area,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Okay Uncle, I’ll give Aunty Hanna an exciting trip she won’t forget,” Mark promised.

“Good boy,” Uncle Arthur said and patted Mark on the head.

“I don’t need a scary trip,” Hanna warned, nervous about what was in store for her.

Up ahead the storm clouds appeared. They penetrated the wall and entered another realm.

“Uncle, there’s a cool island I saw the last time I came here. I’m going to see if I can find it.” Mark reached out with his mind. Where could it be?

An area far off in the distance called out to him. He headed for it. Clouds formed around them, making a tube that looked like the insides of someone’s intestines. Stuff floated around them that appeared like half-digested food.

“Are we in someone’s guts?” Hanna asked, feeling slightly nauseous.

“Maybe,” Mark said. “I think we are right here.” Mark turned around and poked Uncle Arthur in the stomach.

“No. We’re right here,” Uncle Arthur replied and poked Mark back. The chariot jerked.

“Stop that you two. This is dangerous,” Hanna screamed.

“Yes mother,” uncle and nephew said together. They both laughed.

An island appeared far off in the distance. It resembled a seven layer wedding cake. They went closer.

It contained bright green forests, blue rivers and lakes, and red alien writing. On the sides of the layers were waterfalls.

They landed near a grove of trees. “Okay everyone, let’s get out,” Mark said as he led the way.

They stepped out on what looked like frosting. Mark broke off a branch from a tree and nibbled on it. “Happy birthday, you two,” he said. “Happy anniversary, wedding or whatever - here’s your cake.”

“You mean that this is a cake?” Hanna asked, surprised. “That’s impossible.”

“If you mean impossibly fattening, you’re right,” Mark agreed.

Uncle Arthur bent down and scooped icing in his hand and ate it. He looked up at Mark with shining eyes. “That’s my boy. Thank you for this marvelous wedding present.”

They returned to the chariot and took off. “Mark, have you ever gone to Dragonia without the aid of the compass?” Uncle Arthur asked.

“No,” Mark replied.

“Try it. I think you can do it,” Uncle Arthur encouraged.

Mark shrugged. “We can always turn it on again, I suppose.” The compass disappeared. As before, Mark reached out with his mind. Just as before, an area far off in the distance called out to him.

They passed floating eyeballs along the way. The eyes turned to look at them. One of them with a purple pupil reminded him of Annie. For some reason he missed her.

“Are you sure this is the way?” Hanna asked nervously as giant shadowy spiders scurried around the chariot.

“Off-course, I trust my nephew. See, there’s our home,” Uncle Arthur pointed.

Hanna saw Dragonia for the first time. “That looks like a giant bonsai,” she commented.

“That’s the Tree of Life, or the Tree for short,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Aunty Hanna, I just thought of something. Did Uncle mention that we’re a bunch of naturalists?” Mark asked.

Hanna blushed at that. “Do you mean all-natural, as in no clothes?”

“It kind of slipped my mind,” Uncle Arthur confessed.

They landed at a garishly painted house on one of the branches of the bonsai. A forest surrounded the house. Beside the house was a small pond.

All three got off the chariot and Mark handed the keys to Uncle Arthur. Hanna looked around nervously, expecting naked people to jump out at her.

Mark looked at Uncle Arthur in annoyance. “You like your surprises, don’t you Uncle?”

“That’s a surprise I could do without,” Hanna grumbled.

Uncle Arthur unpacked the chariot and moved the stuff into the house. He even placed Mark’s tuff on a couch. “Thanks for helping us move, Mark.”

“I didn’t do anything, Uncle,” Mark protested.

“Nonsense my boy, you did plenty. I have to add, that was some excellent flying. You’ve become quite good at it, I see.” Uncle Arthur slapped Mark on the back and Mark was sent flying.

“You shouldn’t hit the poor boy like that. You could really hurt him,” Hanna scolded.

“That’s okay Aunty, I have a strong body. I didn’t get hurt. It’s just annoying. I think that smack was for ruining his surprise,” Mark said. He helped them unpack.

Half way through unpacking, Uncle Arthur said, “Mark, I need you to do me a favor. But first, I want you to take a shower and change into your new clothes. Make yourself look less like the bum you are and more like my nephew.”

“Okay Uncle,” Mark said and undressed.

“Wait a minute, I’m here,” Hanna objected, feeling embarrassed.

“It’s okay dear, we’re one big happy family,” Uncle Arthur assured.

Mark finished undressing and dumped his clothes with his other stuff. He headed to the washroom.

“He has a cute ass, don’t you think Hanna?” Uncle Arthur asked.

Mark ignored the comment and entered the washroom. Five minutes later he was back.

Mark looked at Hanna. She averted her eyed.

“Look at me, Hanna Cortes,” Mark commanded. “Clothes are one of those things in the world that cause war and strife. It divides people and makes them feel shame. There is no sin in this world, except that which we bring on ourselves. To be a Draco is to embrace freedom.”

Mark dressed in his new clothes. “Sorry for the lecture Aunty.”

“Okay Mark, now that you’re dressed, it’s time for the favor.” Uncle Arthur grabbed him by the arm and led Mark to a red door.

“We have a new arrival to our home. Please go to the docking platform of the Gatehouse and greet her,” Uncle Arthur said and shoved Mark through the door. The door closed behind him. That was a typical Uncle Arthur move. Uncle Arthur’s philosophy was: *nothing beats a good surprise*.

On the other side of the red door was a corridor lined with portals to other homes. The corridor was perhaps twenty feet wide and twenty feet high.

Mark walked to the end of the corridor and stepped into a balcony of a large atrium. Lining the walls of the balcony were other passageways spaced every two feet. Above the balcony was another balcony, just like the one Mark previously left.

Mark walked down stairs and onto the main floor. Crossing the atrium he stepped onto the docking platform.

A chariot approach and landed ten feet in front of Mark. The cockpit door opened and Mark got a surprise. It was Annie, Jane’s baby sister.

“Mark, what are you doing here?” Annie asked, clearly surprised.

“What, no hug?” a man standing beside her asked, smiling.

Mark remembered seeing the man a few times when he went to the Draco hangers in Washington to fly some of the military aircraft. Unfortunately, they never spoke before.

The fact that he was here meant only one thing. He belonged to the Draco clan. Mark checked his name in the Book of Knowledge. Above the man’s head appeared the name Adam Daphnis.

“Sorry Uncle Adam, I don’t like hugging guys,” Mark said.

“I meant Annie, not me. I agree, only girls are worth hugging,” Adam chuckled.

“Did you get my name from the Book of Knowledge? It’s convenient, isn’t it? It makes people think they know each other, when they don’t,” Adam said.

“You don’t know each other?” Annie asked, surprised.

“We have a big clan with countless thousands of families claiming allegiance to our clan’s heritage. It’s not surprising that Mark doesn’t know me. I only know him because of links to his parents, and because he test flies some of our military craft. The same thing applies to you Annie. You have countless relatives, most of which you don’t know exist,” Adam explained.

“Look at the time,” Adam said. “It’s almost lunch time. Mark, please take Annie to the Main Hall.”

“Okay Uncle,” Mark said, and watched the clan member walk away.

“Annie, what are you doing here? I’m surprised your parents would let you enter the Sea, or for that matter come here,” Mark said. He didn’t think outsiders were allowed on the island. That, however, was none of his business.

“Adam invited us here for a private concert. Adam has been doing business with daddy for years, something to do with the military,” Annie replied.

“You came for the concert, didn’t you? I can’t wait to hear Hanna Cortes sing,” Annie said. She entered the Gatehouse and got dizzy.

Annie grabbed Mark’s arm for support. He guided her down a hall lined with doorways.

“This place is scary,” Annie said, and huddled next to him. Mark wrapped an arm around her and comforted her. It felt like he was holding a frightened little sister, instead of the daughter of a powerful king.

“The Gatehouse contains countless dimensional gates. You’ll get used to it after a while. By the way, you’re not going to believe it but, Uncle Arthur is going to marry Hanna Cortes. I just helped them move her stuff,” Mark said.

“That’s incredible,” she said distractedly. “This place is getting scary.” She glanced nervously at the doorways. It felt like nameless things were slithering just beyond view, waiting to devour her.

Mark looked down at her face and thought that she was going to puke. Fear and nausea was having a battle in her stomach and neither wanted to surrender.

This reminded Mark of the first time he went through the dimensional pathways. That wasn’t a fun experience. “You’re braver than me. The first time, I refused to go through. They had to carry me, kicking and screaming. We’re almost there. There’s the exit.”

They crossed the final door and walked a few feet away. Mark felt the dimensions stabilizing around him and knew Annie was fine now. “Are you still scared?” Mark asked.

Annie shook her head, but was still nauseous. “That’s a good girl. Let’s stop for a few minutes until you’re ready.” Mark guided her to a nearby bench and they sat down.

Mark waited as color returned to Annie’s face. After a while Annie nodded, but continued to hold Mark’s hand.

Annie looked around for the first time. They were in a large banquet hall. To the right was the stage.

“Excuse me,” Mark called to a passer-by. “Please tell me where the king and queen are.”

“Right over there,” he said and left.

“Okay Annie, let’s go.” Mark held her hand with his left hand, like a gentleman. He placed his right hand behind him.

They walked towards the stage and found the royal family, as a waitress took their order.

Annie and Mark stepped to the table and Mark pulled a chair for Annie.

Marjorie looked at Annie’s face and got worried. “What happened to you Annie? You look sick.”

Mark bowed to the king and queen. “I’m sorry, but the trip from the landing platform to here didn’t agree with Princess Annie. She has a touch of motion sickness.”

“How can she get motion sickness just by walking?” Marjorie asked, incredulously.

“The path we travelled passes through multiple dimensional gates. The sensation of moving and not moving made her sick,” Mark explained.

“But I didn’t feel anything,” Marjorie objected.

“Neither did I,” Ravenswood agreed. “We should ask Jane when she finishes powdering her nose.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I shall take my leave,” Mark bowed and left.

Annie tried to object when the waitress interrupted her. “What would you like to order, Princess Annie?”

Annie glanced back, but Mark was gone. Annie ordered something and the waitress left.

Jane arrived and sat at her chair. She didn’t see Mark.

Someone stepped on stage. “Good afternoon Majesties, Princesses, everyone, I’m Hammer, your MC,” Hammer said. “We have a whole afternoon’s worth of entertainment for you. To start off, I’d like to introduce to you the singer, Michelle Farrows. Please give a hand to Michelle Farrows.” Hammer clapped and everyone followed suit.

The Grammy Award winning singer stepped out and sang.

In time lunch was served, and then dessert.

Mark grabbed something to eat and absent-mindedly looked at the stage. He had no interest in entertainment, but had nothing better to do.

While watching, Mark read a book entitled, *Infinity and the Mind,* by Rudy Rucker. He read the book twice before, and each time it gave him a headache. Infinity was not an easy concept to wrap your brain around.

Rudy was definitely NOT a dragon. The concept of infinity terrified him. Mark suspected most people were like him in his fear. Mark, on the other hand, was just the opposite. Infinity comforted him, and the thought of a finite world terrified him.

In due course, Hanna stepped on stage. She sang some of her classic songs from her movies and her children’s TV series.

This time, Mark paid attention. He loved the actress and singer.

Back again came singers singing for adult audiences.

Mark looked up to see Adam approach the royal family. He said something and the king and queen nodded. They continued to watch the show, enjoying themselves.

Annie got up and followed Adam. They headed towards Mark. Annie spotted him and ran to him. “Where did you go?” Annie scolded him. “I wanted you to sit with me.”

“Sorry Annie, but we have to follow certain rules while around your parents,” Adam said. “Mark, I suggested to Annie’s parents I give Annie some entertainment appropriate to someone her age. You have until 6:00PM to entertain her. Have fun,” Adam said with a twinkle in his eye and left.

Mark suspected something fishy was going on. He was having too much alone time with Annie for it to be a coincidence. Also, why were the king and queen here? That too didn’t make sense. He pushed the thoughts into the back of his mind. They being here was none of his business.

“I wish you weren’t scared of the dimensions. There are so many fun things to see there,” Mark said and stroked his moustache. “I’ll be back in five minutes…Follow me.”

Mark grabbed Annie’s hand and led her to a balcony overlooking a vast canyon. “Wait here,” Mark said.

Annie watched as Mark ran off. She then turned to the amazing canyon. It was deeper and grandeur than the Grand Canyon. Lush vegetation carpeted the walls, punctuated by vast waterfalls cascading to unknown depths.

The appearance of a flying vehicle interrupted Annie’s reverie. The carriage landed and Mark said, “Now we don’t have to worry about those scary halls. Come on, we have five hours to waste.”

Annie got in and they took off. “This is fun,” Annie cried, as her long pink hair flowed in the wind behind her.

They zoomed through the vast canyon, skirting waterfalls, odd multi-colored granite pillars, and through stone arches.

“Are you scared of caves?” Mark asked.

“I love caves. They are fun,” Annie said excitedly.

“Excellent, then you’ll love this one. By the way, that mountain we’re heading to is called Mount Pilchuck. It’s over forty miles tall, and is the tallest mountain on the island.”

They zoomed towards a sheer cliff. In moments they spotted am opening where water gushed out, falling to a lake two thousand feet below.

In they zoomed. At first the tunnel was dark, with only the carriage’s lights to illuminate the way. Then the tunnel brightened as glowing crystals illuminated the scene. Rubies and diamonds studded the walls.

“Can you feel the dimensional shift?” Mark asked.

“I can feel something, but I’m not sure what I’m feeling,” Annie replied.

“I was the same when I was your age. I wish you could spend more time on this island. You have real talent,” Mark said.

“Thanks, Mark,” Annie said, happily.

The tunnel opened out to a cavern filled with hundreds of openings. One opening took them to a cave with a crystal clear lake. A nearby waterfall sang a melody.

Next came a cave carpeted with strange crystals. They looked like trees and grass. Some resembled flowering bushes.

“Aw, they look so pretty. I wish I could have one,” Annie bubbled.

Mark hovered near a flowering bush. He clasped his hands and said, “Mum and dad, can I please have one of these flowers for Annie?”

A ruby rose appeared on the dashboard. “Thanks mum and dad,” Mark said happily. “There you go Annie, a rose for you.”

“Thank-you Mark,” Annie said and hugged him.

“Let’s do something else,” Mark said. “Would you like to navigate us back out of here? I’ll help you if you get lost. This will be good practice for you.”

“Okay,” Annie agreed reluctantly.

“Focus on where you want to go and the path we travelled. Now point where I should go.” Mark waited.

“We came from there,” Annie said.

“That’s good. Let’s go.” Mark guided the carriage in the direction Annie pointed.

The first few turns went well. Then she got lost. Mark placed his hand on her back and whispered in her ear. “Close your eyes and feel the dimensions around us. Feel their texture and movement.”

“There,” Annie shouted and pointed.

“That’s excellent Annie.” Annie blushed with pride.

With only a tiny bit of assistance, Annie was able to guide them back to the entrance.

“What should we do next? It’s only 1:20 PM. How about hide and seek? It will give you some training on what you just learnt,” Mark said.

“Okay,” Annie agreed, happily. She was good at that game and always found her friends faster than everyone else.

“I have an excellent place. Let’s go,” Mark said and zoomed away.

They landed on an outcropping of rock, surrounded by forests and large rocks. “It’s easy to get lost here if you don’t have a good sense of direction…” Mark explained.

“Tag, you’re it,” Annie interrupted. She covered her eyes and counted. Mark jumped off and ran to the nearest bushes. The whole area was filled with hiding spots.

Mark found a hollow tree and climbed into it.

“Ready or not, here I come,” Annie called.

In less than ten minutes, Annie found him. “Congratulations Annie, you’re the very first to find me in this spot. After awhile, I started hiding in easier to find spots because the other kids complained. Now it’s your turn to hide,” Mark said and closed his eyes.

“Ready or not, here I come,” Mark called. He looked around and discovered Annie’s presence was gone.

Mark ran around the area, looking for her. How could she have disappeared? “Annie, where are you?” Mark called.

After searching for almost fifteen minutes, he felt a blip to the left of him. He ran and found her stuck in a tiny crevice in a tiny cliff.

Mark felt relief as he saw her. “Damn, you’re good. I could barely feel your presence, until you slipped for a second.” Annie giggled.

They played the game for a few more times, until Mark declared that the area was too simple for her.

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“Tag, you’re it,” Annie cried and ran. Mark chased after her.

Annie enjoyed herself immeasurably. It reminded her of the time before her friends understood what it meant for her to be a princess and what it meant for them to be commoners.

They still played with her, but there was a barrier separating them. She had cousins in Washington and other countries, but they were of lower status and there was constant rivalry.

“Tag, you’re it,” Mark said and tagged her. Annie ran and Mark chased.

There was no barrier between her and Mark, just like there was no barrier between her and her sister, since they were of equal status.

The only difference was that Jane was too old to play with her.

As Annie chased after Mark, Mark’s form wavered as if an illusion was dispelled.

The wavering disappeared, along with Mark’s sixteen-year-old form. Replacing the old form was what Annie knew in her heart was Mark’s true form, revealed for the first time.

There in front of her was a ten-year-old boy with long flowing ruby-red hair. He wore clothes that were many sizes too big for him.

Not surprisingly, Mark’s pants fell down as he ran. He pitched forward onto his face as his shoes went flying.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Annie tagged him. “Tag, you’re it,” she said and jumped back.

“Hey, no fair,” Mark said, angrily. “My pants fell down.” He turned around and looked at his hands. They were fully inside the sleeves of his oversized shirt.

Annie looked down and saw everything. “I can see your pee-pee,” she said and giggled in embarrassment.

“Congratulations,” Mark said absentmindedly as he struggled with his sleeves. “Ah-huh,” he said triumphantly, as his hands popped out.

“Don’t you feel embarrassed, sitting like that?” Annie asked. She knew she had to look away, but at the same time, she didn’t want to lose this opportunity of a lifetime. In the real world, someone would have covered her eyes. Her curiosity won out and she continued staring.

Mark looked up at her. “Why would I feel embarrassed around you?”

Annie looked into Mark’s eyes and discovered that his eyes were just like hers. That was no surprise to her. They were, after all, equals.

Mark got up and stepped out of his pants, socks, and underwear. “It’ll be easier to play without this stuff,” Mark commented and looked around. “Now where are my shoes?”

“Tag, you’re it,” Annie said, and tagged Mark. Mark chased her, barefooted.

After awhile, Annie stopped, exhausted. She felt as if she was sweating like a pig. “I’m hot. Aren’t you hot?” she asked.

“I do have some ventilation that you don’t,” Mark said and smiled at her. “See,” he said, lifted his shirt and showed her.

Annie had completely forgotten his half-naked state. “I wish there was a hot spring in the area. I feel like taking a bath,” she said, feeling overdressed.

“There is, nearby,” Mark said and searched for his clothes. “I can take you there if you wish.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Annie said, and grabbed Mark’s missing shoes.

They stepped into the carriage and zoomed away. Five minutes later, they were at their destination.

The entire area bubbled with geysers and hot springs. Mist shrouded the landscape. They stopped at a large set of interconnected pools.

As they put down, Annie shouted, “The last one in is a rotten egg.”

Annie stripped and ran at top speed. She dove in first and splashed Mark as he entered. Mark splashed her back.

After a splashing war, both sat together and relaxed. “I haven’t had this much fun in ages,” Mark said.

“Me too,” Annie agreed and closed her eyes. After awhile, she opened her eyes and giggled.

“What’s the matter, Annie?” Mark asked.

“I just peed in the pool,” Annie said and giggled again.

“So did I,” Mark said, and smiled at her. “You haven’t lived life unless you’ve done that with your best friend.”

Annie turned and looked Mark in the eyes. “Purple grapes,” Annie said. “Your eyes look like purple grapes.”

Just then Mark’s stomach growled. “You’re making me hungry,” he said. “Your eyes look like purple grapes too.”

Annie’s stomach growled just then. Both laughed.

Mark turned and looked at the setting sun. He sat up straight and pointed. “Good grief, look at the time. It’s 5:30 PM. We better get dressed.”

“But I’m having so much fun,” Annie complained.

“Can’t help it,” Mark said. “We don’t want the grownups to catch us, do we?”

That got her attention. “All right,” Annie said and reluctantly followed Mark out of the pool.

“We don’t have a towel, how do we get dry?” Annie asked.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get dry quickly. All we have to do is sit on these rocks and wait.” Mark reached behind him and wrung out his hair. Annie did the same.

Mark sat on a rock and Annie sat opposite him. “This is the first time I’ve been naked with a boy. How about you?” Annie asked.

“Dracos are naturalists. We believe clothes are unnatural. I never thought twice about being naked, until after I left the island. I do have to admit, being naked with you is fun. I think we’re dry now. Might as well dress and return to the real world,” Mark said and got up.

Annie got up and followed Mark.

Mark stopped near his clothes and tried to put on his underwear. “Damn, this is too big for me. How do I revert to my full size?”

Just then they heard a twig snap. Both jumped. Mark’s body reverted back to full size. His hair became short and his eyes turned green.

“Damn, for a second I thought that was Uncle Adam,” Mark said, and dressed.

“Me too,” Annie agreed and dressed as well. “That would have been embarrassing.”

“I know,” Mark agreed, but for a different reason. “How is my moustache?” Mark asked.

“It’s fine,” Annie said, and both got back in the carriage.

As they headed back, Mark commented, “It’s a good thing our clothes are dirt and wrinkle proof.” Expensive clothes were like that.

“I know,” Annie replied, and tried to comb her hair with her fingers.

They arrived with five minutes to spare.

Adam was on the terrace when they landed. “What did you two do?” he asked with a smile.

The two looked at each other and giggled. “Nothing,” both said in unison.

“Let me comb your hair,” Adam said and waived his wand at them.

“You two look as if you had just taken a bath together. I’ll fix that for you as well,” Adam said and waved his wand a second time.

“That’s better. Now I’ve covered up all your sins,” Adam said.

Adam turned to Mark. “Mark, return to your uncle’s house. He has something for you. Leave the carriage for Annie.”

“See you later Annie,” Mark said and headed out.

Adam waited for Mark to leave and turned to Annie. “Annie, what you two did on this island is a secret. Under no circumstance must you tell anyone, not even your sister. Do you understand me?” Adam asked sternly.

“Yes Uncle,” Annie said, intimidated by his tone.

Adam smiled at her. “Good girl. Remember, this is both for your protection in the real world, as well as Mark’s.

“Now I’d like to share a little secret with you. Mark has shown you a side of him he has never shown anyone else. In fact, even he didn’t know about it until he showed it to you. You should cherish that.

“Now come in, your parents are waiting.”

Adam and Annie entered as the M.C. wrapped up his show. “Well folks, that wraps up the show until 7:00 PM. We shall have a dinner show, as well as the main event. See you later.”

“Did you have fun dear?” Marjorie asked.

“Yes mum,” Annie said, beaming with happiness.

“Majesties, one of our fashion designers has clothes he would like your two daughters to wear for the evening. Would you allow them to wear it?”

“Yes please,” Marjorie said.

“He is in the guest house, waiting for you. If you would follow me,” Adam said.

“I don’t want to go through the Corridors. They’re scary,” Annie complained.

“Nonsense, there is nothing scary about those halls,” Ravenswood denied.

“No, I’m scared,” Annie whined and went close to Adam.

“Majesties, Annie has a very special ability that very few people in the world have. She can sense the dimensional structure of the universe, even without going through the initiation,” Adam explained.

“Your hotel room and this hall are actually on opposite sides of the island. Your hotel is on one of the branches of the Tree of Life, and this place is on the underside of the island. A wormhole is used to connect the two locations by something we call the Gatehouse.

“For someone who’s sensitive, that’s very scary. If you don’t mind, I will drive your daughter to your hotel via the long route,” Adam said.

“Are you saying she has abilities I don’t have?” Ravenswood asked, incredulously.

“Yes Majesty. As a matter of fact, I only know one other person with that ability. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Adam said.

Adam shouted at Hammer, who was still on stage. “Hammer, can you please take Their Majesties to the Guest House? It’s Suite #1. Thanks.” Without waiting for a reply, Adam headed for the balcony and Annie followed.

They jumped in the waiting carriage and sped off.

“How do you like your new home Annie?” Adam asked.

“I love it. I wish I could stay here forever,” Annie said happily.

They approached the edge of the island. “Brace yourself. This could be scary,” Adam said.

Annie braced, but found it more disorienting than scary. Within moments a new landscape unfolded. They zoomed towards the Tree of Life.

As they approached one of the branches, Adam commented, “The Guest House is on the underside of that branch over there. I find it easier to zoom over the branch and around it, rather than go straight.”

Annie looked on the underside of the moss covered branch and decided that the direct route would be scary.

They zoomed onward. As they approached, the moss resolved into a forest.

“There’s a forest growing on that branch,” Annie exclaimed in surprise.

“That branch is several miles in diameter. Mount Everest on Earth is smaller than some of these branches. We’re almost there. If you look up, you’ll see the island and the base of the Tree,” Adam said. “And there’s the hotel.”

As they stepped onto one of several balconies, Annie commented, “This branch has its own gravity.”

They walked to the door leading in from the patio. Adam knocked.

“Come in,” Marjorie said.

Annie opened the door and entered. “Mum, Dad, isn’t this place incredible?” she shouted.

“Don’t shout dear,” Marjorie scolded.

“You’re right,” Ravenswood said. “That entertainment was first class. I need to consider commissioning them for some of my events.”

“Hello dear, how good it is to see you,” a familiar voice called out.

Annie turned and discovered Guido standing there. “I didn’t know you were a Draco,” Annie marveled.

“Please come with me dear and I’ll show you the dress I would love you to wear. It’ll look darling on you,” Guido said.

Annie followed him to a bedroom. “Please step in and try the dress out. I’ll be waiting in the living room,” Guido said and waited for Annie to step in. He closed the door after her.

Alone in the room, Annie changed and looked at herself in the mirror. She loved the dress. It had the flavor of the island in it. She couldn’t wait to show it off to her new best friend.

Annie stepped out of the room and into the living room. She twirled around to show everyone the dress.

“That looks beautiful on you Annie,” Marjorie said.

“Thank-you mum, I can’t wait to show it to my new best friend,” Annie said.

“What’s her name sweetie?” Marjorie asked.

What’s her name? Annie drew a blank. She couldn’t think of any name to supply. “Mark…Ma…Markay…” Annie stammered.

“Markainia,” Adam supplied. “She spent most of her time with a girl named Markainia, I was told,” Adam said.

“That’s a pretty name. What kind of girl was this Markainia?” Marjorie and headed to her room. Annie followed.

Marjorie put makeup on and fixed her hair.

“She has beautiful ruby red hair that came down to her waist,” Annie said.

“That’s nice dear,” Marjorie said and continued fussing with her face.

A woman came in and asked, “Is there anything I can do for you, Majesty?”

“Please fix Annie’s hair. It’s a mess,” Marjorie said.

Annie sang a popular kid’s song while she waited.

“Honey, it’s time to go. I don’t want to delay the concert,” Ravenswood called. “A king is always punctual and mindful of times and rules.”

“Yes dear,” Marjorie said and put down her comb. “Men,” she mumbled to herself. They don’t understand the important things in life. Every occasion needed a different look.

Both stepped into the living-room. “My, don’t the two of you look just divine,” Guido said and clasped his hands against his chest.

“Jane, aren’t you finished yet?” Ravenswood asked. “I don’t want to be late.”

“If you wish, Landry can escort her when she’s finished,” Guido said. “Shall we go, Majesties?”

Guido bowed and opened the door to the Corridors. Annie instinctively stepped back. The slight wavering in the air near the door was disturbing to look at.

“Majesties, with your leave I shall escort Princess Annie to the Great Hall,” Adam offered.

“I’m ready,” Jane said and stepped out of her room.

“My, don’t you look stunning,” Guido said. “Shall we be going?”

“See you later,” Annie said and stepped out onto the patio.

As they flew away, Annie commented, “You looked really stiff around my parents.”

“That’s because I hate being around royalty,” Adam admitted. “I always feel they are better than me, but I guess that’s just being stupid. They blow their noses just like the rest of us.”

“You’re weird,” Annie giggled.

As they approached for a landing, Adam said, “Remember to wear your rose. I think it will look good with your dress.”

Annie pulled down the windshield blind and looked at herself in the mirror. She took the rose and placed it in her hair. It lodged there perfectly and stayed in place.

They parked on the balcony and stepped off. Annie stepped in and looked around. She spotted her family sitting at a table and headed there.

“That’s a beautiful dress you have on Annie,” Jane said, not having a chance to comment before.

“Thank-you Sister Jane, you’re looking very pretty as well,” Annie said, admiring her sister.

“Jane, Mark is here,” Annie called impulsively. “Sorry I didn’t tell you before.” She turned around and looked at the entrance. Mark stepped out from the Corridors. He looked good in his new evening clothes.

“Who’s Mark?” Marjorie asked, as she spread butter on a slice of bread.

“Mark is a fellow student at the Academy. He’s the current VP of Education of the student council and is brilliant,” Jane said. “He also has excellent leadership skills. I wonder why he’s here.”

Ravenswood took note of the last comment. He was always looking for new talent to manage civil projects. Running a country was exhausting work, and half the people he had to work with were idiots.

“Please call him here,” Ravenswood commanded as he watched a comedian run around on stage.

“I’ll get him,” Annie volunteered and ran off.

“Mark, daddy wants to talk to you. Come on,” Annie called and dragged Mark by the hand.

Mark arrived at the table, placed his right hand across his chest and bowed. “How may I be of service to you, Majesty?”

Ravenswood looked at the young man standing in front of him. He had short ruby red hair that was military short and piercing green eyes. He bore himself well, indicating good upbringing. His height, form and moustache indicated that the boy was at least eighteen. This should be his graduating year at the academy.

Did he have the ability to handle the civic and military projects that couldn’t be started for lack of leadership?

“Jane told me that you serve as VP of Education for the student body,” Ravenswood said.

“Yes Majesty. I wanted to contribute to the school in my own humble way,” Mark said. He straightened out but kept his hand on his chest.

“Tell me of projects you helped manage,” Ravenswood asked and took a sip of wine.

“During summer break, before school started, I volunteered at an orphanage. They needed help managing their books, since they had to let the last person go. At the same time, I tutored the students and did some necessary work at the place.

“Right now, I can only devote time during the weekend and an hour or two during the week.” Mark said.

The waiting staff brought out soup.

“Why was the last person let go?” Ravenswood asked.

“They found he was cooking the books. I don’t know what happened to him after that,” Mark replied.

Ravenswood was conflicted. He couldn’t talk business outside of normal business hours, but he could find out more about this potential hire. “Please sit down and join us for dinner,” he said.

Annie looked as if she wanted to clap, but Mark gave her a silent warning.

Ravenswood called a waiter and requested a chair. The chair came and was placed next to Annie. Following that the waiter brought a place setting and then soup.

Mark looked at the soup and knew he wasn’t going to enjoy the meal. He took a sip when Ravenswood asked the next question. “What do you do as the VP of Education?”

There was no question in Mark’s mind. He was in a lunch interview for a position the king needed filling.

Mark put down the spoon and spoke of his various duties. After that was done, Mark resumed eating his soup as quickly and politely as possible.

“What do you plan on doing once you graduate?” Ravenswood asked.

Damn. Mark didn’t have an answer to that question. After all, he was only one week into schooling and still had almost three years of school left before he graduated.

In a lunch interview, you’re not required to speak immediately. Mark finished the last of his soup, while thinking furiously.

“I haven’t fully decided my path in life, Majesty. The most important thing for me is being able to utilize my newly acquired wizard’s skills for my career. I have considered teaching, since I feel I’m good at that. However, my field is still wide open,” Mark said and grabbed a piece of bread.

The waiter brought salad and refilled Mark’s coke.

“Have you considered a career in the military?” Ravenswood asked.

“No Majesty,” Mark replied. “That thought never cross my mind.” He looked at his plate, and wondered, w*hy are people obsessed with salad?* He didn’t like salad. He especially hated broccoli.

This was the perfect time to talk, since that gave him an excuse to not touch the rabbit food in front of him.

Mark looked around the table. The king, queen and Jane were enjoying the salad, covered with blue cheese dressing and other expensive but disgusting substances. Caviar should only be served as a form of punishment.

Mark looked at Annie. She definitely didn’t want to eat the salad. Thankfully, Mark had learnt a simple teleportation spell. It only worked for tiny objects and only for distances of less than a foot and others must not see it being done.

“I don’t know anything about the military,” Mark admitted and placed his napkin on his lap. He wiggled his fingers under the table and tiny pieces of salad disappeared from both his and Annie’s plate and landed on the napkin. “Do they require wizards there?”

“That’s a good girl Annie. You must always finish your salad,” Marjorie praised on seeing an empty plate.

“I’m not surprised she finished it. This beluga caviar is good,” Ravenswood said.

Annie stifled a laugh, knowing what Mark had done. She couldn’t understand why adults fed salad to kids.

Mark gave the napkin to the waiter when the main dishes came.

“There is unrest in some of the nearby kingdoms and we are looking for good people who can become officers. They also help when needed in civil emergencies,” Ravenswood said.

“You’ve been working with Jane for a week on the student body council, haven’t you? How is she doing?” Ravenswood asked.

Mark wasn’t sure how to answer that, and so focused on eating.

“You can be candid with me,” Ravenswood added.

“Majesty, I think your daughter has great potential as a leader. However, I feel she is unsure about herself and her ability to lead others. I’m trying my best to help her. I’ve suggested some leadership training, but that will take some time to master,” Mark said. He turned to Jane. “That reminds me, Princess Jane. You should join a local toastmaster’s gavel club. I am a member and I find it useful.”

“Where did you get your leadership training?” Ravenswood asked.

Before Mark could answer, Marjorie scolded, “Please dear, let the poor boy eat in peace.”

“Thank-you for your concern, Majesty, but I’m glad to entertain you,” Mark replied.

Mark glanced at Annie and was happy to see that she was enjoying her food. “My parents were always pushing me to excel. They were amazing people, and I always try to emulate them,” Mark said.

“Didn’t they ascend just a few years ago?” Jane asked.

“That’s right. They became ascended beings at the young age of 435. They want me to beat that record,” Mark replied.

“I remember it mentioned years ago in the news that a wizard couple had ascended at an unusually young age. What were their names?” Marjorie wondered.

“Baldwin and Susan Lucas, Majesty,” Mark replied.

“I thought your last name was Draco,” Annie said abruptly.

“Draco is the clan name, Princess Annie. In our clan we have…I have no idea how many families. Everyone has different last names. Can you image the confusion if we all had the same last name?” Mark smiled at Annie.

“That was their names. They said that was a record age that hadn’t been broken in over 600 years,” Marjorie mused. “So you’re their son – it’s such a small world.”

Desert came and the empty plates were removed. The entertainment continued.

“Annie, you haven’t spoken all meal. How’s school life? By the way, where did you get that rose broach in your hair?” Marjorie asked.

“It’s pretty isn’t it?” Annie said. “My best friend gave it to me.”

“The one with the beautiful red hair,” Marjorie said. “Mark, are you by any chance related to a girl named Markainia?”

“I do have a baby sister named Markainia. She has the same hair color as me,” Mark said and glanced at Annie. Annie giggled.

“How come she’s not here?” Marjorie asked.

“I’m guessing because she’s too young, Majesty. I don’t see anyone younger than sixteen here,” Mark said.

“I am,” Annie said.

Mark turned to Annie and said, “You’re sixteen years old? Congratulations, Princess Annie.”

“No, I am not sixteen,” Annie said, frowning. “Oh, never mind.”

Hammer returned to central stage. “Highnesses, Princesses, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for the main event, the event everyone has come here for.”

Hammer paused for dramatic effect. “Every year, hundreds of our children enter wizard’s school. It is a coming of age for us. As such, we celebrate it with our families and friends.

“Without further ado, I would like our first years to come up on stage and present themselves.” Hammer applauded.

The audience joined in the clapping as a procession of teens headed for the stage.

Mark got up immediately. Ravenswood looked at Mark in surprise but said nothing. Mark walked towards the stage, but people kept blocking the way.

First year students filed onto stage and a woman directed the first arrivals to stand on the topmost step of the platform. Soon enough, the top step filled, then the next lower step.

Finally all steps were filled. Mark, being the last to step onto the stage, had nowhere to go.

“Oh, my,” Hammer exclaimed. “We don’t have enough space. Son, please stand front and center of everyone.”

Mark, face bright red with embarrassment, did as instructed. He didn’t like being singled out just for being late on stage.

“Majesties, if you would, I would like your daughter Princess Jane to come and keep the red-faced boy company. Did I say red face? I meant red hair,” Hammer said. Everyone laughed. Mark’s face got redder.

“Since Princess Jane is also a first-year student, I thought it would be appropriate,” Hammer continued.

Jane jot up and headed to the stage.

“I’d hate to leave Princess Annie out, since she looks so beautiful in that dress and with that ruby rose in her hair,” Hammer continued.

Annie happily got up and walked forward. Indeed, she did feel left out.

“Princess Jane, would you please stand to the right of Markus,” Hammer said and pointed where to stand. Jane did as instructed.

Annie stepped on stage. “Princess Annie, would you please stand to the left of Markus,” Hammer continued. Annie stood next to Mark and smiled at her parents. They in turn smiled back at her.

“Now that all the honorees have been assembled, it’s time to call out the heads of our clan,” Hammer said.

“Majesties, Princesses, clan members, please let me introduce Lord Draco and Lady Lilith, our First Parents.” Hammer clapped and everyone followed.

A bearded, grey-haired man in his late sixties and a beautiful woman in her early twenties materialized on stage. The man looked like God, as painted on the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The woman looked like an attractive dancer from one of the bible stories.

Lord Draco spoke. “Children of the clan of Draco, you have taken the first step in becoming full-fledged members of our clan.”

Lady Lilith continued. “Magic isn’t about doing cool things, like flying. It’s about transforming ourselves into better versions of ourselves.”

Lord Draco followed. “Our motto is, learn through doing, learn through experience, become all that you can be.”

Back to Lady Lilith, “Princess Jane, you may not be my child, but I think we are related in our love for magic and our love for life.”

“The initiation is a ceremony that takes us beyond our physical selves, and into a world beyond anything you can possibly imagine. It is a secret that sadly, few people in the outside world fully appreciate,” Lord Draco said.

Back to Lady Lilith, “The initiation is about life and the joy of living. It’s about growing and exploring and new discovery.”

Both spoke in turn for over an hour. Annie listened raptly, feeling that the First Parents were speaking directly to her, and including her as one of their children.

Lady Lilith asked, “Princess Jane, children, in our clan we are officially recognized as adults when we become Junior Wizards. Why is that?”

Lord Draco answered. “It’s because this allows us to go beyond our initial biology. We extend our lives into a whole new world.”

Annie gazed at the First Parents with a mixture of awe and wonder. There was something radiating from them that was beyond description.

The overwhelming presence of the First Parents was giving her a high that was beyond words to describe. She felt they loved her completely and utterly. When they said, “Children,” they were including her.

Annie fully understood why there was no one under the age of sixteen in the room. Anyone under that age would want to take the initiation right then and there. She herself wanted permission to perform the ceremony now.

The First Parents stopped speaking. Annie felt as if she would explode if she didn’t do something. She ran to the First Parents and gave one of them a hug and then the other.

“I love you First Parents,” she screamed aloud.

The two looked at her with both love and sadness. ‘We love you too, little one’, the First Parents said in unison in her mind. ‘*Your journey will be hard. Be strong.’*

Everyone gave Annie a standing ovation. The clapping was deafening.

Back in the audience, the king and queen tried to get up and stop Annie’s embarrassing behavior, but an invisible force prevented them.

After awhile the applause died down. People returned to their seats, some wiping their eyes.

“Let’s give a big applause to our First Parents. Their love for us is always overwhelming,” Hammer said and clapped. Everyone got up one more time, clapped and shouted hysterically.

The First Parents disappeared from view.

Jane got off the stage and returned to her chair. She and her parents were escorted to another location where more entertainment was prepared.

Annie ran to Mark. He stood behind the stepped platform, away from view of Jane, the king and the queen, as they left the room.

“Aren’t the First Parents incredible?” Annie said. “I wish I could take the initiation now.”

Annie raised her hands to Mark and he picked her up and carried her in his arms. Annie wrapped her legs around Mark’s waist and her hands around Mark’s neck and hugged him as tightly as she could. He returned the favor. He could feel Annie trembling with excitement.

“I know the feeling. I remember back when I was eight years old. I heard some of the grownups talk about this event. The next thing I knew I was behind the stands. I watched as our First Parents gave their speech.

“They knew I was there and they loved me for coming. I resolved right there and then that I would become a wizard,” Mark said. “I think some of the first-years are a little jealous of you, since you got the privilege of hugging our First Parents. I know, since I felt a little jealous as well.”

Annie grabbed Mark’s face in both hands and planted a kiss on his lips. She then covered the rest of his face with kisses.

After an intense kissing frenzy, Mark said, “Your body isn’t shaking as much.”

Annie nodded, “I’m calming down a bit, but I don’t think I will be able to sleep tonight.”

“I know what you mean,” Mark replied.

Mark looked around. “I wonder what your parents are doing. I have a feeling that the Elders will prevent them from bothering us as long as we stay here. I wonder where they went.”

Annie rested her head on Mark’s shoulder and Mark heard Annie’s heart. Annie straightened up and said, “I didn’t know your name was Markus.”

“I’m not sure why my parents named me that. It makes me sound like a Roman gladiator or something,” Mark said. “Are you ready to go back?”

“I don’t want to go back. I want to stay here forever,” Annie pouted.

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible,” a voice called from behind.

Annie turned and discovered a portly, middle aged man with pink hair and twinkling blue-green eyes looking at her. The hair was over two feet long and tied in a ponytail. He wore flamboyant colors and was the perfect example of a hippy.

“Hi Annie, I’m Arthur, Mark’s uncle,” the man said. “I’m surprised to see you here, but I guess that’s only because you’re Mark’s girlfriend.”

Uncle Arthur laughed when Mark blushed. Annie winched at the strident sound. “Mark, I didn’t know you went for younger girls.” Uncle Arthur laughed again.

“Hi Uncle Arthur,” Annie said when the laughing died down. “Our First Parents spoke to me. Aren’t they incredible?”

“I think so. Then again, all Dracos think so. They are the glue that binds us all together,” Uncle Arthur said. “Annie, I know you would like to spend the rest of your life in Mark’s arms, but that will have to wait. We need to return to your parents and pretend we are strangers.”

“Do we have to?” Annie pouted.

“There’s a huge gap that separates us Dracos from them,” Uncle Arthur said. “It’s going to take a lot of time and effort to bridge that gap. It won’t be easy, but I know you can do it.”

“All right,” Annie said reluctantly.

“What’s going on you two?” a voice asked.

“Hanna Cortes,” Annie cried and clapped her hands. “I’m one of your biggest fans. Thank you for sending me those dolls.” Mark positioned himself so that Annie could easily see Hanna.

“You’re quite welcome Princess Annie. Arthur asked me to send them,” Hanna replied with a smile.

“Annie, I have a little surprise for you. Hanna and I are getting married,” Uncle Arthur said.

“I know,” Annie said. “Mark told me this morning.”

“Way to go spoiling my surprise,” Uncle Author said with a fake frown.

“I couldn’t help it,” Luke objected. “The Corridors terrified Annie and I wanted to distract her.”

“You’re forgiven then,” Uncle Arthur said. “The wedding will be in about two months. We’ll think of an excuse to invite you that your parents will believe.”

“Mark, how come you’re carrying Princess Annie?” Hanna Cortes asked.

“Why are you being so formal? We’re all Dracos, aren’t we? You, because you’re marrying Uncle Arthur, and me because our First Parents adopted me,” Annie said.

Without warning, Annie wiggled, shook her head wildly and clapped. “Yeah,” she screamed hysterically.

“Calm yourself Annie or you’ll explode,” Mark said and hugged her as tightly as he could.

Uncle Arthur looked at Annie and said, “Now I see why Draco children aren’t allowed direct contact with our First Parents. Annie is the first person I know who was given this privilege.”

“That’s not true,” Annie said while resting her head on Mark’s shoulder. “Mark said he wandered in when he was eight and heard the First Parents talk about the initiation.”

“Is that true Mark?” Uncle Arthur asked.

“I heard the grownups talk about the initiation celebration and was curious,” Mark said. “The First Parents knew I was standing behind the stands and they welcomed me. I felt then what Annie is feeling now.”

Mark turned to Hanna. “Aunty Hanna, how was it for you?” At this, Annie straightened and turned to Hanna.

“You’re right. It was the most incredible experience in my life. I’m still feeling lightheaded. I only wish this idiot had proposed to me sooner,” Hanna said and hit Uncle Arthur’s arm with the back of her hand.

Someone stepped up to them and spoke. “I hate to interrupt this touchy-feely event but Annie’s parents are looking for her. They think it’s time for her to go to bed.”

“Thanks Brendon,” Arthur said. “Please tell them we’ll be there in five minutes. By the way, where are they?”

“They are in the Rocco Reception Hall,” the man said. He turned to Annie. “Welcome to our family Annie,” he greeted and left.

“We can’t go there. Annie doesn’t like the Corridors,” Mark complained.

“I don’t mind, now,” Annie replied.

They followed after the messenger and entered the Corridors. This time, the Corridors didn’t get bother Annie.

Mark put Annie down at the doors and everyone stepped through. Annie’s parents were speaking with some important business leaders.

“Mummy, daddy, Sister Jane, weren’t the First Parents incredible?” Annie burst out.

“What do you think you were doing hugging those people? I was so embarrassed,” Marjorie scolded Annie.

“Majesties,” Uncle Arthur said. “I don’t know if this is good news or bad news, but Lord Draco and Lady Lilith have chosen to adopt Princess Annie. What this means is that she has the same access to the resources of Draco as us.”

Uncle Arthur looked at the queen. “Princess Annie’s rose is beautiful, isn’t it? We have even greater treasures that Princess Annie has access to.”

Uncle Arthur looked at the king. “Because of this, we are allowed to offer you the types of assistance we can’t offer any other government or organization. This is only because of Princess Annie. You understand what I mean, don’t you?”

Uncle Arthur continued, “Your daughter is still your own. She will still live her life as before. We will not interfere with the free will of others. Other than access to additional resources, nothing has changed.”

“Why would they want to adopt my daughter?” Marjorie asked.

Annie looked up at Mark. “That’s because I’m…” Annie started, but Uncle Arthur interrupted her with a loud sneeze. It was so loud, it caused everyone to jump.

“Sorry about that,” Uncle Arthur apologized. He pulled out a giant purple handkerchief with neon green polka dots, and blew his nose. It sounded like a trumpet.

“I assure you, I have no idea why they want to adopt Princess Annie,” Uncle Arthur said.

“What about Jane?” Marjorie asked.

Uncle Arthur turned to Jane. “Princess Jane, did the First Parents speak to you? I mean in your mind, not aloud.”

“No, they didn’t. They only gave that…speech,” Jane said, making sure she didn’t say anything insulting. She found the event embarrassing. She didn’t like being on stage. Jane only enjoyed the entertainment.

“I’m sorry Highness, but…” Uncle Arthur trailed off.

“What if we choose not to accept this offer?” Ravenswood asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Uncle Arthur said, shaking his head. “Whether you want to avail yourself of our additional services are up to you. However, what has happened can’t be undone.”

Still not satisfied, Ravenswood asked. “What is required of us?”

“Nothing at all,” Uncle Arthur replied. “We are offering this to Annie…Princess Annie because we like her. We don’t expect anything you don’t want to give of your own free will.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ravenswood said.

“Shall I escort you to your rooms now, Highnesses?” Uncle Arthur asked.

Uncle Arthur stepped to the doors and opened them. The king, queen, and Jane followed. All three looked sleepy.

Annie took hold of Mark’s hand and they followed.

Annie felt very little fear or discomfort as the dimensions destabilized around her. She only felt slight dizziness.

They stepped into the guest house and walked into Suite #1.

Mark gave the royal family his formal bow. “Good night, Majesties. It was a pleasure talking to you during the meal. Good night Princess Jane. See you Monday night at the council hall. Good night Princess Annie. My sister said she had fun playing with you.”

“Give your sister this for me,” Annie said and hugged Mark. She stepped away and Mark stepped out the door.

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The door closed and Mark gave a deep sigh.

“What’s the matter Mark, you look depressed?” Hanna asked.

“I just realized something. The only non-aunt to like me for me is a little girl. I can see it now. I’m old and gray, entirely covered with wrinkles and age spots. I come up to a sixteen-year-old girl and say, ‘Hello little girl, would you like some candy?’”

Mark demonstrated by hunching over and pretended to be a decrepit old man with a cane.

Mark continued his skit. “The girl says, ‘I’m sorry little boy, but you’re too young for me. Come back when you’re no longer in diapers.”

A tear rolled down Mark’s face.

“I’d like some candy, you dirty old man,” a sexy voice spoke from behind. A woman hugged Mark from the back and kissed him on the neck. She was a beautiful sixteen-year-old blond with a sexy body.

Mark turned around and gave the girl a hug. He snuggled his face against her neck. “Hi Aunty,” he said.

“Come on dear, let’s go home,” the aunt said.

The aunt led the way, with arm around Mark’s waste. Uncle Arthur wrapped his arm around Hanna and they followed.

As they walked, the woman introduced herself, “Hi Hanna, I’m Flowing Waters. Please call me Flo. I’m both Mark’s father’s and your hippie boyfriend’s older sister.”

They stepped into Flo’s home. “How come you look younger than Arthur?” Hanna asked.

“That’s because my baby brother likes looking like a middle-aged overweight hippie,” Flo said and tossed her shoes to the side. “I’m dressed like this because I want to comfort Mark.

“We took over guardianship of Mark when his parents ascended,” Flo explained and sat on a reclining couch.

“Mark, come here and sit on my lap,” Flo said and Mark did as instructed. He cuddled with her and buried his face in her neck again.

Arthur removed Mark’s shoes and socks and sat beside Hanna on the couch.

Everyone could hear Mark breathing heavily in the silence of the room as he drifted towards sleep.

“I don’t understand Mark,” Hanna said. “He has the physical appearance of an eighteen-year-old boy at least. I know he’s sixteen, since he just did the initiation. Yet when I’m with him, I feel I’m with a sweet lovable child who has just turned ten.”

“I love you, Aunty Flo,” Mark mumbled and his breathing slowed down.

Just then, Mark’s appearance wavered. Hanna blinked, and found herself looking at the cutest little boy she had ever seen, with unbelievably long ruby-red hair.

The fact he was dressed in over-sized clothes made him look even cuter. “Oh – my – God, he’s so cute,” Hanna exclaimed. “I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

Flo and Arthur looked sadly at Mark. “We believe Mark’s body stopped growing just around when he turned ten,” Flo said. She turned to Arthur and said. “Arthur, please help me undress Mark.”

“Why are you undressing him?” Hanna asked, shocked.

“I’m preparing him for bed,” Flo explained.

Flo lifted Mark off her lap and his pants and underwear fell down. Arthur removed them and Flo sat Mark down again. Mark continued sleeping. Next, uncle and aunt removed his shirt. That done, Flo adjusted Mark on her lap and rubbed his chest.

Flo looked at Hanna. “Don’t worry. He won’t wake up…For some reason, he can only fall asleep if he’s in a girl’s arms or if he’s holding his teddy bear. I always sleep with him when I visit him, because I know that makes him happy. Unfortunately, I have such a busy schedule that I can only visit him once a month.”

“I don’t understand,” Hanna said. She felt embarrassed by Mark’s nudity, as well as how Flo was holding him. She also felt sorry for him.

Just then, Mark’s body twitched. “No mama, I don’t want to go back. Please don’t send me back to the Garden. I’ll be a good boy,” Mark mumbled in his sleep.

Hanna couldn’t take it anymore. She sobbed uncontrollably. Arthur hugged her and tried to comfort her.

“I might as well start at the beginning. You need to know this, since you’re family,” Flo said. “We raise our children in a special area on the Tree of Life. It’s called the Garden of Eden. Children leave the Garden when they reach puberty at around twelve.

“Mark grew up in the Garden surrounded by caretakers and friends. Then something happened, we don’t know what. As I mentioned, Mark stopped growing when he reached ten.

“The other kids continued growing, and eventually left the garden. Mark, on the other hand remained.

“For one whole year, he stayed in the garden beyond the time he should have left. After begging the caretakers, they finally allowed him to leave.” Flo kissed Mark on the forehead and continued her story.

“Shortly after that, his appearance changed. Physically, he looked more mature than anyone else. At the age of fifteen, he got the moustache he’s so proud of.

“Unfortunately, his appearance is the product of his sub-conscious mind. When he sleeps, his sub-conscious mind relaxes and his true form reemerges.

“He moved to a school in Washington, and thankfully, made a friend. His name is Harry Banks. I think that Harry secretly always wanted a baby brother, and so adopted Mark, for which I’m eternally grateful. We have someone who can look after Mark, without Mark feeling self-conscious.”

Hanna could say nothing. She just nodded and tried to wipe her face.

“My heart breaks to see how much effort Mark puts into trying to be grownup,” Flo continued. “He has studied more, trained more, than most people twice his age. Right now he’s trying to get a girlfriend because his best friend has a girlfriend.”

“He should be in the Guinness Book of World Records for the number of times he asked out and was rejected by women,” Arthur said.

“Would you like to carry Mark?” Flo said. “I think he’ll be happy to be in the arms of a new girl.”

Hanna stood up and Flo placed Mark in Hanna’s arms. Mark wrapped his legs around Hanna’s waste and his arms around her neck. He snuggled is face against her neck. “I love you, Aunty Hanna,” he said and continued sleeping.

“I love you too, sweetie,” Hanna mumbled and rubbed his silky smooth back.

“Last week, Mark’s father, Baldwin contacted me,” Uncle Arthur continued. “He asked me to buy Mark a set of clothes from *Pilchards and Sons* for the initiation celebration. For some reason, it was going to be a formal event with the king and queen of Washington attending.

“When we came to my place, Baldwin once again contacted me. He said to get Mark dressed in the new clothes and send Mark to the landing platform of the Gatehouse to greet a cute visitor.

“The next time I saw him, Mark was sitting with the king and queen. That was a surprise, Ha.” Arthur said. Mark flinched, but kept sleeping.

“Sorry,” Uncle Arthur whispered and covered his mouth in embarrassment.

Flo said to Hanna, “I spoke to people before the event. Everyone was upset that outsiders were invited to this sacred event. No one knew why this happened. Sometimes the Elders can be a little too tight-lipped.”

“It’s clear now that it was all for the benefit of Annie…Princess Annie. Did you notice how they got Mark to stand between the two princesses? I don’t think Their Majesties or Mark knew that it was a set up,” Arthur said. “After the event, I found Annie in Mark’s arms. You should have felt the love between them. It was beautiful.”

Arthur whipped a pretend tear from his eye, and then continued. “I remember speaking to Annie on the phone. I was joking with her that she was Mark’s girlfriend. I can’t believe that that was the truth. Ha-ha.”

Again Mark jerked his body and again Uncle Arthur had to apologize.

“I’m convinced that the Elders have chosen Annie to be Mark’s future wife,” Arthur said. He turned to Flo and continued, “I talked to the king and queen and told them that our First Parents have decided to adopt Annie for some unknown reason. I think they were fooled.”

“Do you think Annie knows?” Flo asked.

“Most definitely, and she’s very happy about it. In fact, she almost told her parents until I interrupted her. Strangely enough, I don’t think Mark is aware of what’s happening,” Arthur said.

“That’s not surprising. Boys are like that,” Flo said. She turned to Hanna. “Hanna, as far as I know, there are only two ways to become a Draco. The first is to be born into our family. The second is to marry into the family, like you did, or will do shortly.”

“You said Mark is stuck at the age of ten forever. How can he marry…Oh – my – god,” Hanna said in shock and covered her mouth with a free hand.

Arthur nodded. “Annie is destined for the same fate as Mark. She will be stuck as a ten-year-old forever. If Mark were to find out, he would do everything in his power to stop it.”

Just then Mark spoke. “You smell nice, Aunty Hanna.” He kissed her neck and continued sleeping.

The unfairness of it all got to Hanna. The Elders were responsible for all the suffering that Mark has gone through and all the suffering Annie would eventually go through. For what reason, only the Elders knew.

“That’s horrible,” Hanna screamed, right in Mark’s ear.

Mark jerked upright. His body reverted to teenage form but his weight remained the same.

Mark looked around, confused. One minute he was cuddling in Aunty Flo’s arms and the next he was in Aunty Hanna’s arms.

Mark quickly regained his composure, and smiled down at Hanna. “Aunty Hanna, have you been doing naughty things to me?” he asked, resting his hands on Hanna’s shoulders. “You know your husband will get jealous if you fool around with another man.”

Hanna burst out crying.

“Are you okay Aunty? I’m sorry. I was only joking,” Mark said in a worried tone and wiped a tear form Hanna’s face.

“They’re all horrible,” Hanna screamed. She lowered Mark’s feather-light body to the ground and ran into the Corridors. Arthur hesitated for a moment and then followed.

Mark realized something adult had just happened and knew not to comment. He just stood there and waited.

“Mark, go to bed. You had a very long day. Remember to brush your teeth,” Flo said.

“Yes Aunty,” Mark said and headed for the washroom.

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As expected, Annie couldn’t sleep. She sat on the bed and played with her dolls.

“Hello Mr. Dragon, did you have fun today?” Annie spoke for the princess.

“Yes Princess Annie, I loved playing hide-and-seek with you,” the dragon replied.

“Annie, please go back to sleep,” Marjorie called. “It’s 2:00 AM.”

“But I can’t sleep,” Annie grumbled. She looked at the rose sitting on the table, turned off the lights and lay in bed. She reviewed the events of the day. In due course, the room brightened as the rays of the sun entered.

A thought occurred to her. How come there was a sun orbiting this island, when there was none when they approached? Mystery…

Finally Annie felt sleepy, when it was almost time to get up. She barely closed her eyes when her mother called. “Annie, it’s almost 10:00 AM. Get up and have some breakfast.”

Annie closed her eyed and pretended she didn’t hear that. Unfortunately, her mother was too annoying to ignore.

Annie got up, went to the bathroom, brushed her teeth and took a shower.

She stepped into the living room and found her father, mother, and sister sitting down, watching the news.

“Young lady, what do you think you’re doing? Aren’t you forgetting something?” Marjorie scolded her.

Annie looked confused. “I took a bath and brushed my teeth,” she said.

“What about your clothes?” Marjorie scolded.

Annie looked down and realized that she was naked. “Oops,” Annie giggled and returned to her room.

Annie quickly dressed and returned to the living room. “Princess Annie, breakfast is ready,” a woman called from the kitchen.

Annie entered the kitchen and saw the woman. She made sure that she was alone and hugged the woman.

The woman smiled at her and whispered, “Good morning Annie. Finish your breakfast before it gets cold.”

“Yes Aunty,” Annie said and did as instructed.

As she ate, she saw two other women come and take their luggage away.

“Are you finished dear? It’s time to go,” Marjorie called from the living-room.

“Yes mum,” Annie replied. She hugged the woman in the kitchen one more time and left the kitchen.

Adam was there, waiting to take the family away.

Annie ran to Adam, but he stopped her with a formal bow. “Good morning Princess Annie. I hope you slept well.”

Adam turned to the rest of the family and said, “Are you ready to go? Everything should be packed now.”

“Thank you for your hospitality. The entertainment was excellent,” Ravenswood said.

Adam opened the suite door and waited for everyone. Annie stood next to Adam. Adam stepped out and everyone followed.

They walked through several corridors and arrived at the Gatehouse atrium.

Mark, Uncle Arthur, Hanna, and a woman Annie never saw before greeted them.

“Hello Majesties, Princess Jane, what did you think about yesterday’s entertainment?” Uncle Arthur asked.

“I think you’re the funniest…” Jane started. Uncle Arthur tuned out the rest of Jane’s speech and only pretended to listen. Fortunately, introverts can talk a lot when they get excited and Uncle Arthur needed the cover.

Under the cover of Jane’s monologue, Uncle Arthur spoke to Annie’s mind. ‘Hi Annie, I bet you want to gossip to someone about Mark.’

“Un-huh,” Annie said excitedly.

Marjorie looked down at her daughter. “Did you say something dear?”

Annie shook her head.

‘Think back at me. Don’t speak. I’ll contact you later. I’ll also arrange for Hanna to contact you.

‘Remember you can only talk freely with us,’ Uncle Arthur admonished.

‘And Uncle Adam?’ Annie asked.

‘Yes dear, him too,’ Uncle Arthur replied.

With that, they waited for Jane to finish speaking.

“Princess Jane, I’m glad you enjoyed our entertainment. If you like, Hanna and I can come to your place and entertain you whenever we are free,” Uncle Arthur said. “How would you like that Princess Annie?”

“Yeah,” Annie cried and clapped her hands.

“Is this one of your services for adopting our daughter?” Ravenswood asked.

“Who knows? Maybe I’m doing this as a promotional thing. Whether you want to commission us for concerts is entirely up to you,” Uncle Arthur said with a smile.

Adam turned to Ravenswood. “Majesties, Mark will fly you back home…”

Ravenswood interrupted. “Isn’t he a little young…”

“I’m sixteen,” Mark said angrily.

“Markus Lucas Draco, calm yourself,” Uncle Arthur scolded Mark.

Uncle Arthur turned to Ravenswood and apologized. “I’m sorry Majesty, but Mark is very sensitive about his age.”

Ravenswood looked at Mark in shock. “He’s sixteen? I thought he was eighteen.”

A huge grin broke across Mark’s face. He couldn’t help it, he was so happy. He ran to Ravenswood and gave him a big hug, “Thank you dad.”

Mark pause, realizing what he had just done. Mark stepped back, made a fist with his left hand and placed it against the flat of his right palm. The arms were horizontal to the floor. Mark bowed. “Please forgive me, Majesty. I don’t know what came over me.”

Ravenswood seemed a little confused. He wasn’t used to being hugged. He was also not used to people not fearing him, or not wanting to take advantage of him.

“It’s that moustache, isn’t it daddy?” Annie asked, giggling.

“Yes dear,” Ravenswood said, regaining his senses. “I didn’t know a sixteen-year-old boy could grow one like that.”

High praise indeed! Mark gave Ravenswood his special bow. “I assure you, Majesty, that I’ll do everything in my power to keep your two daughters, as well as your beautiful wife, safe.”

“Mark started flying when he was your daughter’s age,” Uncle Arthur said, proudly. “He took his first solo flight through the Sea at the age of fourteen. He has a commercial flying license, and has flown all the military vehicles we sell. He’s crazy about flying.”

*It’s all about freedom*, Mark thought to himself.

Ravenswood nodded. “I’m impressed. Very well then, I shall trust in your judgment.”

“Thank-you for your faith in my nephew,” Uncle Arthur said and bowed. “Have an uneventful trip home, Majesties, Princesses, Mark.”

They stepped onto the landing area. There in front of them was the promised chariot. It was painted in the royal colors of purple and blue.

The side of the chariot had the name, *Princess Annie*, written in large gold letters. Beside it was the royal insignia.

“As promised, here is the *Princess Annie*,” Adam said.

“Cool, it’s named after me,” Annie said and clapped.

Ravenswood looked at the present and wondered once again what their angle was. A thought occurred. They mentioned that Annie had a unique ability that only one other person had. Maybe they wanted that talent. Ravenswood was finally satisfied, convinced he understood the situation.

Annie pressed a panel and the door opened. Her family stepped in.

“See you later Uncle Arthur, Aunty Flo, Aunty Hanna,” Mark said and hugged them.

Mark and Annie stepped in and Annie pressed a button. The door closed. Fear gripped Mark. He was transporting royalty. The only people he had transported before were uncles and aunts.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen, I shall be our hostess for this flight. Pleas follow me to your seats,” Annie greeted and led the way.

Annie stopped at presidential style seats and said, “Please have a seat as we entertain you with an in-flight movie.”

“Thank you stewardess Annie,” Jane said with a smile.

“If you’ll excuse me, I shall navigate this ship back home,” Annie said and bowed. She turned to Mark and said, “Let’s go captain. It’s time we left this rock.”

Mark smiled and went forward. Annie followed.

They stepped into the next compartment and closed the door. Two compartments later, and they were in the cockpit. Mark dropped off his backpack in a cargo storage bay and sat down in the pilot’s chair.

Annie sat in the co-pilot’s chair and said ‘Home’. The compass appeared.

Annie looked at Mark. He looked terrified. “What’s the matter, Mark?” Annie asked.

“I’ve never transported such important people in my entire life. I’m a little nervous,” Mark said.

“They’re only my parents and sister,” Annie pointed out.

“That alone makes them important. They are also the king and queen of an entire nation.” Mark closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. “Please mum and dad, let everything go well.”

Mark opened his eyes, took a deep breath, and did an instrument check. Seeing that all was in order, Mark started the engines. The craft rose gently from the platform.

Mark oriented the craft in the direction pointed by the compass and they moved forward.

Mark focused all his attention on the instruments and the feeling in his guts. He carefully guided the craft around as many unstable areas as he could, trying to make the trip as smooth as possible.

Annie looked at Mark. “Calm down Mark, you’re making me nervous.”

Turbulence buffeted the chariot. “Tig-poo,” Mark cursed.

“Tig-poo?” Annie asked.

“Tiger poo,” Mark said. “Don’t tell your dad I thought you that word.”

They continued. Ten minutes passed.

Annie tried to distract Mark. “Mark, you looked really cute in your long hair, just like a little girl.”

Mark frowned at her and said, “Thanks a lot.”

Annie giggled, realizing that boys don’t like to be told that.

They continued flying. Finally, they burst out of the Sea of Chaos and into a sunny day. Mark gave a sigh of relief. That felt like the longest trip in his life. They continued flying.

They soon landed at the front gate of the palace grounds. Mark waited as a guard approached. “I’m transporting Their Majesties,” he called. “I don’t know where to park to let them off.”

The guard spoke to someone on a walkie-talkie. That someone said that everything was in order.

“Let me on, and I’ll guide you,” a guard said.

He got on and looked at Mark in surprise. “Aren’t you a little…”

“Don’t say it,” Annie warned.

The guard turned and looked in surprise at Annie. “Princess Annie,” he said under his breath.

“Move forward, then left, and then right…stop there,” the guard said.

“I’ll need you to tell me where to park this vehicle,” Mark said.

“I know where to go, I’ll show you,” Annie said.

“If you’ll excuse me,” the guard said and left, happy to go.

Both Mark and Annie walked back to the passengers. “Thank-you for flying Air Annie,” Mark said. “I hope you had a comfortable flight. Princess Annie said she’ll show me where to park the chariot, if that’s okay with you.”

Ravenswood nodded. The royal passengers got off. “See you at the council room tomorrow,” Jane said and waved.

“Okay,” Mark said and waved back.

Seconds later, palace staff entered the chariot. Mark showed them where the luggage was stored. They got off and Annie closed the door. They went forward to the cockpit. Annie gave directions to the hanger.

“I wish I could fly. It looks like fun,” Annie said.

“I doubt your parents would allow it. The only reason my parents allowed me to learn was because they are kind of strange. Then again, all Dracos are strange. As Uncle Arthur likes saying, ‘to be a Draco is to be strange’.”

Mark entered the royal hangers and parked in an empty spot. He shut off the engines and powered off the chariot. He pocketed the keys.

Mark slumped all the way down in the chair, exhausted. “Man, I haven’t been that scared in all my life. I think I almost peed my pants when that turbulence hit.”

Mark turned and looked at Annie. “That was some excellent navigating. I think I shall hire you permanently.”

Mark got up and placed his backpack on.

Mark stepped out of the chariot and Annie followed. Mark closed the door and handed the keys to Annie. They headed back to the palace.

“How do I become strange?” Annie asked.

Mark thought about that for a few moments. “Let’s see now. You could start by watching some immersive novels…but your parents won’t allow you to watch that,” Mark said, speaking slowly.

“Watch the movie, the *Air and Me*. It’s about a woman named Amelia Earhart.

“She came from an alternate reality very similar to our own world. In their world, there’s no magic. It seems the secret of the initiation was never made public.

“In that world, Washington is just a…what they call a state in a mega-country called the United States. Also, there are no kings or royalty…”

“A world without royalty, that’s impossible,” Annie laughed.

“It’s true. They elect a person they hope will do a good job running the country…Coming back to Amelia Earhart; she was a pioneer of aviation in her world and famous for many reasons.” Mark said. “One day she accidently flew into the Sea of Chaos…”

“How could anyone accidently fly into the Sea of Chaos?” Annie asked.

They stopped in front of the palace.

“In that reality, the Sea is almost non-existent. It appeared rarely and so most people don’t believe it exists,” Mark replied. “She was flying near the tiny country of Bermuda when the Sea opened up around her. She fell in. An hour later, she appeared in our world.

“I’ll pass on some assignments to you through Jane. See you later Annie,” Mark said.

“Have you ever been to that world?” Annie asked.

“Once, with my parents,” Mark said. “I didn’t like their world. I found it lacked color and vitality…Did you know only humans can talk there? They don’t believe in magical creatures and so magical creatures don’t visit.

“Everyone has drab looking hair and eye color. For instance, you won’t find beautiful eyes such as yours there, or even hair like yours. Come to think of it, I doubt that your particular shade of pink even exists in that world. I’m glad to be born in this world filled with magic and cute princesses.

“See you later Annie,” Mark said.

“Okay Mark,” Annie said and hugged him. She ran up the stairs and into the palace.

Mark walked away, feeling slightly depressed. He needed a girl. The only way to do that was to become more like an adult, more like Harry. That meant watching more immersive novels and handling more adult responsibilities.

That was for later. Now he had to go eat and maybe gain some weight. Seventy-three pounds was too little for a 6”2’ man.

Mark opened a physics book he just bought, entitled, *the* *Dimensional Flow of Matter*. It appeared in the second screen in his head. He read while walking.

Just then Adam emailed Mark information on the *Princess Annie*. It included technical information, as well as the users’ manual.

Mark sighed. That was just two more books in his backlog of books he needed to read.

Speaking of work, he still had his volunteer job at the orphanage to do, and then there was wand practice.

Mark chuckled humorlessly – wand practice without a wand wasn’t much fun.

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“Hello Mrs. Windermere, hello kids,” Mark called out as he greeted the residents of the local orphanage he did volunteer work for.

Some of the kids, notably the younger ones, came and greeted him.

“Hello Mark,” Mrs. Windermere called from the kitchen. She was cooking something. “You didn’t have to come today. Aren’t you tired from moving yesterday?”

“I didn’t do any moving. That was just an excuse to get me to go to the Island…Dragonia. It seems they were having a party for us first year students who just went through their initiation ceremony. The clan heads were there as well and made a speech,” Mark said.

“Listen up everyone,” Mark called aloud. “You’re not got going to believe who my uncle is going to marry…”

“Hanna Cortes,” a girl with purple ponytails and green eyes said.

That surprised Mark. *How did you…*, Mark thought, but spoke aloud, “You’re very smart Josephine. How did you know?”

“They said on the news that she was going to marry someone from the Draco clan,” Josephine said.

“Well Josephine, just for being smart, I’m going to invite you to the wedding,” Mark said.

“Woo-Hoo,” Josephine said, and clapped her hands.

“Okay everyone, which of you is smart?” Mark called out.

All the little kids raised their hands and jumped around. The older kids were more laid back.

“In that case, I shall invite everyone,” Mark announced. “Everyone is going to a celebrity wedding.”

Everyone ran around, jumping and screaming.

Mark looked at Mrs. Windermere. “I suppose I should have asked you first before inviting everyone. You’re of course coming. With the kids, that makes fifteen people.”

“Please dear, you shouldn’t have. Such high-floating events aren’t for the likes of us,” Mrs. Windermere complained.

“No problem, Mrs. Windermere,” Mark said, already composing an email to his uncle with the list of people to invite. In less than a minute he completed it, but did not send it. Instead, he called his uncle.

“Hello Uncle Arthur,” Mark said and placed his phone on speaker mode.

“Hello Mark, always good to hear you,” Uncle Arthur greeted, shouting so loudly, it distorted the sound. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m at the orphanage where…” Mark started.

“And you wanted to invite some of your little friends. No problem. Just send me the names and I’ll give them official invitations. That reminds me, do they have anything to wear? No problem, I’ll think of something,” Uncle Arthur said.

Mark pressed the send button and the email was on its way. “Okay everyone, say thank-you Uncle Arthur.”

In unison everyone screamed, “Thank-you Uncle Arthur.”

“You’re quite welcome, kids. I always love making children happy. Bye,” Uncle Arthur said and hung up.

“Okay kids, it’s time to play. What games do you want to play?” Mark called out.

As expected, everyone wanted to play a different game. Also as expected, everyone was overly hyper because of the invitation and promised clothes.

“Mark, you did your initiation. Can you do any magic?” eight year old Brad asked.

“Yes,” Susan called. Others clamored as well.

“Okay kids, I only know three spells. That’s not surprising since I only started last week,” Mark said. “The first spell is teleportation. I shall make this coin disappear and reappear in Susan’s pant pocket.”

Mark covered the coin with one hand and made a throwing motion with his other hand. “Ah la Ka Zam,” Mark said.

Susan checked her pocked, and sure enough it was there. “That wasn’t wizardry,” John said. “That was just a magic trick.”

“Then how do you explain the coin in your hair?” Mark asked.

“I don’t have a coin in…” John started, but then felt his hair. Sure enough, there was the coin.

Mark had to do the trick for the other kids. Finally they wanted the second trick. Mark went to the kitchen and brought back a glass of dirty water. He waved his hands over the water and spoke the magic words. The dirt disappeared from the water and Mark drank it.

“Okay kids, this is my third and final trick,” Mark said. He placed a bottle cap on the table and cast the spell. The bottle cap zoomed and hit a vase. The vase fell down and spilled water everywhere.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Windermere, I didn’t expect that to happen,” Mark said and ran to get a towel. He returned and cleaned up the mess. Fortunately there was no harm done. “The last time I tried that spell, the bottle cap barely moved.”

Perhaps it was the group of kids expecting something to happen. The power of expectation was the greatest tool in the arsenal of a wizard.

“It’s quite all right dear, we all make mistakes,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“I’m going to exercise them more, and then tell them some stories after dinner, unless you need me to do something else,” Mark called.

“Okay dear,” Mrs. Windermere replied.

They continued playing.

“For a ten-year-old boy you’re quite cool,” twelve year old Billy said.

“That’s because I have a cool moustache,” Mark replied. For some reason, it didn’t bother Mark if a child called him a brat.

“Okay everyone, it’s time to wash up for dinner,” Mrs. Windermere called. They all did as instructed. Mark went to help set the table.

“What’s planned for the evening?” Mark asked.

“I want them to do some studying,” Mrs. Windermere replied.

“I’ll finish some of the chores on the to-do list. By the way, your cooking is always incredible. I can’t wait to eat,” Mark said and went to wash up.

As expected, the food was delicious.

Dishes put away, Mark started on the chores. He loved working with children because it made him feel manly. It was a man’s duty to care of children.

Chores done, Mark headed to the laundry room. Mrs. Windermere was doing laundry. For reasons unknown to Mark, there was always laundry to do. It was like magic.

Mark only bothered to wash his clothes every two to three weeks.

“I guess I should be going Mrs. Windermere. I need to practice my magic,” Mark said.

“Thank you for everything dear. I don’t know how to repay you for all the things you do for me,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“I work by the hour, Mrs. Windermere. I expect one hug an hour and two on Sundays,” Mark replied.

“Here you go,” Mrs. Windermere said and hugged Mark. “I wish I could give you more.”

“You can always make sweet love to me,” Mark whispered in Mrs. Windermere’s ear in the sexiest voice he could muster.

Mrs. Windermere chuckled. “No I mean it.”

“I mean it too. I want to make love to you,” Mark said in his huskiest voice.

“You’re a sweet boy,” Mrs. Windermere said.

Mark pulled back and replied in a pained voice. “Please don’t call me sweet. If you want to thank me, tell me I’m manly. Just, don’t, call me sweet.”

Mrs. Windermere seemed unsure of what to say, knowing she had hurt Mark’s feelings.

“I’ll go to the ends of the world for you, do anything for you, I’ll even donate my left kidney. I only ask that you treat me like a man,” Mark whimpered.

“I’m sorry dear. You really are the most mature person I know. You are helpful, loving, caring, generous,” Mrs. Windermere replied. “You’re manlier than most men I’ve dated.”

Mark’s mood instantly changed. “Mrs. Windermere, thank-you for acknowledging me. So tell me, it’s the moustache, isn’t it?”

“Yes dear, it’s the moustache,” Mrs. Windermere replied and briefly wondered how it was possible for a ten-year-old boy to grow a moustache or go to the Magic Academy for that matter.

“Good night, Mrs. Windermere,” Mark said and headed for the door. “By the way, I was serious about wanting to make love to you,” he added as he left.

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Monday was pretty much the same for Mark as the previous week. There were lectures, followed by simple assignments to demonstrate basic skills, followed by more lectures.

Evening came and Mark headed for the student council room. Everyone was present in the main room.

“Hi Jane,” Mark said. “What did you think of Saturday’s event?”

“What event?” Sylvia asked.

“The Draco clan held a concert to celebrate the fact that their children had taken their wizard’s initiation. Mum, dad, Annie and I were invited to the concert where Hanna Cortes and Arthur Lucas performed,” Jane replied.

Jane turned to Mark. “Mark I didn’t know you were related to Arthur Lucas. The man is funny as hell. In my opinion he is the funniest comedian in the world. I was dying listening to his jokes and one-liners. I’m glad Annie wasn’t there. She’s too young to know about boys and sex. She’s never been with a boy before.”

Jane got serious for a moment. “What was that about you wanting to adopt Annie into your clan?” Jane asked.

“That’s the first I heard about that. You should know better than anyone how special Annie is. By the way, that’s confidential. No one must know, not until after your father accepts our invitation,” Mark said.

Jane covered her mouth in embarrassment. “Oops, I’m sorry,” she said.

“I read in a celebrity blog that Hanna Cortes and Arthur Lucas were getting married,” Sylvia said.

“Get out of town,” Jane said excitedly. “I went to the concert just to see Hanna Cortes.

“She’ll be starring in a romantic comedy coming out March. It’s already getting rave reviews. I can’t wait to watch it. Oh man, I wish I could attend her wedding. I’m sure it would be fun.”

“If you like, I can get an invitation for you and Annie,” Mark said. He turned to the others. “Would any of you like to attend as well?”

“How can you get invitations for us?” John asked, perplexed.

“Aren’t you forgetting something? Hanna Cortes is marrying my uncle Arthur Lucas,” Mark said.

Jane looked at Mark and said, “You’re so lucky. You can get to hear his jokes all the time.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not into adult comedy,” Mark said. “Give me the names of your dates and I’ll ask my uncle to send you invitations.”

The other council members gave the names and Mark sent the email.

Everyone dispersed to their respective rooms to work. Mark followed Jane and spoke to her when they were alone.

“Jane, you said you were too shy to talk to Hanna Cortes. Remember she’s going to be my sister-in-law, or aunt-in-law, when she marries my uncle. There is no reason for you to be shy,” Mark said.

“I suppose,” Jane said, uncertainly.

“I know Annie likes her. You’re doing your sister a favor by inviting her to your place. By the way, I just thought of something. How would you like to do some acting with her? I’m sure it can be arranged if you want,” Mark said.

“I’ve never done any acting,” Jane said. “How will I handle the love scenes?”

“You can always practice on me. I’m always happy to lend my lips to a good cause,” Mark offered with a smile. “Think about it. As for acting skill, Hanna Cortes can give you all the training you need.”

Jane nodded. “I’ll think about it,” she said.

“Think about what, the acting or the part about kissing my lips?” Mark asked.

“Both,” Jane said and blushed.

“Both Hanna Cortes and my lips are here to serve,” Mark said with a bow and left the room. He entered the VP of Education office and began his work.

Mark was happy how things went. He looked forward to kissing a girl who wasn’t a relative or a child. That would be a great accomplishment.

For the first time in his life, Mark considered a career in acting. Acting allowed him to be in a relationship without actually being in a relationship. This would prevent his curse from showing up. The possibilities were endless.

Mark sent Hanna Cortes an email before he forgot.

Once everyone’s respective work was completed, they got together to discuss next week’s festival to celebrate the fact that the second year students attained their second form.

“I’ve spoken to the coordinators for Saturday’s event. Everything seems in order,” Sylvia said.

“Everything is good on my end as well,” John said. “Does anyone have anything to add?”

“The finances are good for the event. However there are some people who have yet to submit their paperwork,” Harry said.

“Am I supposed to do anything for the event?” Mark asked.

“No Mark,” Sylvia said. “This has nothing to do with education. It’s just to celebrate with friends and loved ones the next stage in our spiritual journey.

“However if you’re interested, I can always use some help. I need some gopher work done.”

“If you can settle for a messenger dragon, then I’m you’re man,” Mark said.

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Saturday morning started bright and sunny. That wasn’t surprising. The weather man made sure that conditions were perfect for the procession of the magical animals.

Mark stood beside Harry and watched the second-year students as they paraded down the lane. There was a 120 foot giant, followed by a six inch pixie. Next came a demon, walking hand-in-hand with an angle.

“Look Mark, it’s Stephaney,” Harry pointed at a Chinese Fox. “Isn’t she pretty? I love feeling her soft fur…”

“And fondling her cute ass,” Mark finished.

“Yes…” Harry agreed, and then blushed.

Mark laughed at Harry. “Don’t feel embarrassed. Someone once said, ‘There’s no such thing as an unnatural sexual act, except one that’s impossible to perform.’ Sex is a gift to all adults. You should be grateful for it.

“There’s nothing forbidden about the fruit, although too many people think it is.” He changed the subject, realizing he was getting too preachy. “If you have sex with her while she’s in fox form, will you have puppies?”

Harry elbowed Mark. Mark laughed.

Eventually the procession ended and they went to the main fair grounds. Emerson gave a speech about how important this stage in the growth of their wizard’s journey was.

The speeches ended and everyone with second forms put theirs on. Mark found himself surrounded by a sea of magical creatures. Mark felt a twinge of jealousy for not having his own second form yet.

They walked to the stage and discovered the other council members there. There were in their second form.

Sylvia Larks was a fairy, John Hankins was a pixie, Mama-Duke Bradley was a ghost hound, and Maurice Brown was a sphinx.

“I can’t wait for next year when I get my second form,” Mark said.

“Me too,” Harry said. “Being Irish, I’ll probably become a leprechaun. Considering my wand, I’ll definitely become a leprechaun.”

Stephaney walked up to them and greeted them. Mark bent down on his haunches, held out his hand to her and said, “Hi Stephaney.”

She looked at his hand and said, “I’m a Chinese Fox, not a dog.”

“Well whatever you are, you certainly look cute,” Mark said. “Can I please pet you?”

Stephaney hesitated a moment, and then nodded.

“No heavy petting,” Mama-Duke Bradley said and laughed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle,” Mark said and scratched the back of Stephaney’s head and rubbed her soft fur. “Harry, you’re so lucky. You can have so much fun playing with her. I don’t suppose you play fetch, do you?”

Everyone laughed at that comment.

“You’re one weird dude, Mark. I can’t tell if you’re joking or if you’re serious,” John Hankins said.

“Of course I’m joking,” Mark said and stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to look at all the second forms and then have something to eat. I wish there was a way to have all forms, not just two.”

Mark wandered off, admiring all the magical creatures surrounding him. He had so much fun viewing everyone that he forgot to eat.

All too soon, the day ended. While walking back home, he realized that he had forgotten to ask any girls out. It didn’t matter. There was plenty of time to get a girl and become a full-fledged adult.

6. Wedding Bells

“The bells are ringing   
for me and my gal”

It was a beau1tiful Saturday morning, perfect for a wedding. “Okay kids, who wants to go to a celebrity wedding?” Mark asked.

Everyone screamed, “Yay!”

“Okay everyone, get in,” Mrs. Windermere said. The children got on the well-worn bus owned by the orphanage. Mark went next, and finally Mrs. Windermere.

“Okay everyone, before we go, I need to remind you of a few things. First, there is going to be media, so you need to be on your best behavior,” Mark said.

“Yes,” everyone called out.

“The second thing is, if anyone asks how old I am, what must you say?” Mark continued.

“Sixteen,” everyone called.

“Excellent everyone,” Mark said. “Mrs. Windermere, shall we get going?”

Mrs. Windermere got behind the wheel and Mark took an empty chair besides a little girl.

As expected, the hour-long trip to the church was noisy.

As they entered the city, Mark called out, “Okay everyone, we’ll stop at the reception area before we go to the church.”

“That’s right kids,” Mrs. Windermere said. “We need to go to the Washroom before the wedding. It will be a long time before we can go again.”

As they approached the reception hall, Mark noticed plenty of people. Most of the people were media, setting up equipment.

As they stepped out, Mrs. Windermere called, “Girls, follow me. Boys, follow Mark. We’ll arrive back here when we’re done.”

As they approached the hall, an asshole guard tried to stop them. “I’m sorry, but this place is restricted.”

“Okay everyone, take out your invitations and show this person,” Mark called.

Mark wanted to use hasher language, but he knew the power of language and was always careful with words. After all, it was the word that created the universe, and it was by that very same word that magic came into being into the world.

“I am Markus Lucas, Arthur Lucas’s nephew. May we pass?” Mark said.

“I’m sorry sir, I didn’t know you were guests,” the man apologized.

“That’s all right, my good man,” Mark smiled at the guard and headed in. The others followed.

The incident disappeared from mind as Mark relieved himself and waited for the other kids to finish. Once they were out, Mark inspected them. They all looked respectable, so they headed to the bus. Minutes later, they were on their way.

As they approached the church, Mark said, “I think we’re a little too early. We still have over an hour to start time.”

“Nonsense dear, there’s no such thing as too early,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“The good thing about coming early is that there’s plenty of parking,” Mark said as they pulled up to the front of the church.

Mrs. Windermere opened the doors and the children stepped out.

“Mrs. Windermere, I’ll move the bus to a nearby location,” Mark said and stepped into the driver’s seat.

As Mark walked back from the parking spot, he wondered where Harry was. Harry had decided to come by car with his girlfriend. However, it wasn’t surprising that they weren’t here. It was, after all, still over an hour till the event. There was going to be some impatient kids, Mark knew. Fortunately, Mrs. Windermere was entertaining the children with stories.

Mark looked around. Most of the people in the area were the media setting up equipment. A few guests wandered about. There was nothing for Mark to do but practice his magic.

Mark walked to a bald spot on the lawn and focused his attention on it. One of the things earth magic does is gives you a green thumb. His level of magic couldn’t create life, but it could help make plants grow.

Mark took out his makeshift wand and held it in one hand. He placed his other hand over the ground. Shifting his consciousness slightly, he saw the life force flowing around him. He directed the force downwards, towards the life struggling below the ground.

Nothing happened. That was expected. He was after all only a Freshman-level Earth wizard. The next level, Sophomore-level Earth wizards could do it just fast enough for people to see a change.

A royal limo pulled up. The chauffeur stepped out and opened the door for Jane and Annie.

“Yo James,” Mark called to the chauffeur. *I wonder what his name is*, Mark wondered and waved.

The man waved back and returned to the car. He drove off.

Mark walked up to the princesses and bowed. He winked at Annie and said. “Good morning Princess Jane, Princess Annie, you look beautiful this morning.”

Mark straightened up, aware that cameras were pointed at him.

“You’re looking good too Mark,” Jane said.

“Hi Mark,” Annie said and gave him one of her cute smiles.

“Young man, may I ask your name and your relationship to the princesses?” a reporter asked.

Mark was expecting something like this to happen and spent weeks trying how best to handle it. In the end, he decided that the best way was always to go forward.

“I am Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan. I’m a fellow student of Princess Jane. We both serve on the student council of the Magic Academy,” Mark said.

“What do you do on the student council?” another reporter asked.

“I am the VP of Education. My job is to help fellow students with their studies,” Mark said.

“How long have you known the princess?” reporter 3 asked.

“Since the beginning of the school year in September,” Mark said.

The next asked a question before Mark finished. “What kind of relationship do you have?”

“She is the president and I am the VP of Education. It’s my job to support her in doing her work,” Mark said.

“I mean personal relationship,” one said. “What kind of person is Princess Jane?” another said at the same time. A third asked a question but he didn’t catch it.

Mark was getting annoyed by all the personal questions about Jane and how they completely ignored her. What was worse, gossiping behind someone’s back, or in front of them?

“In my opinion, Princess Jane is a fine, outstanding human being and I consider it an honor and privilege to call her my friend,” Mark replied to both questions he heard.

“People say Princess Jane is a little cold and distant. Is that true?” Reporter 5 said. She was a newcomer.

While this unfolded, Jane just stood and looked uncomfortable. The kids huddled around her, feeling her pain and not knowing what to do. Mrs. Windermere was equally unsure.

Mark gave the reporter a big smile. “Princess Jane is a sweet, loving person who cares deeply for her fellow students and citizens. She spends long hours working to serve them. Because of her compassion, intelligence and wisdom, I think that she will one day make an incredible queen, when the time comes.”

Mark turned his back to the reporters and called to the children, “Okay children, isn’t Princess Jane a great princess?” Mark asked.

The kids screamed, “Yay” in unison.

Thinking quickly, Mark positioned himself in front of Jane. “Okay kids, do you love Princess Jane?”

Again the children said, “Yes” in unison.

“In that case, show the world just how much you love her by giving her a great big hug,” Mark said.

The children huddled around Jane. Jane smiled, feeling the love. She remained standing.

Mark caught her eye and discretely motioned her to get down. She did so and hugged several of the children back.

Mark turned back and gave the audience a big smile.

“Who are those children?” Reporter 2 asked.

“These children come from a nearby orphanage that our good and gracious king lovingly supports. My uncle Arthur invited them to come for his wedding,” Mark said.

“Have you met the king? What kind of person do you think he is,” Reporter 1 asked.

“I met the king once and can say…” Mark paused, unsure what to say. He turned to the children and called out. “Kids, Princess Annie came just to see Hanna Cortes. She’s feeling lonely because Aunty Hanna hasn’t come. Can you please go there and play with her? Don’t dirty your clothes.”

Mark turned back and said, “Sorry about the interruption. What did you say?”

“How would you describe the king?”

“He’s a very caring king who works very hard for his people. When I spoke to him last, he was trying to find people to help him manage some projects he needs done for the country. It’s not easy finding reliable people,” Mark said.

Mark looked around the audience and noticed that they looked disappointed. None of them were getting any juicy gossip.

“Can you tell me any secrets you know about Princess Jane?” Reporter 5 asked.

Mark stuck his thumb into his mouth for a moment. He pulled it out. “Do you mean like sucking her thumb?” he said and frowned at the reporters.

“Wait a minute. I’m the one who likes to suck his thumb, not her,” Mark struck a thoughtful pose and stuck his thumb in his mouth again.

The children laughed.

Mark glanced at Jane, surrounded by children. Mrs. Windermere stood nearby. That prevented people from asking her questions. As a result, the reporters focused their attacks on him. Mark was happy with that.

“What do you think of King Ravenswood’s decision to choose Duke Benjamin’s son Jim as a possible spouse for Princess Jane?” Reporter 3 asked.

“I’m sorry but that question is a little too adult for me. I am after all only sixteen years old,” Mark smiled at the reporter.

The reporters looked at Mark in astonishment, “You’re sixteen? I thought you were eighteen,” one reporter said.

“Yes, I thought this was your graduating year,” another said.

Mark beamed with pride. He bowed at them and said, “Thank you.”

“How come you seem so mature,” Reporter 7 asked.

Mark felt the urge to mention his moustache, but instead said, “It’s because I have great role models I can fashion my life around. One such role model is of course, Princess Jane.”

By now, reporters were dispersing as more guests arrived and more targets became available. Also, they had pretty much run out of things to ask.

“Hi Mark,” someone called.

“Hi Aunty Tammie,” Mark said and gave her a hug and a kiss.

Other relatives came and he greeted them in turn. By now the reporters had pretty much dispersed.

Mark felt the presence of Uncle Arthur fast approaching. “Look everyone, they’re coming,” Mark announced and pointed at the sky.

Everyone looked but saw nothing. “I don’t see anything,” someone commented.

“They will arrive right…now,” Mark said.

An instant later, a huge flying vehicle zoomed in from nowhere and stopped above everyone’s heads. It was Uncle Arthur’s chariot.

A four-foot wide plate dropped from the vehicle and plopped two feet in front of Mark. Uncle Arthur stood on it.

“Hello Mark, good to see you my boy,” Uncle Arthur called out. He stepped off the plate and it returned to the chariot. He turned to the children and bellowed, “Hi kids.”

They in turn bellowed “Hi” back and ran towards him.

“Okay kids, I just discovered that we don’t have enough flower girls and page boys. How would you like to do that for us?” Uncle Arthur called.

“Yay,” everyone screamed.

“Okay everyone, step on the plate and return to the chariot,” Uncle Arthur said.

Everyone looked around but found nothing to step on. “Uncle Arthur, where is the plate?” Annie asked.

Uncle Arthur looked confused by the question. “Why, the plate is right over there.”

Uncle Arthur pointed and a large square plate fell from the chariot and plopped right where he pointed. Annie and the children got on.

“Mrs. Windermere, would you please join the kids?” Uncle Arthur said and Mrs. Windermere did as instructed.

Uncle Arthur motioned to Annie to come to him and she got off the plate. The plate shot skywards and docked an instant later.

Uncle Arthur turned to Jane and said, “Princess Jane, you know brides. They’re always running around and forgetting everything. Well, she forgot a maid of honor. Would you care to be that maid of honor?”

“I’d love to,” Jane said.

“Thank you Princess Jane,” Uncle Arthur bowed. A plate fell in front of Jane. She stepped on and it took her away.

Uncle Arthur paused and stood as if in deep thought. He tapped his chin and said, “You know what, I think I forgot something. I wonder what it is. I know. I need a best man and a ring bearer.”

Uncle Arthur turned to Annie and said, “Princess Annie, would you kindly be my best man?”

Annie giggled, “Don’t you mean the ring bearer?”

“Actually I wanted Mark to be the ring bearer,” Uncle Arthur said and pulled a ring from his pocket. It was a gold wedding ring sight feet in diameter. He hung it around Mark’s neck. Mark staggered under the weight.

Uncle Arthur turned to Annie and said, “Would you rather carry that ring?”

“No way,” Annie said and stepped back.

“In that case, you’re my best man. Please, you two, step on the plate,” Uncle Arthur said and a plate plopped down in front of them. At the same time, the ring disappeared from around Mark’s neck.

The two stepped on the plate and the chariot rushed downwards to meet them. The chariot docked with the plate with a click.

Annie and Mark were in a private bedroom. In front of them was Guido. On the bed were two sets of clothes.

“Guido, what are you doing here?” Mark asked.

“I guess you don’t recognize me dear, but I’m your aunty Jeanine. I legally changed genders two years ago,” Guido said, “Although I’m still biologically female.”

Annie looked at him in surprise. “Why did you do that?” Annie asked.

“Well dear, it’s a well-known fact that the best fashionistas are effeminate men,” Guido said.

“You really are a Draco,” Annie said and giggled.

“Why thank you dear, now get dressed. We have a wedding to attend to,” Guido said.

“Okay,” Annie said and undressed. Mark stripped as well.

Annie picked up the dress and said, “This is so pretty Uncle Guido.”

“Thank you dear. Now lift up your hands and I will help you put it on,” Guido said.

“Uncle Arthur loves doing stuff like this at the last minute,” Mark said as he buttoned his shirt, and tucked it into his pants.

“Well don’t you look like an angel, Princess,” Guido said and buttoned up the back of the dress. He adjusted the fairy wings in the back and positioned the halo over Annie’s head. “Okay dear, put your new shoes on.”

Once done, Annie looked at Mark. He was completely dressed, except for the bow. “Men,” she said and rolled her eyes. She signaled Mark to come down. Mark sat on a chair and Annie worked on the bow.

Guido laughed, “Annie dear, where did you learn that expression?”

“From my mother,” Annie replied. “She always says that when she has to fix daddy’s tie. She told me to learn to tie bows for the useless man I would eventually marry.” Annie finished tying the bow and said, “All done.”

“My, don’t you two look like a wonderful couple. Okay you two, you’re now ready for the wedding, unless you have to go to the washroom,” Guido said.

“You go first,” Mark said. Annie went through a nearby set of doors. A minute later, the washroom flushed. She went out and Mark went in. While Annie waited, Guido fixed her dress.

Mark stepped out and Guido adjusted him as well.

“Okay, you two, step on the plate,” Guido said.

They stepped on and the chariot jumped skywards.

“Okay Princess Annie, Mark, it’s time to enter the church,” Uncle Arthur said.

They stepped in and walked to the front of the packed church. Mark spotted quite a few relatives.

They waited.

The wedding song played.

Down the aisle walked the bride. The room strobed with flashes of light as photographers took pictures. Jane walked beside Hanna.

Behind them processed the pages and the flower girls, all dolled up in their new clothes. Unlike Annie, they had formal clothes that could be worn on any occasion.

Hanna stepped to Arthur’s side and the wedding started. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the presence of God and these witnesses to join this man and this woman in the bonds of holy matrimony…”

The mass commenced. The vows were said. Finally came the time to exchange the rings.

*‘Annie, reach into your pocket and take out the ring*,’ Uncle Arthur said mind-to-mind. ‘*Now hand it to Hanna.’*

Annie handed a ring to Hanna and Mark handed a ring to Uncle Arthur. The couple exchanged rings, and then kisses. Everyone clapped.

The newlywed couple headed for the door as music played. Annie and Mark followed them. “Weddings are fun,” Mark said. “Now comes the party. I hope you know how to dance.”

“Mark,” Harry called and ran to the two. He was with Stephaney. All four stepped out of the church and guests threw confetti at the newlywed couple.

The couple walked to a large plate resting on the grass. “Okay kids, mama of the kids, maid of honor, ring bearer, best man, get on. Now wave and smile at everyone,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Harry, Stephaney, get on too,” Mark said and dragged them aboard. “You two missed some fun getting here.”

“No thanks,” Harry said. “I know how noisy school busses can get.”

“You sound like an old fart,” Mark said and Annie giggled. “See, even Annie…Princess Annie agrees.

“See you all at the reception,” Arthur said. Uncharacteristically, the plate rose slowly as pictures were taken.

They docked. A second later the platform lowered. They were at the reception hall.

The hall contained the head table and guest tables. People mingled, looking for their seats.

Finding seats wasn’t easy. Although all places had name tags, none had actual names. One said ‘Cigar Man’ and another said ‘Doll Face’.

The kids ran around like wild things. One spotted their table and signaled to the others. Their name tags had nicknames only they knew. Being fifteen people, they had two tables to themselves.

“Mark,” Annie called and pointed at the head table.

Just like the other tables, there were no names. In the center was a sign marked ‘Hippie’. On the right was the sign, ‘Hottie’, followed by ‘Maid of Honor’. Beyond that was ‘Mother in Law’, ‘Father in Law’, and a few other in-laws.

To the left was the card saying ‘Best Man’, then ‘Ring Bearer’. After that was ‘Ring Bearer’s Sidekick’, ‘Ring Bearer’s Sidekick’s Main Squeeze’, and finally more in-laws.

Mark looked at the signs and said, “Well Best Man, would you like to take your place?”

“After you, Ring Bearer,” Annie said.

“Yo ring bearer’s sidekick and main squeeze, you get to sit here,” Mark called out to his friends.

They approached the table and Harry said, “I’m not a sidekick.”

Stephaney didn’t like the title given to her either. “I’m no one’s main squeeze,” she grumbled.

“Well I guess these seats don’t belong to you. Isn’t that right my good Best Man?” Mark asked. He didn’t need to be quiet because of the noise. There was no chance that anyone would hear them.

“That’s right Ring Bearer,” Annie replied.

Annie sat with Uncle Arthur to her right and Mark to her left. Harry and Stephaney sat to Mark’s left.

“I can’t believe Mr. Lucas named Princess Annie his best man. The press and comedians will have a field day tomorrow,” Stephaney said aloud, trying to speak over the noise.

“That’s because Uncle Arthur is strange. All Dracos are,” Annie said and giggled. She rested her hand on Mark’s leg. Fortunately, the table hid that from the rest of the room. Harry and Stephaney saw.

“How come you’re so friendly with the princess?” Harry asked. Stephaney nodded.

Mark shrugged. “Because of my cool moustache, Annie has taken a liking to me, and so I have decided to adopt her as my baby sister,” he said.

“It’s convenient, since now I have a date for the wedding. Isn’t that right, Annie?” Mark added.

“That’s right” Annie said. “I’m his wife.”

“I can’t believe you can be so informal with the princess,” Stephaney said in amazement.

“I can explain the details later, but it’s top secret,” Mark said. “Speaking of secrets, when will lunch be served? I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” Harry laughed. “I doubt there is enough food here to satisfy you.” Harry turned to Annie. “You should see him eat. He’s like a machine.”

Uncle Arthur stood up and sneezed. The sound was deafening. Some of the guests literally jumped out of their chairs. It had its effect. The room went silent.

“Everyone, I have an announcement to make before we start eating,” Uncle Arthur said. “I HATE SALAD. Therefore there will be no salad. It’s my wedding and I’ll dine as I want to.”

“Yeah!” the kids screamed.

Stephaney frowned, questioning Uncle Arthur’s adult status.

Uncle Arthur continued. “Also, my ring bearer’s sidekick was worried that we may not have enough food to satisfy his master. I assure you, we have plenty.”

Uncle Arthur turned to his new wife and grabbed her hand. He nibbled on her fingers. “Delicious,” he said. “Okay, my beautiful and sexy wife, do you have anything to say before we start eating.”

Hanna gave a pleasant but boring speech.

“Don’t worry, she’s much more exciting in the bedroom,” Uncle Arthur said and everyone laughed.

Harry and Stephaney laughed as well.

“I don’t get it,” Annie said.

“That’s adult humor. Just ignore it,” Mark advised.

The first course out was a green cake with strawberry ice-cream.

“Same color as your hair,” Mark said and began eating.

“Same color as your eyes,” Annie replied and began eating as well.

Mark looked up and realized that only the children were eating freely. The adults seemed unsure of what to do.

“What’s going on? Why are we eating desert first?” Stephaney asked.

Just then, people tapped their glasses. The newlywed couple got up and kissed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have desert for desert as well. I’m sure of it,” Mark said.

Just as the children finished desert, the next course came out. It was soup – the regular kind.

“Finally normal food,” Stephaney said.

“You shouldn’t say things like…” Mark started.

“Eek,” Stephaney screamed and jumped up. There was an eyeball in her soup. It winked at her.

The same thing happened throughout the hall. Hanna just rolled her eyes and sighed.

“There’s nothing like eyeball soup to make everyone feel alive,” Mark said.

“Yup,” Annie agreed and ate an eyeball. “It tastes like chocolate,” she remarked.

A live band played in the background.

The main course followed. It was the traditional chicken and steak, shaped like intertwined hearts.

“I’m afraid of touching it,” Stephaney said. That was the right response. Nothing strange happened.

Following that was a second main meal of pasta, meatballs and seafood.

A third course had people wondering how much they could eat.

Mark finished everything quickly, while Annie struggled. She swapped plates with Mark, feeling disappointed at herself in that she couldn’t keep up with him.

Harry and Stephaney passed food to Mark as well. Being at the head table, everyone saw and was impressed.

“Don’t worry everyone. If you can’t finish, just give it to the ring bearer. He’ll finish it faster than you can blink. Watch out for your fingers though,” Uncle Arthur announced.

Everyone laughed, knowing it was true. That didn’t bother Mark.

“Okay everyone, who wants desert?” Uncle Arthur called out.

The adults looked at him as if he was nuts. Even the children didn’t respond, since they were stuffed.

Mark glanced at Annie and raised both hands. “Yah,” he shouted and Annie followed his lead.

Desert came. It was a floating boat. On it was chocolate cake, topped with Sundae dressings. Steam flowed from the water. That wasn’t magic. It was just dry ice.

Uncle Arthur got up and told jokes. Every joke had a covert sexual theme that few of the children noticed.

“Weddings tend to have boring food, but this is quite good,” Mark commented.

“I wish I could eat as much as you,” Annie said, disappointed.

Mark considered a response and said, “That’s because you’re a beautiful princess and I’m a mighty dragon. Roar…”

“That’s not true. The reason he can eat so much is because he’s entirely empty,” Harry said and tapped Mark’s head.

Uncle Arthur got up and announced, “I don’t know about you but I’m ready to get down and boogie.” He held his stomach and gyrated like Elvis. Everyone laughed.

“Speaking of empty, I’m starving,” Mark said.

“But you just ate,” Stephaney said in astonishment. Annie giggled.

“I’m joking. I definitely won’t be able to eat for the next five minutes,” Mark said and got up.

He headed towards the dance floor and stopped. “Annie, we better get your sister. I don’t want her to feel alone.”

They walked towards Jane and Mark spoke softly to her. “Let’s dance, show the world how cool you are. Remember to dance with as many guys as possible, and smile.”

They went to the dancing floor and Mark formally bowed. Mark signaled to the band to play a Viennese waltz and waited. The music began.

As expected, Mark danced like a pro. The dancing floor emptied as a stranger danced with the princess. Once the dance finished, everyone clapped.

“Where did you learn to dance so well? You’re dancing at a professional level,” Jane admired.

Mark replied, “I cheated. I used an immersive novel to learn…”

“You did what?” Jane exclaimed.

The room went silent.

“It’s no big deal. I just used the immersive novel, *You can Dance*, to learn to dance,” Mark said into the silence.

“Mark, what’s an immersive novel?” one of the children asked.

“An immersive novel is the recordings of another person’s life experiences. In my case, the novel I used was from a professional dancer named Matt Barber,” Mark said.

“Aren’t those illegal?” someone asked.

“It’s not illegal, but there are special restrictions you must deal with.

“First, you must get a psyche test before and after the experience.

“Second, for those under the age of twenty one, you may only watch a novel from someone of your own gender. That is, your psychological gender, not your physical gender.

“Third, the person must be of your same elemental type, or you can suffer serious psychological damage.

“Finally, you may only watch a maximum of one every lunar month, or your brain will explode.

“There are several government approved locations where you may watch these novels. There are guidelines you must follow, but if you follow them, you shouldn’t have a problem,” Mark finished.

“How many have you watched?” someone asked.

“Enough to give me a stomachache,” Mark said. “Don’t worry. I have full written permission from my parents.”

Mark turned to everyone. “Come on everyone, this is a wedding. Dance and sing and have fun. Don’t forget to dance with the princesses or you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Mark turned to Annie. “Princess Annie, may I please have the next dance?”

Mark bowed to Annie and Annie curtsied. The music started and they danced to a slow waltz.

“Okay Annie, dance with those boys standing there,” Mark said.

Annie was reluctant to go but went, just to please Mark.

Mark found another partner and danced.

The dancing was interrupted for the cutting of the cake. The cake was a traditional layered cake, with figurines of the bride and groom. The figurines were not traditional.

The groom looked like Uncle Arthur in a tux. Normally men looked good in a tux. Uncle Arthur was the exception. He looked like a bum.

The bride was hot and sexy. She had a broom in her hand and she chased her groom around the cake.

The newlywed couple cut the cake and ate the first piece.

Next came the removal of the sacred garter. Hanna sat on a chair and Uncle Arthur slowly crept towards her.

Uncle Arthur crouched next to Hanna’s feet and stuck out his tongue. It extended to six inches and wiggled in a perverted manner. Adults giggled at the obvious connotations.

The children were of course, clueless. They thought the tongue was funny.

The tongue transformed into a green snake. It spoke with a romantic French accent. “Mon Cher, let me invade your Garden of Eden. Let me steal your Red – Delicious – Apple.”

Hanna giggled, enjoying the show. Some of the guests were unsure of how to react.

The snake tongue went under the dress and wiggled around. It even went all the way and popped out the top of Hanna’s dress. “Mon Dieu, I missed the Garden altogether. I better go back,” the snake announced. This time it stopped at Hanna’s crotch. It wiggled around and said, “Oh yare, Baby, do it to me again.”

By now the adults were trying to cover their children’s eyes. No one expected such a raunchy magic act.

Annie stood beside Mark and sneaked peaks from behind him. She could only watch and giggle. She was grateful her parents weren’t there. They would have chased her away.

Jane looked for her sister, but couldn’t find her. That wasn’t surprising, since Annie was hiding from her.

The snake retreated from under Hanna’s dress. It had Hanna’s garter in its mouth. It dropped the garter in Uncle Arthur’s hands and turned back into a regular tongue.

“Okay men, get ready to catch the garter,” Uncle Arthur announced. “The man to catch the garter will marry the girl he’s with.

Fans appeared on the ceiling. Uncle Arthur shot the garter into the air. It got stuck on a fan and spun around.

“Okay men, spread around the room and get ready to catch the garter when it lands,” Uncle Arthur instructed.

After a few seconds, the garter flew off the fan, but got caught by another fan. It flew to a third fan. By now, no one knew where it would land.

Just then, the garter went flying straight at Mark and hit him in the face. He took it and placed it in his pocket. Everyone clapped.

Dancing commenced.

“Can I see that?” Annie asked and Mark handed it to her.

“Princess Annie, can you please get Hanna her bouquet?” Uncle Arthur bellowed over the crowd.

“I don’t know where it is,” Annie replied.

“Mark, please show the princess where the flowers are,” Uncle Arthur called.

‘Okay Mark,’ Uncle Arthur said mind-to-mind, ‘Go to the hall, and then enter the room to the right. I’ll give you some time to talk to Annie. She really wants to talk to you in private. Don’t worry. It’s warded against palace security.’

Mark led the way and Annie followed. They stepped in the room and Mark closed the door. He sat on a chair and Annie jumped on his lap, facing him. Mark gave her a hug.

“I missed you Mark,” Annie said.

“I missed you too, sweetie,” Mark replied and gave her an extra tight hug. “I must say you look very pretty in your angle clothes. I think all the ladies were jealous of you.”

They cuddled for a few minutes.

Annie spent the next ten minutes talking about nothing in particular.

‘Sorry to interrupt the love birds, but Jane is starting to wonder if you two have gotten lost,’ Uncle Arthur said in their minds.

“Okay Uncle,” Mark said. “Come Annie, Uncle Arthur will find a way for you to see me if you’re feeling lonely.”

“All right,” Annie said reluctantly and got off Mark’s lap.

Mark got up and a bouquet appeared on the chair.

“I have to say Annie that you were very well behaved. I don’t think anyone suspects that we’re adopted brother and sister,” Mark said. “You know the saying, don’t you?”

Annie nodded and picked up the flowers. “Where there’s a will…Where there’s a Draco, there is a way.”

Mark opened the door and they stepped out. They entered the hall and Jane spotted them.

“I thought you two got lost,” Jane scolded.

“Okay you two, bring the flowers here,” Uncle Arthur interrupted.

Annie gave the flowers to Hanna. Mark went and stood by Harry and Stephaney.

“Will you two be the next people to get married?” Mark asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous, we’re too young to get married,” Stephaney objected. “Besides, I have too many things to do before I get attached to any ball and chain.”

“Okay everyone, it’s time to catch the bouquet,” Hanna announced. “All you single ladies who want to marry, get ready.”

Hanna tossed the bouquet into the air and the bouquet exploded. From out of that one bouquet, dozens of bouquets flew.

A bouquet fell into the hands of everyone who wanted one. This included some of the young boys, who thought it was just a fun game.

The dancing continued, interrupted only by line dancing.

Night came. The music stopped.

“Okay everyone, all good things must end,” Uncle Arthur said. “But don’t worry, my beloved nephew still needs to get married. I think I will have fun preparing for his wedding. If you think this wedding was fun, wait for his wedding.”

Everyone went out to wave the newlywed couple goodbye.

“Okay kids, Mrs. Windermere, I’ll take you home,” Uncle Arthur said.

The royal limo pulled up. The chauffeur stepped out. This time Mark checked the chauffeur’s name. Surprisingly, his name turned out to be James.

“Yo James,” Mark waved and James waved back.

The limo and driver flew up into the sky and the chariot swallowed them.

“Don’t worry everyone, I’ll be driving the Princesses back,” Uncle Arthur said.

A large plate came down and everyone stepped on.

“Is it okay if Harry and Stephaney came as well?” Mark asked.

“Of course, my dear boy,” Uncle Arthur said. “Where is their car?”

The chariot moved over to the indicated location and abducted the car. The chariot returned to its original location.

The plate slowly rose and the guests waved.

Once docked, Uncle Arthur said, “Well kids, how did you like the wedding?”

Everyone screamed how much fun it was.

“I bet you didn’t expect to play with two real life princesses,” Uncle Arthur said. “Okay everyone, hug the princess goodbye. Oh, and Jane, remember to smile more. You look too stiff.”

The plate lowered and everyone found themselves in the yard of the orphanage. The school bus was in the driveway.

“Mrs. Windermere, your children’s clothes are in the bus. As for the clothes they’re wearing, they are a wedding present to you. I hope you have plenty of uses for them,” Uncle Arthur said.

The plate rose and the chariot sped off with the eight remaining people.

Uncle Arthur bent down and smiled at Annie. “Who wants to hug the world’s looniest uncle?”

“I do,” Annie screamed and hugged Uncle Arthur.

“I can’t believe you’re such good friends with royalty,” Stephaney marveled.

“Royalty is just like everyone else. We pick our noses just like everyone else,” Annie said.

Uncle Arthur gave a hearty laugh. “Annie, you’re a sweetheart, and I love you.”

Uncle Arthur sobered up and said, “I wish I could take you with me, but your parents would worry. Annie, go hug Hanna. It’s about time we left.”

Uncle Arthur turned to Harry and gave him a hug. “We’ve never met, but I’m glad you’re taking care of my beloved nephew. I know he can be a pain sometimes.”

Uncle Arthur turned to Stephaney and said, “What, no hug?” Stephaney smiled and got a hug.

Finally he turned to Jane and held out his arms. Jane smiled and got a hug as well.

“Okay Mark, give your new Aunt a hug. Don’t forget to hug the best man. She did an incredible job, better than the ring bearer, I might add.”

Once all the hugging was done, the plate lowered.

Everyone except Uncle Arthur and Hanna got off. The plate returned and the chariot disappeared.

“Goodnight everyone,” Harry said. “See you later Mark.” Stephaney and Harry got in their waiting car and drove away.

“See you Monday Mark,” Jane said and entered the waiting limo.

“Bye Mark,” Annie waved and stepped in as well. They drove off.

Mark felt lonely as his friends left. He entered his apartment and headed for the kitchen. The only remedy for loneliness was food in the belly.

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The next day was bright and sunny. Mark did some needful chores at home and arrived at the orphanage just after lunch. As expected, the kids were running wild. The first order of business was to give hugs and kisses to all the children who wanted one.

“Hi Mark,” Mrs. Windermere said. “Everyone was so excited about yesterday’s wedding that no one could sleep.”

“Sorry about that, Mrs. Windermere. That was very naughty of me, getting them overly caffeinated,” Mark said. “What would you like me to do today?”

“Stuart already delivered the groceries, the health care worker already came Friday, and a new fridge will be delivered Monday. Everything is in order today, except for laundry. Why don’t you entertain the kids with stories, then give them some exercise?” Mrs. Windermere suggested.

“Okay, Mrs. Windermere,” Mark said. “Okay kids, it’s story time.”

Everyone sat crossed-legged on the floor. Mark started. “I was walking down a moss covered path. It was evening and I was lost. Just then I heard a…” Mark stopped and looked at the boy sitting to the left of him.

Sam, age six, continued the story. “A great big screech, like the wail of a banshee,” Sam stopped.

The next to go was seven-year-old Becky. “I don’t like banshees. Banshees are scary.”

“Then change it,” Mark said gently. “Sam said he heard a screech like the wail of a banshee. What else could make a screeching sound?”

“A cow,” Becky giggled.

“Okay Becky, why did the cow make that sound?” Mark made the motions of driving a car and pressing on the breaks, to give the girl an idea.

“Bossy the cow was driving an old beat-up car. She slammed on the breaks and that’s where the screeching noise came from,” Becky said.

“That was excellent Becky. Now Simone, it’s your turn,” Mark said.

The doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” Mrs. Windermere said.

Simone, eight, continued the story. “Bang! The car crashed into my bum and I went flying.” She giggled. “‘I’m sorry little girl’, the cow said. ‘I should have asked you to mooove.’ ” Everyone laughed.

“Please come in, we are expecting you,” Mrs. Windermere said. Mark ignored the commotion.

Brad, ten, looked stumped. He didn’t know how to continue the story.

“Okay Brad, try to imagine you’re there. This rude cow just bumped into your bum and sent you flying. Where did you land? What is around you?” Mark asked.

Brad looked past Mark’s shoulder and said, “Princess.” Everyone giggled.

“Okay, you crashed into a princess. That’s cool. Everyone loves princesses. Describe how beautiful she is,” Mark said.

Susan, thirteen, continued, “She has fair, chubby, freckled cheeks like white strawberries, eyes that look like fresh purple grapes, hair like strawberry ice-cream, tee shirt covered in watermelons, and an apple green skort.”

Again everyone giggled. This time Mrs. Windermere snickered behind him. Mark couldn’t understand what the joke was. He could only feel the presence of Mrs. Windermere behind him.

“Oh man, that princess sounds delicious. I don’t know whether to eat her or make love to her,” Mark said.

John, eleven, continued. “She sneaks up to you, wraps her arms around you and kisses you on the cheek.”

Just then Mark felt tiny arms wrap around his neck. His check got kissed. Everyone laughed.

“Annie, what are you doing here?” Mark asked, surprised. He never felt her presence.

“I asked daddy if I could volunteer at the orphanage and he said that would be an excellent idea,” Annie said. “Mummy and daddy were proud of me for volunteering.”

Actually it was Uncle Arthur’s idea, but he warned her not to tell anyone.

“Your uncle, Arthur contacted me and told me what kind of relationship you two have,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“If you know everything, then,” Mark said and paused a moment. “Okay, oh most fair and tasty princess, kindly place your delicious bum on my lap so that I may eat you.”

Annie sat on his lap and Mark hugged her. He kissed her cheek. “I most definitely love strawberries and grapes and watermelons and apples. That was a good surprise. Uncle Arthur would approve.”

Mark looked at everyone. “Okay everyone, I want you to welcome my brand new baby sister. My clan adopted her. Isn’t she sweet…and tasty?

“Girls, I want you to do girl stuff with Annie whenever she’s here.

“Boys, you can practice being a gentleman around her.”

Everyone greeted Annie.

“Okay everyone, it’s time to resume the story. We have a cow in a car. The cow made us crash into a sweet and tasty princess. Josephine, you’re next,” Mark said.

Josephine, nine, continued. “‘I’m sorry sweet and tasty princess, but that stupid cow bumped me in the bum and I went flying.’ ”

Alan, twelve, spoke next. “‘Don’t call me a stupid cow. It’s your fault that your ginormous bum was in the way. People these days, always getting in the way of poor innocent cows.’ ”

Mary, ten, spoke, “‘Stop arguing, you two,’ the princess…the sweet and tasty princess said. ‘Can’t we all be friends?’ ”

“‘No we can’t be friends,’ ” Gregory, eight, said. “ ‘I’m going on a quest to slay dragons.’ ”

“Noooo, don’t slay poor innocent dragons,” Annie whined.

“I don’t think Annie wants you to kill me,” Mark explained.

“I’m sorry,” Gregory apologized. “How about sludge monsters? ‘I’m on a quest to slay an evil sludge monster that has been terrorizing the country.’ ”

Emilia, nine, continued the story. “‘You are most valiant for wanting to fight the evil sludge monster,’ the sweet and tasty princess said. ‘Now go with my blessing.’ ”

Jason, seven said, “‘Oh great and noble Cow of Banga, would you come with me to fight evil sludge monsters? The sweet and tasty princess promised to kiss you on the nose if you do.’ ”

Zoe, six, continued, “The sweet and tasty princess kissed the cow on the nose. ‘Thank you, oh sweet and tasty princess. I shall now help this bum fight the sludge monster.’ With that, both got into the car and drove off.”

Billy, twelve, was next. “They drove through a dark and forbidding forest. Scary screeches could be heard coming from the woods. From out of nowhere popped a…”

“Okay Annie, it’s your turn. The cow and hero are driving through a dark and forbidding forest. Who do you think will pop out in front of them?” Mark asked.

Annie wasn’t sure what to say. “I don’t like scary.”

“What do you like? It could be anything you want,” Mark asked.

Annie thought for a moment. “A kitty-cat dragon – a snow-white kitty-cat dragon pops out from out of the bushes,” Annie said and giggled. “The heroes stop the car. They get out and greet their new friend.”

“That’s excellent Annie. That’s how we play the game,” Mark praised. “Okay, the kitty-cat dragon looks at them and says, ‘I am Grundy, the brave and courageous kitty-cat dragon sent to aid you on your quest by the sweet and tasty princess.’ ”

The story continued as they had several more rounds. Next they then went out back and played Frisbee for another hour. After that, the children wanted to wrestle with Mark. 6:00PM came and they had dinner.

Finally, the kids did homework and Mark and Annie helped Mrs. Windermere fold laundry.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get that,” Mark said and went to the door. Annie followed.

Jane was at the door, ready to pick Annie up.

“I had so much fun Sister Jane,” Annie said and explained the story telling, Frisbee game and the wrestling.

Jane frowned at Annie. “Remember you’re here to volunteer, not to have fun.”

“It’s all good, as long as she brightened up the lives of the children,” Mark said.

“I wish I had a kitty-cat dragon as a pet,” Annie said. “Mark, can you become a kitty-cat dragon?”

“That’s impossible Annie,” Jane said. “There are no such things as kitty-cat dragons.”

“Please Mark,” Annie begged.

“I’ll be getting my second form next September. Who knows what kind of dragon I’ll become. Annie, if I become a kitty-cat dragon, will you be my sweet and tasty princess?" Mark asked.

“Okay,” Annie said and raised her arms to Mark.

Mark bent down and gave Annie a hug.

“I love you, big brother,” Annie said.

“I love you too, baby sister,” Mark replied.

While cuddling, Jane commented. “It’s incredible how much she loves you. She’s always talking about you. How did that happen?”

“Who knows?” Mark said. “She has always been lonely and I am a very cool guy. Isn’t that right Annie?”

“That’s right, especially your cool moustache,” Annie replied.

Mark stood up and said. “Bye Annie, remember to give your sister and your mum and dad plenty of hugs and kisses. They need them more badly than you realize.”

Mark watched them enter the royal limo and leave. He returned to the laundry room feeling empty.

“What’s the matter Mark, you look depressed?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“I always feel sad when Annie leaves. She’s so much fun to be around. I love playing with her,” Mark said sadly.

Mrs. Windermere looked like she wanted to comment but said nothing.

“Uncle Arthur told you everything about me, hasn’t he?” Mark asked.

“Yes dear,” she said.

Mark took two candy bars out of his pocket. He passed one to Mrs. Windermere, but she shook her head. He put it back and ate the second one. Having eaten, Mark felt better.

Mark shook himself like a dog, took a deep breath and looked at Mrs. Windermere. Feeling back to normal he said, “There’s no need to worry. I’ll see my baby sister again. Besides, I have my beautiful, hot, sexy, goddess of a girlfriend to keep me company. Isn’t that right, Mrs. Windermere?”

Mark walked to Mrs. Windermere, made her put down her laundry, turned her around, kissed her on the lips, and then gave her a tight squeeze.

“You’re such a flirt,” Mrs. Windermere said and laughed.

“Come on, Mrs. Windermere, sing with me,” Mark said and sang.

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Monday morning came dark and rainy. Unlike most people, inclement weather didn’t bother Mark. In fact he loved exciting weather.

Mark enjoyed the rain dowsing him with water and the sights and sounds of thunder and lightning.

Unfortunately, Mark couldn’t enjoy the weather all day. He had school to attend and studies to complete.

Stepping into class, Mark found himself the only one soaking. He shook himself like a dog and sprayed half the class. He was greeted with cursing.

“Damn it,” Harimau shouted. “Do you always have to be such an - asshole?” He finally said, as he struggled for a better insult.

“I love you too Harimau,” Mark said as he shook himself and sprayed Harimau with more water.

“That’s what we get for allowing vermin to reproduce. They stink up the whole place,” Harimau grumbled.

“This vermin is happy to be alive on this glorious day and nothing you can say can upset me,” Mark said happily. He took his seat as the bell rang.

“Welcome class, it’s time to talk about incarnational attributes. Incarnational attributes include things such as a person’s elemental affiliation.

“The type of person they are always shines through. This includes their Briggs-Myers personality types. This also includes their overall spiritual growth.

“Some attributes are believed to be constant throughout life, such as our Briggs-Myers personality types. Other attributes, such as our physical age, change.

“The total number of attributes is 108. The complete list is in your notes.

“Using illusion and glamour, we have the ability to hide out true selves from others. However, one thing is certain. We can’t hide our true selves from our loved ones.

“There is a saying, ‘The eyes of the heart can’t be deceived by glamour.’

“What this means is that in a heart-to-heart relationship, one partner will always be aware of the true nature of the other partner. Third parties won’t be affected by this. It’s great for relationships, since both parties know what they are getting into. This doesn’t however prevent bad marriages, because of self-delusions,” Rover explained.

“Let me give you a funny example. Imagine a cute ten-year-old boy. He wants to impress a sixteen year old…” Rover started.

Mark got up suddenly and knocked the chair down. “Damn it,” he shouted in frustration. *I am sixteen years old, almost seventeen. Why can’t the universe leave me alone?*

“Is there a problem, Mr. Lucas?” Rover asked.

“Can a person’s age be stuck forever at one spot?” Mark asked and picked up his chair. He sat down, feeling uncomfortable with all the stares.

“Impossible. By our very nature, we are always aging,” Rover said.

“This has nothing to do with the biological aging process that causes our body to grow old and decay. A high enough wizard level automatically slows down and eventually stops biological aging.

“However, a thousand year old wizard with the physical body of a twenty year old will still appear as being a thousand years old to the eyes of a loved one. That’s not surprising since he is after all a thousand years old. Does that make sense?”

That wasn’t the answer Mark wanted. “Yes sir,” Mark said glumly.

“Being an idiot again,” Harimau commented.

Mark felt an overwhelming desire to hit Harimau. Mark glared at Harimau and hurled his intense feelings at him. Harimau went flying as if hit by a sledgehammer.

Mark got up. “I know where the headmaster’s office is. I’ll go,” Mark said and exited.

*Maybe I should return to the Garden*, Mark sulked to himself. *There’s no stress or worries there. All there is is an eternity of playing and laughter. But I’m too old for that. I’m certain I’ve lived almost seventeen years, or am I being delusional?*

Mark entered the headmaster’s waiting room and was immediately called in. “I heard you hit Tiikeri. Would you like to talk about it?” she asked.

“I overreacted to one of Tiikeri’s taunts,” Mark said.

“Why did you overreact? You’re always so mature,” Emerson asked.

Mark sighed. “There are things about myself I hate talking about. If you need personal information about me, please talk to my aunt Flowing Waters or my uncle Arthur Lucas. They are the closest things I have to parents. I am ready for whatever punishment you have.”

“I’ll schedule an appointment with them. In the meantime, return to class.”

“Yes ma’am,” Mark said and left the office. He composed an email to Uncle Arthur, explaining the headmaster’s request and sent it.

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Mark returned just as the recess bell rang. Harry greeted Mark as he exited. “Mark, none of us can believe you had so much magical ability. What’s your secret?”

“Immersive novels,” Mark lied. The power came from his pent-up frustrations. “Professor Rover talked about them. Speaking of which, my next session will be in two weeks, when I visit my aunt, Flowing Waters.”

“I’ve never watched one of those novels. What’s it like?” Harry asked.

“It depends on the novel. Remember, you’re reliving another person’s life. You experience being born, growing up, experiencing all of life’s good and bad points. Eventually you either die or ascend,” Mark said.

“The hard part is integrating all those experiences back into your mind and body. For some experiences, it’s relatively painless, for others, it can feel like hell.

“If you’re going to do it, I recommend you devote the weekend to recuperating. For me, that’s sufficient time to recover.

“By the way, you will need to spend all weekend with someone you trust 100%. For me, it’s my aunt. Do you have someone like that?” Mark asked.

“Stephaney,” Harry said instantly.

Mark nodded. “Okay, both of you will need some training. I’ll email you the details.”

7. Christmas Holidays

Christmas – a time for   
family, both old and new

Days passed. Studies progressed. December came, along with exams and end-of-year parities.

Mark knew he would be at the top of the class, which in his case was not something to be proud of – it didn’t bring him any closer to getting a girlfriend.

On the bright side, he did ask out and was rejected by the thousandth girl. He relished the achievement and briefly wondered if he qualified to enter the Guinness Book of World Records, but didn’t bother to check.

Next month he would be seventeen, and then he could ask out sixteen-year-old girls. He chuckled, knowing how naughty that was.

Mark considered asking out fifteen-year-old girls, but knew that was a waste of time. They weren’t fully ready for adult relationships.

Mark entered homeroom for the last day of the semester class. “Good morning everyone,” he called out in his usual enthusiastic voice. Classmates in turn greeted him. Mark sat at his desk and the bell rang.

“Good morning students,” Rover praised. “Congratulations Mr. Lucas on your excellent grades. Keep it up and you’ll be teaching instead of me.” Everyone laughed.

“Unfortunately, not everyone did as well as Mr. Lucas,” Rover scolded. “Please keep in mind, Mr. Lucas is our VP of Education. He’s more than qualified to help you with your studies. However, he can’t – we can’t – none of us can help you if you don’t request assistance.

“The good news is that everyone passed – barely.” Rover glared at various people around the room.

Mark noticed Harry cringe. He would need to speak to Harry.

“That’s enough of doom and gloom,” Rover said. “It’s time to party.” Rover transformed into a werewolf. His clothes changed with his transformation. He was now dressed like someone from the 1960’s and he was busting out some serious 1960 moves.

Everyone laughed. “Okay everyone, let’s go to the gym. Everything is prepared.” The class followed him out the door.

Mark chased after Rover and caught up to him. “Professor, you should talk to my uncle, Arthur Lucas. He can party just like you.”

“That’s good to know. Busting out moves is what I do best,” Rover said. “By the way, I spoke to your uncle.”

Mark nodded. “Then you know how much of a freak of nature I am.”

“You’re not a freak of nature. You’re just a very unique person. Do you really think you can succeed by reading all those immersive novels? I’m surprised your head hasn’t exploded yet,” Rover said.

“What choice do I have?” Mark asked. “I don’t know any other way to get my clock ticking again.”

“Is it true that you’ve asked hundreds of girls out? How does that help you?” Rover asked. They stepped into the gym.

“I’ve recently asked out my thousandth girl,” Mark said proudly. “I’m rather proud of that. Few people can say they’ve been rejected by a thousand women for the exact same reason.

“To be an adult, you need to be in at least one serious adult relationship and you need to be laid by that said person. Doing that makes an indelible mark on your soul which transforms you into an adult.

“Believe it or not, but I can tell when someone becomes an adult. Something about them that I don’t understand changes. One minute they’re in my world, and the next minute, they’re gone.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to eat something,” Mark said and left.

Rover watched Mark wander off to the buffet table and remembered the conversation with Arthur Lucas. Arthur said that Mark used food as a psychological crutch, and no matter how much he ate, he never gained any weight. That was a kind of weight maintenance treatment he could do without.

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After regaining his mental equilibrium, Mark looked for and found Harry. “Harry, I saw you cringe when the professor mentioned grades. As your best friend, it’s my duty to help you get good grades.”

“I know, but you’re always so busy,” Harry complained.

“I’ve already asked out my thousandth girl, so I’m in no rush to continue. I can make time to tutor you,” Mark assured. “We can leave that till after we go home. Now it’s time to – as the professor said – party. You better eat something from the buffet or I’ll finish everything. Excuse me while I dance. Professor Rover isn’t the only one who can bust out some serious moves.”

Mark looked around and spotted Rover. As expected, he was busting out some serious moves, to the consternation of everyone around him. Rover was having so much fun that Mark decided to join.

“Yo Professor, if you think that’s rad, watch this,” Mark said.

“That’s not bad for a rookie,” Rover said and showed Mark a move.

Mark did one of his own. The competition intensified into a break-dancing contest. Eventually they drew a crown.

“How long can Mark keep that up?” someone asked. “There’s no way a human can keep pace with a werewolf.”

“Watch and learn my little buckaroos,” Mark said. He then bellowed, “Come on everyone, join us. We’re having so much fun. Use your second forms to liven things up.”

“That was some excellent use of wind magic, Mr. Lucas,” Emerson called, holding her ears. “Please next time, not so loud.”

“Sorry Headmaster. Come join us. I know you can put both of us to shame with your sexy moves,” Mark said as he spun on his head.

“If you insist,” Emerson said and joined. Everyone cheered her on.

Finally Emerson got tired and stopped. “That was excellent, Headmaster,” Mark said. He ran to her, grabbed her face with both hands and planted a kiss on her lips. He then clapped.

“You lucky dog, I always wanted to kiss her,” Rover whispered to Mark.

“Then kiss her,” Mark encouraged. “Those lips are begging to be kissed.” Mark pushed Rover to Emerson and knew that romance was in the air.

“Another victory for the cupid-meister,” Mark said and gave the victory sign with both hands.

Both looked at Mark and laughed. Mark understood the joke but didn’t let it bother him. “Sorry, I may be cute, but I don’t do diapers. If you’ll excuse, it’s time for me to spread my love powers around.”

The party continued.

Mark spotted Harry and Stephaney dancing and decided to join them. “So you two, what are your plans for the holidays?”

“We’ll spend some time at Stephaney’s parent’s place for Christmas day, and then we’ll go to my parent’s place,” Harry said.

Just then Jane joined them. “What are you discussing?” she asked.

“Christmas plans,” Mark said. “I’ll be going to the Orphanage’s annual Christmas party the Saturday before Christmas. I finally finished shopping for all the children, as well as Mrs. Windermere. It’s a pain to shop for people who are incapable of accepting anything.

“I will also have a celebration on the winter solstice with my relatives. How about you Jane?” Mark asked.

“We’re having a family party at the palace. However, we’re only allowed to invite one friend to the party. I’m inviting my best friend Nancy. Annie has chosen you to be her guest. She’ll give you your invitation when you meet for the party at the orphanage,” Jain said.

“Congratulations Mark, you finally have a girlfriend,” Harry said. “I can’t believe you’re dating a princess. Remember, don’t get caught while doing naughty things to her.” Harry laughed at his own perverted joke.

“Would you like me to give you an atomic wedgie now or later?” Mark asked, annoyed at the comment.

“No thanks, I’m allergic to atomic wedgies…Jane, what’s the matter? You look spaced out.” Harry said.

“What exactly is your relationship with Annie?” Jane asked in a no-nonsense tone of voice. “Why did your clan ask to adopt Annie?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Harry asked. “Mark’s people want Mark and Annie to get married. Mark even got the garter while holding Annie’s hand at the wedding.”

The truth of Harry’s words slammed into Mark like, well, an atomic wedgie. Chills ran up and down his spine. It made perfect sense. That however wasn’t the scary part.

Mark knew in every fiber of his being that there was only one way for a girl to be truly his wife. She had to become a freak of nature, just like him.

“That’s horrible,” Mark blurted out in shock.

“What’s so horrible about marrying my sister? She isn’t a monster,” Jane said angrily.

“No, but I am. Can we discuss this somewhere private?” Mark said as people stared.

“Sorry about my outbreak. I guess you meant the fact that she’s underage. Then again, a princess can’t marry just anyone,” Jane smiled.

“Let’s go someplace private. Stephaney, come with us too. You’re already involved,” Mark suggested.

They had no problem finding a vacant room because of the party.

“Harry is right,” Mark said after closing the door. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. Our meeting at the restraint was no coincidence. I knew she liked me the moment she saw me.

“Then I went to Dragonia for the initiation celebration, and who should I meet but Annie? I was instructed to entertain Annie and they gave me five hours to do it,” Mark said.

“Then you’re the one who gave Annie the rose,” Jane murmured.

“I took Annie to a vast cave system in a 40 mile tall mountain called Mount Pilchuck…” Mark said.

“Hold it,” Stephaney objected. “That’s impossible. Mount Everest is only six miles tall.”

“If you think that’s impossible, you should see the Tree of Life. It’s eighty miles tall and still growing,” Mark answered.

“What else did you do?” Jane demanded.

“We played tag and hide and seek. Jane, your sister is the best hide and seek player I’ve ever met,” Mark said excitedly. “I’ve played with hundreds of children when I was growing up, and she was the only one to stump me.

“Also, I took her to the cave I mentioned. The twists and turns I made on my little flier would have caused most people to get lost, but she found her way back with only a little help from me.” Mark looked at Jane with eyes sparkling. “You’re sister is incredible. She has talent that I don’t think many people have.”

“Mr. Adam Draco mentioned that there was only one other person in the universe with the same abilities as Annie does. I guess he was referring to you,” Jane said. “I understand now. The Draco clan wants you and Annie to marry when she turns twenty-one.

“There’s only one problem. A princess can’t marry just anyone. She has to marry someone of suitable royal or noble blood for political reasons only,” Jane said. “That’s too bad, since you two seem to go well together.”

“Like an eight-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy playing together,” Harry said with a smile.

“That’s not the problem Jane. A national hero has the legal right to marry the princess he fights for. Becoming one is no big deal. The problem is what Harry just said,” Mark said.

“Jane, do you remember when we met at the restraint, the day after the initiation ceremony? Do you remember what Annie said to you when she first saw me?” Mark asked.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention to what she said,” Jane said. She did a double-take. “How can you say that becoming a national hero is no big deal? That’s next to impossible.”

“To a rational adult, that’s impossible…” Harry started.

“Unless you’re an irrational brat,” Mark said. “Yes, yes, I know.”

Mark looked at Stephaney, who seemed left out. “Isn’t it fun talking to princesses about weird subjects, like perverted teenage boys wanting to marry sweet and tasty princess babies?

“It all started the day after the initiation ceremony. I was eating six mega burgers, coke, fries and a Sundae when I heard a seventeen-year-old girl whisper to another girl, saying ‘Look at that cute red-hair boy with that moustache’. Naturally, I tried to date them. As expected, they rejected me as being too young.

“Then I heard Jane say to Annie, ‘What are you looking at?’

“Annie replied, ‘That ten-year-old boy over there is trying to make a pass at those high-school girls. He’s so funny,’ she said and giggled.”

“I remember now, you cried when they teased you about your age,” Jane said. “They even suggested you date a bunch of eight and ten year old school girls sitting nearby.”

Mark blushed red. “Annie entered into a heart-to-heart relationship with me the moment she saw me.”

“How old are you Mark?” Stephaney asked. “I thought you were sixteen years old.”

“Sixteen years ago, almost seventeen, a baby boy with green eyes and a red hair was born. He grew up with other children in the Garden of Eden in Dragonia. At the age of twelve, all the children left except for him, because they thought he was too young. After much begging, they finally let him out and he came to Washington. There he met Harry and Harry decided that I would make a perfect baby brother. We’ve been friends ever since,” Mark said, telling them his life story.

“That’s impossible,” Stephaney said. “Are you saying you’re actually ten years old, but have lived sixteen years?”

“No, I’m saying I’m almost seventeen. However, all the people who love me or who I try to date perceive me as being ten. That of course is impossible,” Mark said. “A person’s incarnational attribute known as age can’t be fixed.

“’The eyes of the heart can’t be fooled by glamour.’ Either I can fool the heart or I really am a ten-year-old brat who has lived almost seventeen years. Either way, I’m a freak of nature. Use your Book of Knowledge to see my true age.”

“Oh my God, you’re right,” Stephaney exclaimed. “How is that even possible?”

“Don’t know,” Mark said with a sigh. He turned to Jane. “Every fiber in my being believes that same fate will await Annie if she associates with me. My family will see to it that that happens, and there’s nothing I can say to them to make them stop.”

“What’s wrong with…never mind,” Harry said.

“Have you tried?” Jane asked, worriedly.

“No, since I just realized it now. However, do you really think an adult would listen to what someone they believe is a child says on matters concerning their welfare?” Mark replied.

“Why don’t we just prevent Annie from seeing you?” Jane asked.

“That will only make her feel lonely and her attachment to me will intensify,” Mark said. “She needs to forget me entirely. I don’t believe my family will interfere with the free will of others. That’s what my uncle said to the king and queen, your parents. That means that we can save her if we prevent her from asking to become like me,” Mark concluded.

“What’s it like to be eternally ten?” Stephaney asked.

“First of all, I’m almost seventeen,” Mark corrected. “Stephaney, how would you feel if Harry treated you like his baby sister, his ten-year-old baby sister? You could never do any perverted things with him or any other adult things.

“Annie views me as an equal now, but that will change when she grows up. She will then treat me as the baby brother, instead of the other way around.

“If I looked now what I did when I was ten, Harry would probably want to hug me all the time. Not to be arrogant, but I think I was cute then. But I do have an almost seventeen-year-old body. My body did grow up,” Mark finished.

“Mark, are you aware of any change that take place when you sleep?” Harry asked.

“No. I close my eyes. When I open them, it’s morning,” Mark replied. “What are you talking about?”

“I hate to say this but you transform in the night. When you fall asleep, you turn into the cutest ten-year-old boy you could possibly imagine,” Harry said.

A thought occurred to Jane. “Does he have long hair when he sleeps?”

“It comes to his waste. How did you know?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I transformed while playing with Annie,” Mark remembered. “However, that was the first time that has ever happened to me.”

“What happened to your clothes?” Stephaney asked.

Mark looked at her strangely. “Who cares? The important thing is I did transform.”

“Oh – my – God,” Jane exclaimed and covered her mouth. “She saw your pee-pee.”

“Your baby sister is worldlier than you,” Harry said with a laugh. “Did you do naughty things together?”

Mark blushed at that. Peeing in the pool together was certainly naughty. “We’re getting off topic. I think erasing all memories concerning any contact between her and the Draco clan will fix the problem. All inappropriate memories will go as well. It will be like it never happened.

“Jane, I’ll talk to your dad and get him to use his wizards to cast the appropriate spells.”

“Is erasing memories easy?” Harry asked.

“Hell no,” Mark replied. “It involves the blocking of specific memories, as well as suppressing and changing emotions. That involves Air, Water, and Darkness elements.”

“Why Darkness?” Jane asked.

“Because we are doing this against Annie’s will. We’re taking it upon ourselves to decide what’s best for her. I think Jane’s dad will go with it since he never trusted the Draco offer. Does anyone have anything to add?” Mark said.

“Yes. You’re being very mature…” Harry started.

“Do you want that wedgie now?” Mark threatened.

Mark spoke to Jane. “I’ll be seeing Annie two more times before our memories get erased. Would you like to come to the Christmas party at the orphanage to make sure I don’t do any funny business?”

“Can I come too?” Harry asked. “I want to see this funny business.”

“Stephaney, you may come too if you wish,” Mark said. “Okay everyone, it’s time to return to the party, unless it’s over.”

The party was winding down. Half the people were gone. “It was a good party, Headmaster Emerson. I just remembered something. I never danced with you. Come on, Headmaster Emerson, let’s dance,” Mark said and danced with her.

“His mannerisms really are that of a ten-year-old boy,” Jane mused. “I wonder why I never noticed.”

Mark danced without commenting, and then said, “Harry, did you hear that? The Princess thinks you act like a brat. Perhaps you should grow a moustache. The girls love it. Isn’t that right, Headmaster Emerson?” Mark rubbed his moustache of her face.

“That tickles,” Emerson laughed.

“I’m always glad to make beautiful ladies happy. Thank you for that dance Headmaster Emerson. I shall now have the last dance with the charming and beautiful president of the student council,” Mark said.

Mark bowed to Jane and Jane curtsied. They danced. The music stopped and cleanup crew came to put things away. Mark helped.

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Jane stood at the front door, debating whether to enter Mark’s apartment. It was 7:00AM on the Saturday of the party at the orphanage. However, she just had to see Mark as a ten-year-old boy. Annie said he was super-cute and Jane was curious.

While Jane was debating, Annie knocked.

“Coming,” Harry called.

“He said come in,” Annie said and entered. She looked around the apartment. It looked like a standard student apartment, with TV, furniture an open concept kitchen, dining and living room area.

One door had a picture of a baby dragon blowing bubbles.

“I’ll be out in a second,” Harry called from what was obviously the washroom.

Annie ran and opened the dragon door.

“Annie, don’t enter a boy’s room without permission,” Jane warned, but it was too late.

Annie stepped in and spotted Mark sleeping in bed. He was tangled in blankets and was having a nightmare. Tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Please don’t leave me Annie, I need you,” Mark repeated over and over again.

Annie jumped on top of Mark and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She carefully positioned her body so as to hide his exposed pee-pee. That was one thing Annie didn’t want her sister to see. That privilege belonged to her alone.

Just then Jane entered the room. There in front of Jane was a little boy with long flowing ruby red hair and the cutest face she had ever seen. She didn’t notice the fact that he was naked, probably because Annie was covering him.

Jane watched Mark wrap his arms around Annie and say, “I love you Annie. Please stay with me forever.”

Jane felt like crying. They seemed so sweet together.

Harry walked in and the door silently slammed shut.

“Isn’t it cool how he changes when he’s sleeping?” Harry commented.

Mark’s body became full sized and Mark opened his eyes. He looked around, dazed. He wiped his eyes and said, “Hi, Annie, Jane, Harry. Have you come to admire my room, or did you come to see how cute I am when sleeping? Sorry to disappoint you, but as you can see, I am full grown, even when I’m sleeping in the land of cows.”

“Sleeping in the land of cows,” Annie giggled. “That’s a funny expression.”

Jane knew she should be scolding Annie for lying on top of a naked boy, but she didn’t feel like it. Instead, she said, “I’ll make breakfast for you. Harry, help me cook.”

Jane opened the door and Harry exited. She followed and closed the door behind her.

Annie got off Mark and Mark got up. His first impulse was to go to the washroom, but remembered that Jane was there. Mark fixed the bed, and then dressed for the party. He was surprised that Jane left Annie alone with him, even though he was naked. He always thought Jane was more of a prude.

“I’m going to the washroom,” Mark said and stepped out of the room.

Annie looked around the room. Near the door was a chest of drawers. Beyond it was a boy’s tea party. It had five guests. One was an ogre, picking his nose. Two were a dark lord and his minion. The last two were the princess and the dragon from the movie. Instead of cake and tea, there was beer, a pig’s head on a platter, green goo eyeball soup, a bowl full of worms, and a candle in a skull holder. A buxom waitress served blood to the dark lord in a skull cup.

The dragon rested its head on the princess’s lap and the princess fed it cake.

Annie looked at the pictures of dragons, castles, and alien landscapes. She then looked at Mark’s collection of figurines. She played with them.

In the meantime, Mark went to the washroom and made sure to shut the door completely.

After that, he joined Harry and Jane in the kitchen. Mark looked at Jane and saw pity in her eyes. “Please don’t look at me like that,” Mark said.

“You really love Annie, don’t you?” Jane said.

“Of course not,” Mark denied. “She’s just a child, and with a little bit of training, she’ll become an incredible, mature princess, just like her sister.”

“What about you?” Jane asked.

“With a little bit of training, I too will grow up to be an incredible, mature princess, just like my sister,” Mark said with a smile.

“Don’t you mean prince?” Harry chuckled.

“Are you sure you want to go through with your plan?” Jane asked.

“Do you really want Annie to be a child forever? One day I’ll break this curse and become normal. All I need is more training,” Mark said.

“I’ll call you when breakfast is ready,” Jane said. “In the meantime go play with Annie.”

Mark stepped into his room and closed the door. Annie was playing with his figurines.

“Hello Princess Annie, I love that dress you’re wearing. It must be worth a fooortune,” Mark said in a high-pitched voice, pretending to be the dragon in the movie.

“Yes, indeed it does and thank-you for noticing,” Annie said and picked up the princess doll. “Please have a cookie.” Annie handed Mark a wormy cookie.

“Breakfast is ready,” Jane called.

They went to the kitchen and discovered more than enough food for Mark.

“I hope that’s enough food for you,” Jane said, sounding like a mother.

“Don’t worry. Annie gave me a hug this morning, so I’m not hungry,” Mark said. “Thanks for the food. Why don’t you join me?”

“No thanks, we ate,” Jane said.

“I’ll join you,” Annie said and Harry gave her a plate. Harry joined them.

“Annie, don’t try to compete with Mark. You’ll just get a tummy ache,” Jane cautioned.

“That’s okay Sister Jane. Mark can always kiss it better,” Annie said and ate.

“Annie, do you watch *Smile Precure*? It’s on now,” Mark said.

“Yes, that’s one of my favorite shows,” Annie said.

Mark used telekinesis to press buttons on the TV remote control. The show came on.

“What’s that show you’re watching?” Harry asked.

Mark replied, “According to one synopsis of the show:

‘Once upon a time, there was a kingdom of fairy tales called “Märchenland”, where many fairy tale characters live together in joy. Suddenly, the evil emperor Pierrot made an invasion on Märchenland, sealing its Queen in the process. To revive the Queen, the symbol of happiness called Cure Decor, “the Queen's scattered power of light of happiness”, is required. To collect the Cure Decor, a fairy named Candy searches for the Pretty Cures on Earth. There, Candy meets a girl, who decides to collect the Cure Decor. Now, will the world earn a “happy ending”?

“It’s a classic tale of good versus evil.”

Annie and Mark sat in front of the TV and watched. “Come on, you two, join us. In my opinion, Anime is the next best thing to Immersive Novels in their ability to…” The show started and Mark stopped talking.

“That’s so cute. My baby brother has a girlfriend,” Harry said.

Annie put her finger on her lips and shooed him.

“Sorry,” Harry whispered and did the closed zipper sign on his lips.

Harry and Jane cleaned up while Mark and Annie watched the show.

The show ended and Annie turned off the TV.

“Annie, have you ever wished you could marry Mark?” Jane asked.

“Yes,” Annie said, and got up. “Mark, let’s play with your dollies.”

“Those are action figures, not dolls,” Mark corrected and followed Annie into his room.

Jane entered Mark’s room and said, “But it’s not possible for a commoner to marry a princess.”

“Harry, please close the door,” Mark asked. Harry complied and sat on the bed.

“If course it is. All Mark has to do is become a hero and fight for me – for my hand. No one will have the power to prevent him from marrying me, once he fulfills the requirements,” Annie replied. She turned to Mark and said, “Mark, I love your tea party.”

“That’s not a tea party. That’s a monster party,” Mark replied and sat down beside Annie. He brought out more figurines. “Who serves brain soup for a tea party?”

“I loved that eyeball soup at Uncle Arthur’s wedding. Maybe we should have that for our wedding,” Annie suggested.

“What are the requirements?” Jane asked.

Annie looked at Jane in annoyance. “Don’t you know anything?”

Mark knew the goal of Jane’s interrogation. She was hoping Annie would understand the significance of her wish. He decided to let Jane handle it and instead handed Annie a bowl full of brains. “Here’s some yummy soup Annie.”

“Fine,” Annie said to Jane. “But you’re going to be the Maid of Honor. Thank you for the soup Mark. It’s delicious. Brother Harry, you can be the Best Man.”

Remembering the pervious wedding Annie added, “Since you’re Mark’s sidekick. We can have a pretend wedding now.”

Annie got up and collected the needful items.

“Why are girls obsessed with weddings and playing house?” Harry asked.

Mark opened his mouth to try to explain, but realized it would take too long.

“Of course you can’t understand. You’re a boy,” Jane said.

“Mark understands,” Annie said knowingly. “Okay, everything is set for the wedding. We need music.”

“I can play the music Annie,” Mark said.

“What about the requirements?” Jane said.

“I’ll tell you after the wedding,” Annie said. “Mark, start the music.”

The wedding music played through the speaker system in Mark’s room.

Annie picked up the dark lord and spoke for him, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the presence of God and these witnesses to join this man and this woman in the bonds of holy matrimony…Oops, I forgot the words.” After that, Annie ad-libbed.

“Do you, Annie, take Marcus Lucas Draco to be your lawful wedded wife…I mean husband?” the dark lord asked.

“I do,” Annie replied.

“Do you, Mark, take Annie Lucas Draco to be your lawful wedded husband…I mean wife?” the dark lord continued.

“I do,” Mark replied.

Annie pulled two rings from her pocket and handed them to Jane and Harry. They were identical gold rings with a black line down the center.

“Where did you get these rings?” Harry asked and handed his to Mark. “They look expensive.”

“I asked Mark’s parents and they appeared in my pocket,” Annie replied.

Jane opened her mouth to say something, but instead handed the ring back to Annie.

Mark placed his ring on Annie’s left ring finger. Annie did the same.

“Then, by the power invested in me by our First Parents, I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride,” the dark lord said.

Annie held Mark’s face and gave him a kiss on the lips. She sat on Mark’s lap and wrapped her arms around him. They cuddled.

“Now can you answer my question Annie?” Jane asked.

“Oh very well Sister Jane,” Annie sighed. “In order for Mark to marry me officially, Mark needs to take the Princess Challenge. He has to go through a series of trials. He has to do something heroic in the eyes of the world.” Annie paused, realizing the significance of her words.

Annie got up and backed a few steps away from Mark. She looked at him in horror. “Mark will need to feel a great deal of pain and he will cry – just like in the morning when he cried for me.” A tear came to Annie’s eye. “This will go on until I turn twenty-one. That’s forever in the future.”

Annie ran back to Mark and gave him a hug. “I don’t want you to suffer like that,” Annie said.

“How about you?” Mark asked and returned the hug. He turned to Jane and said, “If we were to allow this to happen, Annie would also need to go through an equally unpleasant experience.”

“Why must you two suffer so much?” Jane asked as she wiped away an unexpected tear.

“It’s the nature of the magic. It must be such as to live on through history as one of the great Princess Stories,” Mark replied. “If that can’t be fulfilled, then the marriage can’t take place.

“Annie, do you still want to go on with it, even though you know what will happen to me?” Mark asked.

Annie hesitated a moment, and then said, “No. I don’t want you to suffer, but what can we do?”

“Are you willing to give me up?” Mark asked.

“Do I have to?” Annie asked.

“It’s your decision,” Mark replied.

“All right,” Annie said, reluctantly. “What must we do?”

“Next week at the Christmas party, I’ll formally ask your father to erase our memories. That way, neither of us will need to suffer. Perhaps after you turn twenty-one, we can become friends again. We could even do naughty things together then. How would you like that?” Mark asked.

“I like that very much,” Annie said, relieved.

“I love you Annie,” Mark said, enjoying his hug to the maximum.

“Me too,” Annie replied.

“Come on Annie, it’s time to go to the Christmas Party at the orphanage. This will be the last time you’ll see them. After Midnight Christmas day, no one will remember,” Mark said.

“Okay,” Annie said sadly and got up.

“Why midnight,” Harry asked?

“The magic always ends at midnight. That’s when Cinderella lost her slipper and turned back into a servant. It’s the law,” Annie explained and headed for the front door. Everyone followed.

They stepped out and Harry locked the door.

The royal limo pulled up as they approached the road. James stepped out and opened the door for them.

“How did he know when to come?” Harry asked.

“James is a member of the secret service. They know everything,” Mark replied and stepped in. “Let’s go Harry. The party can’t start without you.”

Harry stepped in and they drove away.

“This is so cool. This is the first time I’m riding in a royal limo,” Harry said and looked out the window.

“You’re such a kid,” both Annie and Mark said together. They looked at each other and giggled.

“That’s what Annie said to Mark when he first rode,” Jane said with a chuckle.

“That’s a case of the pot calling the kettle black,” Harry noted.

“What does that mean?” Annie asked.

“It means that little kiddies such as us shouldn’t be calling grownups such as Harry a kid. Of course, the only kiddy in the limo is him, right Annie?” Mark asked.

“Right,” Annie agreed.

The limo arrived at their destination at a quarter to noon. The four stepped out and the limo drove away.

“That’s just weird,” Harry muttered.

“It’s perfectly natural for those born and raised as nobles or royals. We – I mean they, don’t think about it,” Mark said.

“Since when did you become a royal?” Harry asked as they walked up to the door.

“Since never,” Mark replied. “But I did watch several immersive novels, including *The Unbreaking Wave*, the story of Queen Jasmine the Great. That’s something that might benefit you Jane, since you’re both Air.”

They entered the building and Mark called out, “Merry Christmas everyone. Sorry we’re a little late.”

The children ran and greeted them. Everyone went into the living room. There was a tree and decorations, but no presents.

“Excuse me everyone, but I have to go and do stuff,” Mark said.

Five minutes later, Mark, dressed as Santa Clause, entered with a big red bag.

“Okay kiddies, which ones of you have been good this year?” Mark asked.

Everyone screamed.

“In that case, everyone gets presents,” Mark replied.

For the next hour, Mark pulled out presents from the bag. Some came from Mark, come from Mrs. Windermere, and others came from various charities.

To begin, Mark gave the kids all the boring but practical presents. After that came the fun stuff. Eventually, more stuff came out of the bag than could possibly fit in the bag. That wasn’t surprising, since the bag belonged to Uncle Arthur.

“Mark, I wish you wouldn’t buy me such expensive gifts,” Mrs. Windermere complained.

“Nonsense Mrs. Windermere,” Mark said. “My parents left me plenty of money when they left this world. I could spend my entire life not worrying about money if I wanted to.”

“Still, this necklace is too expensive for me,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“Okay Mrs. Windermere, here’s the receipt,” Mark said reluctantly and held out his hand with the receipt. Mrs. Windermere reached for the paper and the paper burst into flame. It incinerated within seconds.

“Oops. Sorry about that. It accidently went up in flames. Now you have to keep it.” Annie and the children laughed. Mark handed out more presents.

“Cool. I didn’t know you could do fire magic,” Harry said.

“Mark, I thought your element was Earth, like Harry,” Jane said. “How come you can do Fire magic when you’ve only finished the first semester of schooling?”

“That’s because Mark’s the greatest,” Annie replied.

“Sorry Jane, but you can’t argue with a princess, especially one as cute and cuddly as Annie,” Mark said and handed Annie a present. “I don’t have an allegiance to any element. I’m only studying Earth magic with Harry because I want to keep him company.”

“Is that rare?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

Mark felt reluctant to answer and so Harry answered in his place. “No one is born with an allegiance to a specific element. We obtain it at puberty. In other words, Mark is still a baby.”

“Shut up harry,” Mark said in embarrassment. He got up and removed his Santa suit. He sat down on the floor with legs splayed out like a ‘T’. Annie sat on his lap.

“Okay everyone, let’s sing,” Mark said. “We need to work up an appetite. Mrs. Windermere and I stayed up late last night preparing food. We can’t let that go to waste.”

“Mark, how can you sit like that?” Jane asked.

“Like what?” Mark asked. “Who wants to suggest the first song?”

“That’s because he’s…ouch,” Harry said, when Mark hit him with a pillow.

The gang bellowed Christmas carols.

Mrs. Windermere got up and headed to the kitchen.

“I’ll help you with the meal,” Mark said.

“Stay there,” Jane admonished. “Harry and I will help Mrs. Windermere.”

They played the story game while the adults prepared food.

“Food is served,” Jane said.

Annie got off Mark and they entered the dining room. Annie sat on a chair and said, “Mark, sit on my lap.”

Mark was about to comply when Mrs. Windermere said, “Don’t sit on the princess. She’ll get squashed.”

“Annie, who’s the heaviest person who sat on you?” Mark asked.

“That my cousin Emilia. She’s twelve and weighs… at least eighty pounds,” Annie said.

“I only weigh seventy-one pounds,” Mark said and sat on Annie’s lap. Mark used telekinesis to reduce his weight by almost ten pounds. That was his current limit on the ability.

Annie was completely hidden by Mark, but she didn’t seem to mind. She just wrapped her hands around Mark’s waist and held him tightly.

“That’s slightly underweight for a ten-year-old boy, isn’t it?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“It’s also slightly underweight for a sixteen year old, which, theatrically, I’m supposed to be,” Mark said. “Come on, Annie, I better get up so that you can eat.”

Annie refused to let go. “If you don’t let go, I’ll tickle you,” Mark said and tickled her. Annie let go and Mark sat on a chair next to her.

They ate a noisy lunch while Christmas carols played in the background.

“How come Annie is so close to you Mark?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“I don’t know. She liked me the moment she saw me. Perhaps that’s destiny,” Mark said.

“Can I sit on your lap?” Annie asked, looking sad.

Mark nodded and Annie climbed on. She wrapped her arms around him, and rested her head on his chest. Mark held her tightly.

“You’re already missing Mark, aren’t you?” Jane asked.

Annie nodded.

“What’s going on?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“We think my people are trying to get Annie and I married,” Mark said.

“That’s impossible,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“It’s not impossible. All we have to do is overcome the Princess Challenge,” Mark said.

“I think you know that I’m not normal. If Annie stays with me, the same thing will happen to her. I want to protect her and she wants to protect me, which is why we need to stop it.

“After midnight Christmas day, no one will remember we met. I feel as if the King’s wizards have already started the spell. I think Annie feels it too,” Mark continued. Annie nodded.

“But you haven’t told my parents yet,” Jane objected.

“They already know through the secret service. Besides, this spell requires several days to complete, since it’s so complicated. Us formally asking will only make the spell stronger,” Mark explained.

“Would you like some cake Mark?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“No thanks Mrs. Windermere. I already have something that’s thousands of times more tasty than cake. Annie, on the other hand, is currently eating a Mark soufflé with extra strawberry sauce,” Mark said.

“We’ll clean up later,” Mrs. Windermere said. “In the meantime, everyone can go to the living room and play games.”

Mark got up and carried Annie. “Sorry I can’t help you, Mrs. Windermere, but my hands are full.”

“That’s okay dear, just keep loving the princess,” Mrs. Windermere said.

They entered the living room and stopped. “Okay Annie, where should we sit?” Mark asked. Annie looked around and picked a lazy-boy chair.

Mark rested back and Annie lay on Mark. She sulked. In the meantime, Mark spent an hour trying to figure out what to say. The children entertained him by running around and making noise.

‘Annie, can you hear me?’ Mark asked, calling out to her mind and heart. He felt a response in his wedding ring. Annie’s ring finger twitched and she rubbed her wedding ring.

That was strange. The rings were acting like magic wands. Mark dismissed the idea as a figment of his imagination.

Mark felt Annie’s thoughts and feelings reach out to him and realized he made a mistake. He had only strengthened their bond, instead of weakening it. He should have spoken aloud and let their conversation be overheard. It was too late now to do anything about it.

‘Yes Mark,’ Annie said.

‘Annie, what do you want?’ Mark asked.

‘I want to marry you,’ Annie replied.

‘Why do you want to marry me?’ Mark asked.

‘So I can be with you forever.’ Annie replied.

‘If you just want to be with me forever, then that’s easy. We can be BFFs – best friends forever. There are no requirements to being a friend. Anyone can be that. No one has to suffer. Isn’t that great?’ Mark asked.

‘I suppose,’ Annie said. Her feelings improved.

‘Who are you supposed to marry when you turn twenty-one?’ Mark asked.

‘Dilbert. He’s a Tiikeri.’

Mark’s instinctual response was revulsion. ‘That’s perfect. When you turn twenty-one, you will marry him and give him an heir. After that, your responsibilities as a princess end. He won’t care what you do, just as long as you keep up appearances. You can be with me forever after that.

‘Annie, I have a little secret to tell you. As you know, several members of the secret service have been assigned to you to keep you safe. They report to the king on anything and everything concerning your welfare. However, once you turn twenty-one and get married, everything changes. After that, their allegiance switches to you. They will keep your secrets. If you want to meet with me in secret, they will help you. Isn’t that great? It’s the best for both of us, since no one gets hurt,’ Mark finished.

‘But you won’t become a prince,’ Annie complained.

‘I’m not interested in such things. I just want you to be happy,’ Mark replied. ‘I will see you when you become an adult. We will have so much fun after that. Isn’t that great? Okay Annie, let’s play with the kids while we can.’

‘Okay,’ Annie replied and got up. She seemed back to normal.

Peace of mind restored, Mark got up as well and played with the children.

Evening rolled in and the princesses entered the limo and drove away.

Mark watched them go, knowing that he had lied to Annie. What he told her was true. It was common for married nobility and royalty to have extra-marital affairs.

The lie was that they could be together. Annie’s feelings would change the moment she grew up. Then she would lose interest in him.

Mark got back in the orphanage and helped clean up.

Mark couldn’t believe that Jane seriously considered him marrying Annie. As if a teenager would have romantic feelings for a child. The whole concept was both ludicrous.

Mark remembered comments the princesses made about him crying in the morning. Why would he cry for Annie? That was just stupid. It didn’t matter. On boxing-day, everything would be back to normal. He would no longer be in the embarrassing situation he was in now.

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Annie sat in her room and played with her dolls. One of her favorite games was pretending to take the wizard’s initiation. She pretended that the twelve dolls were the supreme masters responsible for the initiation ceremony.

Ever since she met the First Parents, she had been obsessed with becoming a wizard. The fact that Mark was a wizard made it even more urgent.

“It’s time to go to bed Annie,” Becky said. “Tomorrow is Christmas day and you won’t enjoy it if you don’t get enough sleep.

Annie went to the washroom and then jumped into bed.

Annie understood what the problem was. Mark was an eternal ten-year-old boy. If she stayed with him, she would suffer the same fate. Being eight years old, Annie couldn’t understand why being ten forever would be so bad.

Annie put her hands together and prayed. Mark’s mum and dad, I think I’m old enough to make my own decisions. I don’t mind being ten years old forever. Please let me stay with Mark.

Annie drifted to sleep.

“Wake up Annie, it’s nine o’clock,” Becky said. “You’ll need to change, eat, pick Mark up, and then go to 11:00 AM Mass.

Annie jumped out of bed, realizing she had over-slept. She dressed quickly with the supplied clothes and headed for the door.

“Wait Annie, you haven’t eaten yet,” Becky called.

Annie hadn’t gone to the washroom either. She heeded the call of nature and stepped out. “I’ll eat when I get back. Right now I have to pick Mark up.”

Annie ran out the room, navigated the twists and turns of the palace, and ran out the front door. Just then the limo pulled up. James held open the door and said, “Merry Christmas Princess Annie.”

“Merry Christmas James,” Annie said and entered. Seconds later they drove off.

Annie called to Mark as they drove. At the same time, she absentmindedly stroked her wedding ring. ‘Mark, are you awake?’

‘Yes Annie,’ Mark replied.

‘We’re almost at your place,’ Annie said.

‘Okay Annie. I’ll be out in a minute. Merry Christmas*,’* Mark replied.

‘Merry Christmas,’ Annie responded.

They arrived at Mark’s apartment and Annie ran to the door. The door opened and Mark stepped out.

‘Let’s go,’ Annie said, grabbed Mark’s hand and pulled him to the limo.

“Merry Christmas Master Mark,” James said.

“Merry Christmas James,” Mark said. “Annie, give James a big Merry Christmas hug and kiss.”

Annie raised her hands. James bent down and Annie gave James a hug and kiss on the cheek. They got in the limo and drove away.

“I can’t wait to show you my room,” Annie said and talked non-stop about life, the universe, and everything. It always amazed Mark how much little girls liked talking. Mark, on the other hand, was a doer.

They arrived at the palace and the limo drove off. Annie led Mark by the hand to the royal suites. Before long, they were in the private dining room of the royal family.

Mark looked around, feeling uncomfortable. He knew he shouldn’t be here, but he couldn’t do anything about it.

The cook brought out food. There was enough to feed ten people. Apparently they knew his appetite.

“Annie, don’t try to compete with me when it comes to eating. I only eat so much because I’m under-weight,” Mark said.

The two ate.

Five minutes later, the king, queen and Jane entered.

Mark stopped eating and got up. He placed both fists together and bowed to Ravenswood and Marjorie. “Merry Christmas Majesties, Princess Jane.

“Annie and I would like to formally request that all memories of us ever meeting be erased from everyone’s mind until after Annie gets married,” Mark said. “I don’t think it’s in Annie’s best interests that we associate.”

Marjorie came up to Mark and hugged him. Mark automatically hugged her back.

“You’re a good boy Mark for putting Annie’s welfare ahead of your own,” Marjorie said and let go of Mark.

“Thank you, Annie’s mum. I only wish I could train her. She has so much talent that it amazes me,” Mark said.

Ravenswood took out his wand and spoke, “I, King Ravenswood Van Duyn of the house of David, grant you your request. Tonight at midnight, the spell shall complete and no one will remember that Marcus Lucas of the clan Draco and Annie Van Duyn of the house of David ever met.” Ravenswood put his wand away.

“Thank you, Annie’s dad. Annie will no longer need to suffer my fate,” Mark said.

“I don’t mind being ten years old forever,” Annie said.

“No, you can’t,” Ravenswood, Marjorie and Mark said together.

“It doesn’t matter. The spell can’t be revoked. By midnight everyone will forget,” Mark said. Mark looked at Ravenswood and Marjorie and relaxed. There was no longer any need to keep up appearances.

Mark’s teenage body shimmered and disappeared. Replacing it was a ten-year-old boy with waste-length ruby-red hair and purple eyes. His clothes changed as well. Mark was now dressed as befitting a prince going to Christmas Day Mass. The clothes were no doubt a present from his parents.

Ravenswood, Marjorie, and Jane looked at Mark in astonishment.

“Mark, I didn’t know you were a prince. Now there’s no reason why you can’t marry Annie,” Jane said happily.

Mark couldn’t believe his ears. “L-l-look at me,” Mark stammered. “Do you want Annie stuck like this forever, never knowing what it’s like to be an adult?” Mark asked. “Do you think I train like a masochist just for the fun of it?”

“Mark, we can’t stop fate. This was all a complete waste of time and effort,” Ravenswood said with resignation.

“What do you mean, Annie’s dad?” Mark asked.

“Mark, you were born with green eyes, correct?” Ravenswood asked.

“Correct sir,” Mark replied.

“Have your eyes ever changed color?” Ravenswood asked.

“Only once that I can remember,” Mark said. “Back on the Island, the grownups told me to take Annie and entertain her. While playing tag with her, I transformed into what I am now. That was the first time I can remember that happening. Annie said I had the same eyes as her.” Mark examined himself using his book of knowledge. Sure enough, his eyes were identical to Annie’s.

“Your purple eyes are a foreshadowing,” Ravenswood said. “It means that you’re destined to marry Annie. Mark, you had the appearance of a sixteen-year-old boy, even before you took the wizard’s initiation. How do you explain that?”

“I don’t know. I just figured I was a late bloomer. After all, I was stuck looking like a ten-year-old boy for almost three years, and then my body changed overnight,” Mark said.

“Did you by any chance take the wizard’s initiation at the age of ten?” Ravenswood asked.

“Of course not,” Mark blurted. “That’s impossible.”

“You’re right. It can’t happen without the help of twelve supreme masters,” Ravenswood said. “Play acting won’t do it.”

“Voodoo dolls won’t work either,” Mark said.

“What did you say about voodoo dolls?” Ravenswood asked, clearly agitated.

“I took hair clippings from twelve supreme masters and incorporate them into twelve dolls I made. However, nothing I did with them worked,” Mark said. He paused and added, “That’s strange. I completely forgot about that.”

“Oh my god,” Becky exclaimed. “I believe Annie has twelve voodoo dolls. I’ll get them.” She ran from the room.

“No don’t,” Annie cried and ran after her. Mark intercepted her.

“I’m sorry baby love. I must insist that you grow up like a normal person,” Mark said.

“But you’ll be all alone,” Annie whined.

“That’s not true. You’ll remember me the moment you marry Dilbert. You can then adopt me as your baby brother and play with me all the time. I have a secret to tell you. I like older women. I have chased after older women ever since I can remember. You adopting me as your baby brother would make me the happiest perverted little boy in the whole world,” Mark assured.

Becky brought the dolls.

“Annie, why did you create these voodoo dolls?” Ravenswood asked.

“I know why,” Mark said. “It’s because of our First Parents. When I was eight years old, I wandered into the event you witnessed when on the Island.

“You have no idea the effect our First Parents have on us Dracos. After seeing them, I was obsessed with becoming a wizard. Because of them, Annie is just as obsessed as I was,” Mark said.

“But Annie isn’t a Draco,” Marjorie objected.

“Sorry dear, but Mark’s First Parents have claimed her. It’s because of them that Mark took the initiation prematurely and turned into an eternal ten-year-old boy,” Ravenswood explained.

“Annie was the only child at the event. I wondered why at the time. Now I know. The amnesia spell we created, while incredible powerful, is woefully inadequate when compared to Annie’s burning desire to become a wizard. Add to that the fact that forces beyond human comprehension are at play. Even if we destroy those dolls, Annie would just recreate them, or find Marks old dolls.”

Ravenswood looked at Mark, who looked guilty. He walked to Mark and gave him a hug. “It seems you’re going to be my future son-in-law. I’m very happy that you’ll be marrying my daughter. I’ve admired you ever since I first met you.”

Ravenswood let go of Mark and spoke to his wife. “Don’t cry dear. This is politics. Mark’s First Parents used Mark for their own personal agenda and they’re doing the same to Annie. That’s just the way of the world.”

Ravenswood turned back to Mark and discovered that Mark was in shock. The knowledge of his betrayal seemed to have fried Mark’s brain.

“Mrs. Grander, please fry up some bacon. Harry told me that the best way to fix Mark’s mood was to make him eat,” Jane said worriedly.

Both Annie and Jane guided Mark to a chair and sat him down. He just stared unblinking at the world.

The bacon came and Mark bawled like a ten-year-old boy when he smelled it. Great streams of tears flowed down Mark’s face.

The sight of Mark crying awoke Marjorie’s maternal instincts. She gave Mark a hug. “Such mean people they are, treating their own flesh and blood like that,” she said.

Marjorie hugged Mark for almost a minute, when he finally reached out and hugged her back. Mark calmed down and Marjorie let go of him.

Mark absentmindedly ate some bacon. He then swallowed some of the remaining food on the table. “Okay everyone, I’m feeling back to normal. Sorry about my little crying session. It seems I didn’t train myself adequately enough. Annie, please wait till you turn sixteen to take the Wizard’s Initiation. It’s not worth it. You don’t even get to do any magic. I only started using magic when I formally took the initiation. Someone mentioned going to church for Christmas. When is it?”

“Good grief, it’s almost 11:00AM. We have to leave now or we’ll be late,” Marjorie said.

Everyone headed for the door. Annie grabbed Mark’s hand and walked with him. For a moment Mark felt awkward. Boys don’t normally hold hands, unless they are scared, tired, feeling jealous, or feeling protective.

Mark focused on who he was. He was a sixteen-year-old wizard and Annie was his little sister. Mark kissed Annie’s hand and continued walking.

A quick trip brought them to the cathedral, just as mass started.

The royal family insisted on taking the central path to their reserved seating, causing mass to pause. The eyes of everyone followed Mark as he walked hand-in-hand with Annie down the aisle.

The royal family entered the space reserved for them and took their places. Mark sat beside Annie.

The mass proceeded. Time came for the collection. Mark felt his pocket and discovered his wallet. His parents remembered to transfer his stuff when they changed his clothes.

Mark felt strange. His parents were helping him even though he was actively opposing their plans. Thanks mum and dad. I understand what you’re trying to do for me, but a man must do what a man has to do, Mark said to his parents. There was no response and none was expected.

Mark put money in the basket and passed it on. The mass continued.

The priest said, “Let us offer each other a sign of peace.”

The congregation exchanged handshakes, hugs and kisses. Annie hugged and kissed her parents and sister. She then turned to Mark with upturned lips.

Mark held Annie’s shoulders and kissed her on the lips. Mark felt the eyes of the world focused on him, as he enjoyed a smooch with the little princess.

Mark shook hands with Ravenswood and Jane. Marjorie hugged and kissed him on the forehead. The mass continued.

Next came Communion. The priest came and gave the Eucharist under both species to the royal family. Mark crossed his arms over his chest and got a blessing.

The Mass ended and announcements were made. People exited the cathedral. The royal family headed for the door.

Nancy Radcliffe, Jane’s best friend appeared and greeted Jane. “Merry Christmas Jane,” she said. “Mary Christmas, Majesties, Annie.”

“Merry Christmas Nancy,” Mark said. “Did you finish reading the book I gave you?”

Nancy looked in astonishment at Mark. She seemed to recognize him, but couldn’t accept what she was seeing. It wasn’t normal for people to get younger just like that and wasn’t normal for people’s eyes to turn purple.

Mark smiled at Nancy and said, “Say my name. Come on, say it.”

Nancy hesitantly asked, “Mark, is that you?”

“Bingo,” Mark said. He tried to clap, but realized his hand right was occupied. “Isn’t the magical world amazing?”

“Come on dear, let’s go or we’ll be late for the Christmas parade,” Marjorie said.

“Okay mum,” Mark said and walked with the others towards the church doors.

Mark leaned towards Annie and whispered, “Did I just say ‘Mum’?”

Annie giggled.

They walked out the door. Behind them Jane and Nancy gossiped. They entered the limo and drove away.

Jane and Nancy continued gossiping all the way to their destination.

The destination turned out to be the town hall. The entire area was cordoned off. The limo approached the barrier and security opened a path. They stopped in front of the building and got off. The limo drove away and beyond the barrier.

Mark looked around. The area thronged with people and parade floats. The screams of people filled the air.

Hamburgers, pizza, cotton candy, bratwursts, and other foods competed for Mark’s attention.

“Cone on Mark, don’t get lost,” Marjorie scolded. She took hold of Mark’s left hand and guided him. Annie, being attached to Mark’s right hand, came along as well.

‘This is embarrassing’, Mark said in Annie’s mind. ‘Your mother is treating me like a ten-year-old boy.’

‘You are a ten-year-old boy,’ Annie replied and giggled.

‘Say that again and I’ll bite your bum,’ Mark said.

‘You are a ten-year-old boy,’ Annie repeated and giggled anew.

‘Consider your bum bitten,’ Mark said and kissed Annie’s hand.

They arrived at a float and climbed aboard. Marjorie let go of his hand and Mark and Annie went to the top. All around them, people screamed and shouted.

Their float joined the parade and moved on. Mark waved at everyone with his left hand and Annie waved with her right. Baskets lined the top of the parade float, filled with trinkets. Mark and Annie tossed trinkets to the spectators.

“Mark, Annie, isn’t your hands getting all hot and sweaty?” Jane asked.

“Don’t worry Sister Jane,” Mark said. “My mastery of the Water Element is sufficient to keep our little piggies cool and dry. However, I have to say that Annie’s arm is going to be sore tomorrow from all this hand-holding. She doesn’t want to let go. If she had the power, our hands would be permanently glued together.

“I’ve never been in a parade before. This is fun,” Mark said, finishing on a completely different topic.

“That would be awkward going to the washroom,” Nancy commented.

Mark thought about it. “I suppose that would be a problem. I use my right hand.”

“And I use my left hand,” Annie finished.

“Don’t worry. I’m working on a remote peeing spell. I should master it in a month. Then comes remote pooping,” Mark finished. “What good is wizard power if you can’t do that?”

Nancy looked at Mark in confusion. “You have the crude humor of a ten-year-old boy. You’re seriously strange.”

“Thank you for calling me strange, rather than immature,” Mark said.

The float arrived at the park where the Christmas concert was being held.

“Listen Mark, at 2:00PM, we will be giving our annual Christmas greeting to the nation. Meet us at the stage at 1:50PM,” Marjorie said. “I trust you with my daughter. I know you’ll risk your life to keep her safe.”

That last statement disturbed Mark. “What do you mean, risk my life?” Mark asked worriedly. “Is Annie in danger here?”

“Annie is always in danger, since she’s a princess. You’ll be her last line of defense,” Marjorie said.

Mark placed his left hand across his chest and bowed. “I’m stronger than most people realize. I’ll treat your daughter as if she were my own daughter. I’ll protect her with my life.”

With his awareness wide open, Mark looked around, looking for secret service people. Sure enough, within two hundred feet of him he spotted twenty six people looking at them with more than casual interest.

“Give me a hug Majesty,” Mark said and raised his hands to Marjorie.

Marjorie hesitated a moment, surprised at the response, but then complied.

Mark closed his eyes and enjoyed the hug with Marjorie and felt his aura resonating with her own. Mark spoke to Marjorie’s mind once he felt resonance was high enough. ‘Can you hear me, Majesty?’

‘Yes dear,’ Marjorie said.

‘Sorry I have to hug you. I needed the boost from the intimate contact. I spotted twenty six pairs of eyes looking at us…’

Marjorie tensed. ‘There should only be twenty five.’

Mark projected images into Marjorie’s mind. ‘I believe these are your secret service agents. This man is staring at you with some hostility.’

‘Thank you dear. I’ll take it from here. I’m glad you’re protecting Annie. You have greater ability than I realized.’

Marjorie let go of Mark. “See you kids at ten to two,” Marjorie said and left.

That conversation had ruined the day for Mark. He was hoping to enjoy his last day with Annie in peace. Now he had to look out for bad guys as well.

“Come on Annie, where do you want to go?” Mark asked. Annie led the way. As they passed the food vendors, Mark called for a stop. “Come on Annie, let’s get something to eat.”

Loaded with food and drinks, they continued.

As they walked, they spotted the orphanage children, with Mrs. Windermere nearby. Both ran up to them.

“Hi Mrs. Windermere,” both Mark and Annie said together. Everyone stared at Mark, unsure how to respond.

“Merry Christmas Princess Annie,” Mrs. Windermere said. She turned to Mark and bowed. “Merry Christmas, Highness.”

“Mrs. Windermere, do you know a guy named Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan? He goes by Mark. He’s a super cool, super handsome guy. Isn’t that right Annie?” Mark said.

“Mark is the best,” Annie agreed.

“Are you related to him in some way?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” Mark said. He caused the food he carried to hover, and raised his hands to Mrs. Windermere and said, “Please give me a hug and a kiss. That necklace Mark gave you looks good on you.”

Mrs. Windermere looked at the hovering tray filled with food with astonishment. It was not possible for children to do magic.

Hesitantly, Mrs. Windermere bent down and nervously hugged the unknown prince, who apparently knew her. She also noticed that Annie never let go of the prince’s hand, but instead moved around her, so that the prince could properly hug her.

The young prince whispered in Mrs. Windermere’s ear in a sexy tone of voice. “Mrs. Windermere, I want to make sweet love to you.”

“Mark, is that you?” Mrs. Windermere asked in astonishment.

Both Mark and Annie laughed.

“Yes Mrs. Windermere, it’s me. Okay kids, how many of you knew I was Mark?”

Everyone raised their hands. Twelve year old Emilia said, “It had to be you. Annie would never go out with anyone else. I love your hair. It’s so pretty. Can I feel it?”

Mark nodded and the girls swarmed Mark. “It’s like silk. How do you get it so soft?” thirteen year old Susan asked.

“Magic,” Mark explained. “Skin and hair are a reflection of a person’s overall health. All of you have to become wizards when you turn sixteen. There’s currently a global shortage of wizards. Believe me none of you will regret it.”

Mark could feel through his bond with Annie that she was jealous. She didn’t like all those girls swarming Mark and paying so much attention to him.

“Don’t be jealous Annie. You chose me to be your champion in your Princess Challenge,” Mark said. “I’m destined to belong to you forever.”

“That’s right. You’ll be my baby dragon and I’ll be your princess,” Annie said.

“What’s this about a Princess Challenge?” Mrs. Windermere asked.

“Come on everyone, I’ll buy you some food, and then I’ll explain everything,” Mark said.

After buying everyone food, the gang stopped at an empty spot on the grass and ate.

Mark explained everything to the gang, including the reference to the princess and the dragon movie.

“Mark I have to go pee. Can you please go for me?” Annie asked.

“But I haven’t perfected the spell yet,” Mark complained.

“Please Mark, just for me,” Annie begged.

Mrs. Windermere said, “It’s not possible to go for someone else, no matter how much he loves you.” The kids added their own comments.

“I’ll try,” Mark said reluctantly and closed his eyes.

Mark ignored everyone and focused on his wedding ring and his bladder. He closed his eyed and quietly recited the words. As before, the ring resonated with him. His bladder emptied. The spell worked.

Mark looked down at the ring on his left ring finger and recognized his missing wand. Mark looked at the ring on Annie’s left hand and wondered the same for her.

Mark closed his eyes again and focused on a more difficult problem. Going for someone else is vastly different than going for yourself. Mark had to figure out the spatial transformation needed to pull off the trick.

However, there was a way to bypass doing all that heavy math. He could use the law of similarities. Through the bond Mark had with Annie, he focused on her bladder. He then focused on his bladed and linked the two. A moment later, Mark felt his bladder filling.

Mark opened his eyes and looked at Annie in surprise. She really had to go. Mark had to empty his bladder twice before Annie was completely empty.

The group discussed their plans for the day when Annie realized that she no longer had to pee. “You did it Mark. Thank you,” Annie said and hugged Mark.

All conversation stopped and everyone looked at Mark. “You can’t go for someone else. That’s impossible,” Mrs. Windermere declared emphatically.

“It took me over a month to figure out how to do that,” Mark said proudly. “I can’t believe that no one tried to learn to remote pee. I had to create my own spell.”

“That’s so cool,” eight year old Gregory said. “Can you remote pee for me as well?” All the younger boys made the same request.

“I’m sorry Gregory, but I’d rather not. If you want to remote pee, wait till you turn sixteen, and take the wizard’s initiation, and then I’ll teach you.

“More importantly, going for yourself is not the same as going for someone else. It would have taken me an additional month to figure out how to do it for someone else, so I cheated for Annie. I made a one-way connection between her bladder and mine, which means that I literally went for her,” Mark said.

“You took her pee into yourself? That’s so naughty,” Billy, now thirteen, said. The other boys laughed and agreed that was naughty.

“That’s so sweet,” Emilia, who also turned thirteen, said. The girls agreed with her, thinking he was being romantic.

“Mark, I don’t understand,” Mrs. Windermere said. “Why did you even consider learning to remote pee?”

Mark looked at her in surprise. “Consider this. You’re sleeping in bed and having a marvelous dream. You’re surrounded by mountains of food. Just as you’re about to eat the biggest meal in the universe, you realize you need to pee. You now have a choice: You can sleep on and risk wetting your bed or you get up and lose your dream. I am a wizard. Why should I need to make that choice? I have to admit, the thought of going for someone else never occurred to me.”

“You’re a seriously weird guy Mark,” ten-year-old Sam said. On this everyone agreed.

Annie took that as a compliment, “Mark is the weirdest of all Dracos, and as everyone knows, all we Dracos are weird.”

“Speaking of weird, do you want to know something else that’s weird about me? I never received a wand at the wand ceremony. Everyone in my class was given wands except for me. That was an unheard of occurrence. I was really bummed out because of that,” Mark said sadly.

“Wait a minute,” eleven-year-old John said. “I’ve seen you use that camping fork. Isn’t that a wand?”

“That’s just something I bought at Fred Meyer’s. I was only pretending it was a wand so I wouldn’t feel left out. Thankfully Annie came to my rescue and gave me a real wand,” Mark said and showed his ring to everyone. “Now I know why I didn’t get a wand with everyone else. They wanted Annie to give me the wand, in the form of a wedding ring.”

“Annie has a ring as well,” Mrs. Windermere noted.

“I know,” Mark nodded. “Annie is destined to become a wizard at the age of ten and she will be cursed to remain ten forever. There’s nothing anyone can do to stop it. Believe me, I tried my best.”

“What happens if you die?” Billy asked.

“Billy, don’t say such things,” Mrs. Windermere scolded.

“Don’t kill Mark,” Annie cried.

“If that happens, than Annie’s destiny will change,” Mark mused. “She’ll be released from the curse. Annie’s mum told me to risk my life for Annie. I didn’t expect it to be so literal.”

“Please Mark, don’t say such things. I don’t want you to die,” Annie begged, with tears flowing down her face.

“Come on everyone, it’s almost time for us to go to the stage. Annie’s mum told us to meet there at ten minutes to two,” Mark said.

Mark got up and pulled Annie alone. On the way to the stage, they tossed the garbage. Upon arriving, they found Marjorie talking with some stage crew.

Marjorie turned to find Annie’s teary face looking at her.

“Oh my God, Annie, what happened?” Marjorie asked worriedly.

“I don’t want Mark to die,” Annie cried.

“Why would Mark die?” Marjorie asked.

“What’s going on?” Ravenswood asked.

“Billy suggested that the spell would break if I di..di.. passed away,” Mark explained. “And Annie’s mother said I should protect her with my life.”

If Annie expected them to say they’d protect Mark, she was mistaken. Instead, Ravenswood just said, “Dear, we need to discuss this after the interview.”

Annie wanted to protest, but the look on her father’s face stopped her. It was the look of admiration, guilt and pain.

“Prince Mark, Princess Annie, please come here and I’ll fix you up for the show,” a woman called.

“Talk to you later everyone,” Mark said and followed the woman.

The woman took them to the side and worked on their hair and face. They were led to lounge chairs on the stage. Mark and Annie shared a chair.

Ravenswood, Marjorie, and Jane took their chairs, leaving two chairs empty. The announcer sat on her chair and waited. The on-air light went on and the announcer spoke. “Welcome back Washington. Joining us now is the royal family and the young prince that everyone’s talking about. Majesty, the world is dying to know, who is that young prince your daughter is holding hands with?”

“The young man is Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan. Powers beyond our control have selected Mark to fight in a Princess Challenge for the right to marry my daughter,” Ravenswood said.

“As everyone knows, a commoner is forbidden from marrying into royalty. There is only one exception. That’s the Princess Challenge,” Lola the announcer explained.

“Destiny arranges for candidates of the Princess Challenge to appear in front of the princess when she turns sixteen. The princess selects her champion and then issues the Princess Challenge.

“During the next five years, the candidate will fight for the right to marry the Princess. The challenges he faces will push him to the breaking point. The stronger the candidate, the greater the challenges the candidate will face. The candidate who fails the test, not only loses the right to marry the princess, but he could be destroyed, along with the entire country. Many countries have fallen because the candidate failed.

“On the other hand, should the candidate succeed, the country will meet great prosperity.

“There’s only one problem. Princess Annie is too young to be involved in such a contest. She isn’t sixteen,” Lola said.

“No, but I am,” Mark said.

“That’s so cute,” Lola said. “You’ve got to be the cutest little boy I’ve ever seen.”

Mark got up and transformed into his teenage self. His clothes transformed as well. He was now wearing the clothes he had on when Annie picked him up. He accidently pulled Annie out of the chair.

“I am not a brat,” Mark said shouted. “I am sixteen years old, almost seventeen. On the feast of the Three Wise Men, I shall be seventeen.”

Mark turned to Annie. “Sorry for pulling you up like that. I hope I didn’t hurt you.” Mark sat down and Annie jumped on his lap and curled up in a ball. She wrapped her hands around Mark’s neck and Mark hugged her back.

The announcer looked at him in astonishment and was completely out of words.

“I was born and raised in Dragonia. At the age of ten, I stopped growing. When I turned thirteen, I had a growth spurt. That was the time I immigrated to Washington and met Harry Banks, my best friend.

“I thought I was all grown up, just like Harry, especially since I’m two months older than him. Then Harry got a sixteen-year-old girlfriend when he was just fifteen. You have no idea how jealous that made me feel. I was determined to get a girl of my own.

“Unfortunately, every girl I met rejected me for the very same reason. None of them wanted to date a ten-year-old boy…”

“Well, of course,” Lola said. “They would get in trouble for dating a child.”

“Look at me,” Mark said angrily. “Do I look like a ten-year-old boy? I took my wizard’s initiation in September. That was when I first met Jane, Princess Jane. The headmaster called for volunteers for VP of Education and I volunteered. It was a no-brainer. I mean, who wouldn’t want the job, if it meant being friends with a princess, especially one as pretty as Jane?

“The next day I met Jane and her baby sister and we bought some clothes. Next week, my uncle, Arthur Lucas, took me to Dragonia for an initiation celebration. I was surprised when I saw Annie there. I was instructed to entertain her,” Mark said. He looked at the king.

“My family was invited to Dragonia to attend a concert by a business associate,” Ravenswood said. “After the show, the Draco clan requested permission to adopt Annie.”

Ravenswood stopped speaking and Mark resumed. “From then on, I kept bumping into Annie. I didn’t mind, since it was fun having a baby sister. Then my best friend Harry suggested that the Draco clan was trying to get Annie and I married. That’s the worst thing that could happen to Annie.”

“I understand,” Lola said. “The Princess Challenge is the greatest challenge anyone can face.”

“That’s not the problem. The problem is that my age is stuck at ten years, which, by the way, is considered impossible. This means that Annie will suffer the same fate when she reaches ten,” Mark said. “I formally requested that the king erase all memory of us ever meeting. That way, the Princess Challenge could be stopped and Annie could be spared from being a baby forever. This morning I formally made the request. Tonight at midnight the spell will complete.

“After my request, I sort of relaxed and my form reverted to this,” Mark said and reverted back to his ten-year-old form.

“It was then that I knew, short of his death, nothing could stop the Princess Challenge,” Ravenswood said. “Don’t worry Annie, I won’t hurt him. God has decided that he shall take the Princess Challenge, forcing Annie to remain ten forever. God doesn’t make arbitrary decisions, which means that we’re going to have some interesting times in the near future,” Ravenswood said.

“There you have it. Our royal family will soon be having a new member. Let’s hope Marcus Lucas can succeed in the Princess Challenge, for all our sakes. And now, for a word from our sponsors,” Lola said.

After the break, Lola asked the usual questions of the royal family. The interview ended. “Come on Annie, let’s go,” Mark said.

Annie just shook her head and continued sitting on Mark’s lap. Mark became big and got up with Annie in his arms. He followed Ravenswood, Marjorie and Jane off the stage.

They met Nancy and the others. “Annie, do you want to play with your friends?” Marjorie asked.

As expected, Annie shook her head ‘No’.

“Bye everyone, and Merry Christmas,” Mark said to the orphans and Mrs. Windermere. “See you later.”

They got into the limo and drove off. They arrived at the palace and entered. As before, Mark carried Annie.

They entered the royal suites and went to the living room. Decorations made the room festive. An ornate Christmas tree crowded a corner, under which was a mountain of presents.

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you a drink Mark,” Ravenswood said. “You’re underage.”

“Yes, I’m only sixteen. It’s ironic that I’m the only one in this room who doesn’t know what wine tastes like,” Mark said, referring to the Holy Eucharist. “It doesn’t matter. Christmas is the time for eggnog, not wine. What happens next?”

“Next is opening presents,” Jane said. “Father will hand out presents.”

Mark sat on the floor and Annie sat on his lap. Ravenswood handed out presents to his family.

It amused Mark to see how the royal family behaved just like a regular family. ‘We are a regular family,’ Annie said as she opened a present from Jane.

“I spent a few days in the Sea of Chaos, looking for presents for you,” Mark said to the family. “I hope you like my presents.” Mark handed out presents to everyone.

The ladies found necklaces with rare jewels within their boxes. The king got a gold tie pin with a purple jewel. “I don’t know the value of those jewels. I only chose them because I know they can only be found in the Sea of Chaos.”

“How rare are these jewels in the Sea of chaos?” Ravenswood asked.

“These jewels come on an island I found difficult to reach. It’s in a particularly chaotic area of the Sea. Once I got the jewels, I got a family jeweler to polish and set them,” Mark said. “They are harder than diamond, but not brittle.”

“Thank you Marcus, it’s beautiful,” Marjorie said.

“It’s too bad you’ll forget who gave it to you after today,” Annie said in a sulky voice.

“Don’t worry Annie. This is your story. When the time comes, everyone will remember,” Mark said.

“The guests will arrive at 6:00PM. Be ready by then,” Marjorie said.

‘Come on Annie, you can show me your room,’ Mark said.

‘All right,’ Annie said and got up. She led Mark away down a corridor. They entered a room that definitely belonged to a princess. It was overwhelming in its pinkness.

‘That’s a lot of pink, Annie,’ Mark said. Thinking fast, Mark realized what he could do to distract Annie. He transformed into his younger self and said, ‘Comb my hair. I know girls love doing things like that.’

Annie led Mark to a stool and he sat down. Annie brought out a brush and combed his hair. The feel of the comb in his hair felt surprisingly good. It was making him feel sleepy.

Mark felt Annie relax as she did the hair-brushing ritual. It was working. Annie talked mind-to-mind with Mark about life, the universe, and everything.

In eight hours from now, the amnesia spell would activate. It couldn’t be prevented without serious consequences. To Mark, waiting for it to activate was like waiting for his own execution. The best Mark could do was to make the wait as comfortable as possible for Annie.

Mark looked at his ring while Annie braded his hair. Why couldn’t Destiny give them both twenty-one-year-old bodies? If you have to have a frozen age, then that would be the perfect age.

‘I’m done Mark,’ Annie said.

Annie gave Mark a bowed ponytail. One of three braids went straight down and the left and right were used to make a bow.

‘Okay Annie, it’s your turn,’ Mark said and got up.

Annie sat down and Mark worked on her hair. Annie continued her monologue.

‘Okay Annie, it’s done. I’ll paint your finger-nails for you,’ Mark said.

Becky came in as Annie’s fingers were drying. “Annie, it’s time for you to change. Almost all the guests have arrived,” Becky said.

Mark walked to the door. “Okay Annie, dress quickly,” Mark said and stepped out. ‘Don’t worry Annie, I’m always with you.’

Mark shut the door and waited. While waiting, Mark realized he hadn’t taken a dump all day. This was the perfect time to perfect his spell. He closed his eyes and focused on the business end of his large intestines. It had to be the very end for hygienic reasons.

Mark placed his ring on his stomach and cast the spell. It worked like a charm. He felt the pleasant feeling of his intestines emptying. Remote pooping was the best. ‘Annie, I finally mastered the art of remote pooping. Now I’ll never have to worry about having to go ever again.’

‘Congratulations Mark,’ Annie said happily. ‘I’m almost finished dressing.’

Mark looked at his ring. It was amazing what you could do with a wand. The lack of a wand was the only thing that had prevented him from mastering the spell before.

A thought occurred to Mark. He would be losing the ring at midnight, since it represented a fundamental bond between Annie and himself.

“You may come in,” Becky said.

Mark entered the room and said, “You look radiant Annie.”

“Thank you Mark,” Annie said.

“Mum, dad, please give me clothes that will compliment Annie’s dress,” Mark said aloud.

Mark’s clothes shimmered and transformed. He was now wearing a new outfit. “Thanks mum and dad,” Mark said.

“Mark, you look good,” Annie said.

“Thanks Annie,” Mark replied.

“It’s time for you to meet the guests. They should have all arrived by now,” Becky said.

“Okay,” Mark and Annie said.

They walked through a set of doors and found themselves at the top of a flight of steps.

Below them, guests filled the reception hall. ‘I’m feeling a little nervous,’ Mark said. ‘This is the ballroom event, signaling the beginning of the Princess Challenge.’

‘It’s okay Mark. I’m with you,’ Annie reassured.

They waited at the top of the steps. The guests stopped talking and turned to them. It was time to come down. Hand in hand, Annie and Mark walked down the steps, with the world staring at them.

They walked down the steps and stopped at the second to last step. “Merry Christmas everyone,” they said.

The guests hesitated a moment, and them went forward. Everyone wanted to greet the newcomer. Mark found this difficult since he could only shake hands with his left hand.

Wally, King of Switzerland came up to them and spoke to Mark. “Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan, you’re sixteen years old, are you not?”

“Yes Majesty. On the Twelfth Night, I shall turn seventeen,” Mark replied.

“Don’t you think it’s immoral for a seventeen-year-old man to be dating an eight-year-old child? Also, don’t you think it’s doubly immoral for that same seventeen-year-old man to be wearing the appearance of an effeminate ten-year-old boy?” Wally asked.

The room went silent as everyone stared at Mark. Mark felt his face turn red. “Don’t make fun of Mark, he’s my best friend,” Annie shouted.

“That doesn’t mean he can do perverted things to you,” Wally replied angrily.

“Annie is the one who chose me, not the other way around,” Mark clarified calmly. “Destiny has chosen me to be Annie’s champion. I had no part in any of this. I didn’t choose any of this.” Mark wrapped his energy around Annie so that she wouldn’t get upset by what he said.

“You should all know what it means for me to be in this situation, since you’re of the noble and royal world. I am a commoner, and so this is all foreign to me. Once again I say I didn’t choose this.

“The only thing I can do is what I must do.

“As for my appearance, this is the appearance my parents gave me. I have no control over that – except for the bow on my head, of course. I let Annie do my hair as a Christmas present to her, since we’ll be parting company midnight tonight.

“Age is an incarnational attribute that can’t be changed,” Mark lectured. “I challenge any one of you to check my age and see what it really is.” He had to control his emotions since this situation required a cool and collected attitude.

“Do you love Annie?” Coralline, Queen of Switzerland asked.

“I have no romantic feeling for her and she has none for me,” Mark said. “I think of her as being my baby sister and am determined she grows up healthy and happy. That’s the only thing I want,” Mark replied. “If there are no more questions, I think we should begin the Christmas party.”

The people dispersed. That was fine with Mark.

Mark noticed Marjorie nearby. “It seems the challenge has already begun, Annie’s mum,” Mark said. “I only wish I could protect Annie from what lies ahead.”

“Don’t feel bad Mark,” Marjorie consoled. “Some things are just beyond our power to control.”

“I believe a supreme master can do anything, which is why I’m determined to become one. I’m sophomore level in the six elemental magics,” Mark said.

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard. It’s not healthy,” Marjorie scolded.

“I have no choice if I want to protect Annie,” Mark said.

“I like your new outfit. It compliments Annie’s dress,” Marjorie said, changing the subject.

“Thanks, Annie’s mum. I asked my parents for clothes that would complement Annie,” Mark said.

“Do your parents always give you whatever you ask for?” Marjorie asked.

“Only if it’s reasonable,” Mark said. “The situation I’m in now is something I have to deal with on my own.” Mark stomach growled.

Annie laughed and held Mark’s stomach. “You’re always hungry, aren’t you?” Annie’s stomach growled then.

Marjorie laughed. “Don’t worry. Dinner will be served at seven. In the meantime, why don’t you get to know people your…I mean Annie’s age.”

“Okay Annie’s mum,” Mark said and walked towards the crowd.

A thought occurred to Mark. ‘Annie, this is the perfect time to wear your rose.’

‘You’re right,’ Annie said and almost dragged Mark up the steps. They entered Annie’s room. Annie opened a jewel box and took out the rose. Mark adjusted it in her hair. They headed back down.

Walking around the reception hall, Annie introduced the guests to Mark. He didn’t know most of them since he had no interest in politics.

Mark did however meet one annoying person. That was Prince Dilbert, age eleven. Dilbert had purple hair, tied in a simple waist-length ponytail, and of course purple eyes.

“Aren’t you a little old to be dating Annie?” Dilbert asked.

Mark felt like hitting him. Tiikeris always got on his nerves. ‘Aren’t you a little ugly to be a prince?’ Mark said in Annie’s mind.

Annie giggled at Mark’s comment.

“I’m not dating Annie, and you know it. Being a prince, you should know about arranged marriages. Our two countries have arranged for you and Annie to get married when she becomes twenty-one,” Mark said.

“That’s right,” Dilbert exclaimed. “That’s because I’m a prince and you’re not.”

“Annie is stronger than you realize. She’s also destined to be a dragon. You will not dominate her,” Mark stated.

“You can’t tell what someone’s second form will be before the ceremony. Anyone who thinks that is a fool,” Dilbert asserted.

“You’re destined to be a tiger, since you’re a Tiikeri. I’m destined to be a dragon, since I’m a Draco. My First Parents acknowledged Annie, which proves that Annie will be a dragon,” Mark said.

“Your First Parents are demon spawn and so are you. God has cursed your very existence,” Dilbert said in a confrontational tone.

Mark noticed that they were the center of attention, but he couldn’t stop. “If I’m a demon spawn, then so are you, or did you forget who Lord Draco’s father is?”

“Jacob disowned him when he realized just how evil Draco was,” Dilbert replied angrily.

“Who’s Jacob?” someone asked.

“Jacob is the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, grandson of Abraham,” Dilbert replied.

“Does that mean that Dracos are Semites?” someone else asked.

“No!” both Mark and Dilbert denied.

“You two are agreeing with each other,” Jane noted.

“No we aren’t,” both Mark and Dilbert denied again.

“How are you two related?” Nancy asked.

“The tribe of Tiikeri is a sub-tribe of Levi. They are the enforcers of Abrahamic law,” Mark explained. “Draco is the thirteenth and youngest son of Jacob. As Dilbert said, he was disowned by Jacob and the other twelve sons. As you can see, we have some fundamental disagreements.”

“What were the disagreements?” Nancy asked.

“They have blasphemed against God by saying that He isn’t a He,” Dilbert spat. “They also venerated dragons as messengers of God.”

“Lord Draco believed that God partook of both male and female aspects and we should emulate that,” Mark said. “Because of that fundamental difference, he was banished.”

“Why didn’t they just kill him, like they tried to do with Joseph?” Nancy asked.

“They tried to, but Draco got away with the help of his demon cohorts,” Dilbert said. “It is our duty as protectors of the law to fight the Draco clan.” Dilbert’s father Wally nodded in agreement.

“So where did they go?” Nancy asked, fascinated. She wasn’t the only one drawn into the story. Everyone was listening.

“Lord Draco, Lady Lilith and their children fled into the Sea of Chaos. They spent the next forty years searching for and eventually finding the Tree of Life,” Mark said.

“Blasphemy,” Wally shouted, red faced. “You people have no right to live on sacred ground. No one has the right to live on sacred ground. One day we will force you to vacate, and then close up the Sea of Chaos forever.”

“You can’t close up the Sea of Chaos. That’s impossible,” a woman with white hair and black eyes argued.

“It’s already half the size it was ten years ago,” Wally said proudly. In thirteen years, when Annie reaches marriageable age, the Sea will be closed forever, and there’s nothing the Draco clan can do to stop it. And then we shall eliminate filthy magic from the world, as well as all evil magical creatures.”

“You will no longer be a king, should that happen,” Mark countered.

“The elimination of all royalty and nobility from the world is a small price to pay. The human race has blasphemed enough. It has to stop now,” Wally said with an air of finality.

The room went silent.

“Dinner is ready,” someone called.

Everyone went to an adjacent room. It contained two long tables spanning the room and a smaller table with name tags. The adults sat at the long tables and the children sat at the small table. The room was set up for the greatest intimacy, considering the number of guests.

Mark found his and Annie’s names at the kiddy table. Jane and Nancy were seated together at the grown up table. ‘This is embarrassing,’ Mark said. ‘I’m not a child.’

‘What’s wrong with being a child?’ Annie asked.

Mark gave Annie a mental hug. ‘It’s like being treated like a five-year-old. Can you imagine being five forever?’

That comment made Annie understand. ‘I don’t want to be five again.’

It wasn’t as bad as Mark realized, considering that Dilbert had to share the kiddy table. “Why do I have to be on the kiddy table? I’m almost an adult,” Dilbert complained.

Annie and Mark sat down and waited. Annie tensed her butt and Mark looked at her. ‘Mark, I have to go make a poop. Can you please go for me?’

‘All right,’ Mark said.

Mark closed his eyes and focused on the business end of Annie’s large intestines. He cast the spell to connect their intestines, like he did with their bladders. As before, he felt his guts filling as Annie got emptied. Mark cast the spell for remote pooping and emptied himself. Less than five minutes later, it was done.

‘Thank you Mark, you’re the best,’Annie said and gave Mark a hug.

Soup was served. While they drank the soup, a thought occurred to Mark. Connecting his intestines and bladder to Annie’s was kind of disgusting. Some of the poop that was now in his large intestines came from Annie. The same was true for his bladder.

Connecting organs together involved the law of similarities. It tended to create permanent bonds, which in this case was a one-way connection.

On the other hand, the remote-pooping and remote-peeing spells that Mark used were one-off spells that had to be recast whenever needed. He didn’t have a high enough level to cast a continuous spell for that.

‘Why did I agree to something like that?’Mark thought to himself. ‘This isn’t something I would do for just anyone.’

‘That’s because you love me,’ Annie replied in an, isn’t that obvious, tone.

‘No one in the history of the world has ever pooped for someone else. What does that mean?’ Mark asked.

‘It means you love me like no one else,’ Annie replied, again stating the obvious. ‘Please pass the pepper.’

Mark didn’t know how to reply to that, so he passed the pepper.

Mark ate in silence as everyone talked about nothing in particular. He looked at his ring while eating. He had his ring for several days and only now did he discover its true value.

Mark sighed, regretting the wasted time. He wanted to leave the palace and practice magic with his newly discovered wand. Unfortunately, he couldn’t just leave. Instead, he projected a part of his consciousness to another room. Again, he admired how much easier it was with a wand. There he juggled two books, and then three.

Dinner finished, everyone adjourned to the outside patio behind the palace. People danced and socialized under the warm cloudless sky.

‘Come on Annie, you will one day be a world leader,’ Mark said as he guided Annie among the guests. ‘You need to do what you must do, even if you don’t feel like it. You must become strong.’

Annie nodded and forced herself to speak to people. Time passed. Mark got tired socializing as eleven o’clock approached.

Mark switched to his teenage form and picked Annie up in his arms and hugged her. Annie wrapped her legs around Mark’s waist and hugged him back. He found a chair and sat down. ‘You’re so soft and cuddly Annie,’ Mark said. Mark closed his eyes and enjoyed the hug.

While cuddling with Annie, Annie’s parents came and sat with them. Jane and Nancy joined them.

“One hour left,” Ravenswood said.

Mark just nodded.

“What’s that ring on your finger?” Ravenswood asked.

Mark removed his ring and handed it to the king.

“I don’t know if they told you but a week ago, Annie asked to have a pretend wedding with me. She took two rings out of her pocket and we used it for our pretend ceremony,” Mark said. “Surprisingly, the ring you’re holding now is my magic wand. For some unknown reason, I never got a wand at my wand ceremony. It seems my parents intentionally did that, just so Annie could give me my wand.”

“Does that mean that Annie’s ring is her magic wand?” Marjorie asked, worriedly. She took Mark’s ring and examined it.

“I need to freshen up,” Jane said. “Annie, would you like to come with me?”

“Mark went for me,” Annie’s muffled voice replied.

“That’s impossible,” Nancy stated.

“It’s not impossible for a wizard,” Mark denied. “I don’t know why no one thought of doing that before. I had to invent the spells myself, because I couldn’t find anything.”

“That’s because only a stupid brat would want to do something like that,” Dilbert taunted.

“Don’t call Mark stupid,” Annie shouted.

“Annie, you shouldn’t listen to anything Tiikeris have to say. They never have anything worth listening to,” Mark said.

“What did you say?” Dilbert said. “You’re just a damn commoner and I’m a prince.”

“I’m destined to marry Annie and no power in the world can stop that. At midnight, just like Cinderella, I will disappear. Just like Cinderella, I shall leave behind…” Mark trailed off.

“Your panties,” Annie said and giggled.

“Annie, don’t be crude,” Marjorie scolded.

Dilbert laughed, along with several of his cronies. “I didn’t know you were a cross-dresser.”

“I always wear manly clothes,” Mark affirmed. “I’ll leave behind…”

Just then, the clock sounded.

“Crap. I lost track of time,” Mark exclaimed and got up. The second gong rang.

“I didn’t know we had that type of clock,” Marjorie commented.

“That’s the sound of the spell activating,” Ravenswood replied.

The third gong sounded.

Mark pried Annie from his body and handed her to Ravenswood. He bowed to Ravenswood, Marjorie and Jane. “See you later, future mother, father, sister.”

The fourth gong sounded, this time louder than before.

“Don’t go,” Annie cried.

Mark turned and ran as the fifth gong rang. “Mark, you forgot your ring,” Marjorie called.

“I’ll give it to him,” Annie said. She took the ring, squirmed out of her father’s arms and dashed after Mark.

The sixth gong rang.

“Wait up for me Mark. You forgot your ring,” Annie screamed. Mark didn’t seem to hear.

The seventh gong rang.

Mark ran as fast as he could with Annie close behind. He didn’t know what would happen if he stayed beyond the allotted time, and was terrified of finding out.

The eighth gong rang.

Mark raced on, wishing he could take Annie with him. She was a bright light with infinite potential.

The ninth gong rang.

Mark saw the main gates in front of him. They swung open as he approached.

The tenth gong rang, filling the world with sound. Mark’s heart beat fast, more from fear than exertion.

The eleventh gong rang, even more ominous than before. For a moment he felt he wouldn’t make it.

Mark felt Annie close behind and admired her. Very few people could keep up with him when he ran at full speed. Annie was not just keeping up but starting to overtake.

Mark wanted to say he’d miss her, but knew that wasn’t true. You can’t miss something you don’t remember, can you?

The twelfth gong rang with terrifying finality as he reached the gates. The sound of the last gong died as he crossed the line.

The gates of the palace slammed shut behind him with a resounding thud.

8. The Winter Blahs

Can you miss something   
you never knew existed?

Mark looked around him. He was in his street clothes, standing in front of the palace gates. He felt he had lost something of value but didn’t know what.

Mark looked around him but couldn’t find anything on the driveway. Did he just imagine loosing something of value? He couldn’t decide. Mark stood there trying to remember what he lost.

Mark finally had to leave, partially because he intellectually knew he didn’t lose anything, but mostly because he had to pee.

Mark ran the four miles separating the main gate and his apartment. While running, he practiced the remote-peeing spell. As always, every try was a failure. If only he had a wand like a normal person.

Mark arrived at his apartment and relieved himself the old fashioned way. He went to the fridge, but didn’t feel hungry. Never the less, he ate something and headed out.

Boxing-day was cold, rainy and dreary as any other winter day. That was fine with Mark, since it reflected the gloominess inside of him.

The best way to fight the feeling of boredom and gloom was training. Mark headed for his favorite training ground, where no one would bother him.

The training ground was several acres of swamp land on school property and next to the palace wall to the north. He didn’t need to worry about the cold because of the natural hot springs and mud pots.

There was also a shack that Uncle Arthur supplied for his convenience.

The swamps smelled horrible in summer and only mildly earthy in winter. That, combined with the treacherous ground, insects, poisonous plant, and strange magnetic and magical fields kept everyone who didn’t need to be there away.

That was perfect for Mark since he didn’t want to hurt anyone should he make a mistake while training. Accidents are common while working near the edge of your magical ability.

Mark undressed and put his clothes away. Wearing nothing, Mark walked twenty feet away from the shack and stopped.

Mark closed his eyes and felt the breeze blowing around him. A thought occurred to him. Being naked in winter wasn’t the brightest thing to do. However, that was the best way to train.

Feeling the elements with your entire body intensified the oneness with nature.

Mark divided his soul in half and sent it to a spot two hundred feet in front of him. There, the fragment drew forth the substances of the swamp and created a ball floating ten feet above the ground. Seconds later, the ball exploded with a loud bang. It created a twenty foot crater that quickly filled with water. That was another failed experiment.

After hours of repeated failures, Mark restored his soul and jumped into a nearby mud pot. The heat of the mud felt good on his body.

A thought occurred to Mark. He should ask the headmaster to let him open up a hot spring and mud bath here for the students. He was certain that it would help them intensify their training. He would ask when school started in January.

Mark got out ten minutes later and resumed training. The knot in the pit of his stomach wouldn’t let him rest.

Mark trained like a mad man for the next several days, stopping only to sleep, and occasionally forgetting to eat.

School resumed. Mark tried to get a hot spring spa built, but the idea got shot down for various political, environmental, economic, and other reasons. He wasn’t surprised. If it was so easy, it would have been done long ago.

Instead he decided to build up grass-root support by introducing the idea to the students and showing them how the swamps were helping him progress.

Finally the day arrived which Mark had been waiting for. It was his birthday. Mark awoke bright and early. The first thing he did was scream, “Hello world, I am seventeen years old!”

Mark got out of bed and found birthday presents. Just then the call of nature demanded his attention. He went to the washroom and two minutes later came back.

Mark opened the presents up like a kid. One was a new set of clothes he quickly put on. Another was a card from Uncle Arthur’s. It mentioned he would pick up Mark up at 7:00PM for a birthday party.

Mark went to the kitchen and found a meal prepared for him. He enjoyed the meal with the knowledge that he was now seventeen years old. He was no longer a child, and would soon be an adult.

Mark cleared the table and headed out. As he went to school, he greeted everyone more cheerfully than usual. He also informed everyone that he was seventeen years old, whether they wanted to know or not.

Mark waited for just before the second bell to ring before going into homeroom. He then announced to the class that he was seventeen.

“Real mature, fool,” Harimau sneered. “I can’t believe they let you out of kindergarten.”

“They didn’t let me out of the Garden. I escaped,” Mark said and blew Harimau a raspberry.

“What garden?” Ester asked.

“The Garden of Eden on the Tree of Life,” Mark said. “It doesn’t matter now. I’m seventeen. Isn’t that great?”

“There’s no such thing as the Garden of Eden. That’s just a myth,” John Hanson said.

“It’s real,” Rover assured. “With the possible exception of Mark, none of us has the right to enter Eden.”

“Hey, I don’t have the right to enter Eden either,” Mark said angrily. “I’m not a kid anymore.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Harimau laughed.

The bell rang. Class resumed. By the end of the school day everyone knew that Mark had turned seventeen. That wasn’t difficult since he announced it over the P.A. system.

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Mark and Harry entered the student council area and the other council members greeted them.

“Happy birthday Mark,” John Hankins said. “I don’t think I was as happy to have a birthday as you since I was ten.”

“Neither have I,” Jane said.

“That’s because you’re not an eternal ten-year-old, like Mark is,” Harry explained.

“Sorry Harry, but you can’t upset me this time. I’m seventeen years old and you’re not,” Mark said.

Mark paused and said “Not again.” He ran from the room, holding his stomach.

“What’s the matter with Mark?” Sylvia Larks asked.

“He’ll be back in a minute, and then you can ask him,” Harry said.

Two minutes later, Mark returned.

“What’s the matter Mark?” Sylvia asked.

“For some reason I feel as if I’m going for two people,” Mark said and held his stomach. “I know I didn’t eat any corn, but I pooped it out just now.”

“That’s disgusting,” Sylvia said looking nauseous. “You shouldn’t speak like that in front of the princess.”

“That’s strange,” Jane mused. “My baby sister hasn’t gone to the washroom since Christmas. We also had corn yesterday.”

“Maybe Mark’s going for Jane’s baby sister,” Harry said with a laughed.

“That’s impossible,” Mark denied. “I haven’t mastered the art of remote-pooping and remote-peeing yet. Beside, why would I connect my intestines to someone I don’t know or have never met?”

“Are you saying such things are possible?” Maurice asked.

“Of course it’s possible, for a wizard,” Mark declared. “You just need a power level of 22 for Water magic and Earth magic.”

You also needed a wand, but Mark decided not to mention that. After all, the only wizard in the world not having a wand was him.

“It doesn’t matter. I will master the spells by spring festival at the latest,” Mark said.

“Why would you even consider doing something like that?” Mama-Duke Bradley asked.

Mark hated stupid questions, but knew that most people didn’t consider it stupid. “Haven’t you ever had one of those dreams where you’re surrounded by mountains of food? Just then you have to pee. You have a choice: You can either continue dreaming and risk wetting your bed, or you go to the washroom and lose your dream. I’m a wizard. I don’t see why I should choose.”

“You dream of food?” Mama-Duke asked and laughed.

Mark’s face turned red. “No, of course not,” he objected. “I also dream of spell casting and travelling in amazing worlds. What do you dream of?” Mark asked.

“I dream of the same thing that all teenage boys dream of. Wet dreams are the best,” Mama-Duke said.

“Wet dreams?” Mark asked, confused.

“Don’t be crude,” Jane said.

“How come I don’t get such dreams? It’s not fair,” Mark blurted out.

“Why would you want such perverted dreams?” Sylvia asked.

“Because it’s a sign of being an adult,” Mark said. “I don’t understand why people consider the human body to be sinful. One day I’ll get a girlfriend and do to her all the perverted things Mama-Duke dreams about. That’s the path of a man. Dang! Look at the time. I have to meet my uncle. See you all later.”

Mark left the building and ran down the street. Uncle Arthur appeared in front of Mark and Mark crashed into him. “Happy birthday my boy,” Uncle Arthur said as he wrapped his arms around Mark and gave him a hug. “You’re no longer a child. I see you’re getting more affectionate with old age. Just don’t crash into my wife. She’s a little more delicate than me.” Uncle Arthur laughed at his own joke.

A second later they were in Uncle Arthur’s chariot. Hanna Cortes, Aunt Flo, and several other relatives were there.

“Happy birthday Mark,” they called and gave him hugs.

“We’re having the party at my place,” Uncle Arthur said. That meant only one thing. They were going to Dragonia, where no one wore clothes.

Mark walked next to a chair and undressed. He tossed his clothes on the chair and returned to his equally naked relatives. They badgered him with questions about school and social life.

The chariot touched down and everyone disembarked. There were more relatives there to greet him. Here children greeted him as well. They were his nephews and nieces. One was a cute eight-year-old girl with blue hair and red eyes. She ran up to him and gave him a hug.

Mark bent down, picked her up, and gave her a hug and a kiss. “Happy birthday Uncle Mark,” Carol said. “You should visit more often. I miss you.”

“I promise to do that more often Carol. My studies are ahead of schedule so I have time,” Mark said and rubbed her soft back. “You have grown since the last time I met you. I think you’re now the prettiest girl in the universe,” Mark whispered in Carol’s ear, making sure none of his other female relatives heard that. It was his policy to tell all women that they were pretty, whenever the occasion came up.

As Mark lowered Carol to the floor, a thought popped into his head. Carol wasn’t the prettiest girl in the universe. The prettiest girl was…

Mark reached out for the answer to who the prettiest girl in the universe was, but his mind encountered just emptiness. Mark found that disturbing without knowing why.

“Okay Mark,” Uncle Arthur said. “Show us what you learned.”

Mark gave everyone a show. He then told the audience about his remote-pooping and remote-peeing experiments.

The adults thought the concept was amusing without taking it seriously. On the other hand, the kids, especially the little boys, thought he was a genius.

He then played games with his relatives, before sitting down to eat with the family.

Eventually he said goodbye to the family members and Uncle Arthur returned him to his training ground for some late-night training. It was a fun day that Mark greatly enjoyed.

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Days passed and Mark trained for reasons he didn’t fully understand.

Spring sprung and with it the week-long spring festival. Mark had finally perfected the spell he had been working on for the last seven months. To him that was a great moment in magical history, although he knew the world felt differently. It was their loss.

By Christmas latest he knew he knew he could make it automatic. It would be amazing not having to cast the spell multiple times a day.

Banners and decorations adorned the school. Most clubs showed off their club activities in custom booths. Others sold food from around the world.

Mark stepped out of a maid restraint where he enjoyed the service of lady students dressed up as maids.

“Hi Mark,” Jane said.

Mark turned around and saw Jane standing beside a little girl with purple eyes and pink hair. The girl was like an explosion of sunshine and roses.

“Hi Jane, have you eaten yet?” Mark asked happily. All his winter blas had disappeared and he felt at peace.

“Not yet,” Jane said. “I can’t decide what to order.”

Mark saw the little girl staring at him. “Is that your baby sister? She’s very pretty.” Mark smiled at the child.

The girl opened her eyes wide and ran behind Jane. The reaction hurt Mark. He wasn’t used to children being afraid of him.

Mark returned his attention to Jane. “I’ve tried most of the places. I’m planning on going to the Chinese place next. Why don’t you come with me, unless Annie doesn’t like Chinese food?”

Mark pointed the way and Jane followed. Annie stayed on the left of Jane and Mark intentionally stayed to the right, and away from Annie.

“She likes Chinese food, except she hasn’t been eating much lately,” Jane said.

“Is your cute sister having health problems?” Mark asked worriedly. “The Draco clan has some excellent doctors.”

They entered the student restraint and sat at a table for four. Jane and Annie sat on one side and Mark sat on the other side. Annie put her head at eye level to the table and stared at Mark. Mark made sure not to look at her.

“We don’t know. She’s been a Gloomy Gus since Christmas,” Jane said.

“I’ve been feeling a little down since Christmas also, as if I’ve lost my best friend,” Mark said and gave Annie a quick glance. “The only way to beat the blues is hard work. A Draco is…”

The waitress interrupted Mark. “Here are your menus,” she said. “Would you like some drinks?”

“I’ll have a coke,” Jane said. “Annie, what would you like?”

“Orange soda,” Annie mumbled from almost under the table.

“I’ll have a root beer. I’ll be paying the bill,” Mark said. The waitress left. “Now what was I saying before…”

“A Draco is always strong,” Annie mumbled in a barely audible voice.

Mark looked at Annie in surprise. He could only see the top of her head.

“Is it me or does your little sister always act like that?” Mark asked.

“What’s the matter Annie? Why are you being so shy around Mark?” Jane asked.

“Maybe she’s overwhelmed by how cool I am. Jane, give her a hug,” Mark said. Jane gave Annie the hug. “The Draco’s have a saying…”

“Are you ready to order yet?” the waitress interrupted and placed drinks on the table.

“Just give us two of everything,” Mark ordered and then paid.

The waitress walked away and Annie mumbled something. Mark looked questioningly at Jane.

“Annie said, ‘A Draco is always brave,’ ” Jane replied.

“Your sister sounds like a Draco,” Mark said. Annie smiled at that.

“Annie seems to have grown a strange fascination with your clan for some unknown reason. Her room is filled with images of Dragonia and the Sea of Chaos. Also, she’s been asking questions to a business acquaintance named Adam,” Jane said.

“Is he an arms dealer?” Mark asked.

“Yes,” Jane said. “He supplies us with some of our military equipment.”

“I occasionally rent some of the planes. Come to think of it, I haven’t flown in months,” Mark said. “I’ll do it this weekend.”

The waitress came with the food. “Sorry for the wait,” she said. “Most customers don’t order everything.”

“Most customers aren’t gluttons like me,” Mark said with a smile.

Annie giggled. Mark was about to look at her, but changed his mind. Instead he said, “Okay everyone, dig in.”

Mark ate, trying to think of a way to get Annie to relax.

Hoping to entertain Annie, Mark said, “Jane, I finally mastered my remote-pooping spell. I’m still pooping for two people, but it doesn’t matter now.”

Mark scratched his chin and looked at the ceiling, as if thinking great thoughts. “I wonder who I’m pooping for. Is there anyone in the world who hasn’t pooped in ages?”

Annie raised her hand under the table, but Mark didn’t see it.

Mark ate with exaggerated enjoyment, hoping to put Annie at ease. “You two better eat before I finish everything,” Mark said. “I’m going to eat like a Draco.”

“No, I am,” Annie said softly and attacked the food.

“Annie, don’t eat too fast. You haven’t eaten in a long time and you might get sick,” Jane cautioned.

Mark ate in silence. Once finished, Mark rested back and said, “Now it’s time for me to poop like a Draco.” He closed his eyes and smiled. “Aah, that’s better.”

“How come I don’t poop?” Annie asked worriedly.

Mark turned to Jane and said, “You mentioned that, didn’t you?”

He looked at Annie and he said, “That’s because you’re a princess. Beautiful princesses don’t do crude thing. Don’t worry about it. By the way Jane, you should learn the spell. I can teach it to you if you want,” Mark said.

“I’ll think about it,” Jane said uncertainly.

“What do you plan on doing next?” Mark asked.

“We’re going to the concert the acting club is holding,” Jane said.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll keep you company,” Mark said.

They bumped into Harry on the way out. “Hi Harry, we’re going to the concert being held in ten minutes. Do you want to come?”

“Sure,” Harry said and glanced at Annie.

“That’s Annie, Jane’s cute sister,” Mark said. “Annie, say hi to Harry.”

“Hi Harry,” Annie said and gave Harry a smile.

Mark looked at Annie and she backed away. Mark averted his eyes. Harry noticed. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Annie’s a little shy around Mark,” Jane said.

Mark covered his face and pretended to cry, “Boo-Hoo, the cutest princess in the world doesn’t like me.”

“I like you,” Annie said.

“Thank you Annie, I’m so happy you like me,” Mark said happily.

“Mark, you shouldn’t walk with your face covered like that. It’s dangerous,” Jane scolded.

“Not to a wizard,” Luke denied. “Not when wizardry is a way of life, like breathing.”

They stopped at the pavilion and Mark sat down. Annie sat in a chair to the left of him and Jane sat to the left of her. Harry sat on Mark’s right.

“Who wants some popcorn and drinks for the show?” Mark asked.

“Mark, how can you eat so much? Aren’t you afraid of getting fat?” Jane asked.

“I have this weird condition that prevents me from gaining weight. No doctor has been able to figure it out,” Mark explained. “In fact I’m seriously underweight. No amount of food I eat will change that. I think that not eating will have no effect on my weight either, but I enjoy eating too much to want to test that theory.”

“How heavy are you Mark?” Jane asked.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Mark said.

“He weighs seventy-three pounds,” Harry said.

“That’s impossible. That’s the same weight as a nine-year-old boy,” Jane said.

“I’m ten years old, not nine,” Mark said angrily. He paused as he realized what he just said. “I mean I’m seventeen years old. Please stop confusing me. I’m going to get popcorn. What drinks do you want?” Mark asked.

After taking the order, Mark left. Two minutes later, he brought back a large container of popcorn and drinks for everyone.

The play started. Mark wasn’t interested in the show, and so spent the time studying.

Harry smacked Mark upside the head. Mark blinked and looked at Harry. “Annie is trying to get your attention,” Harry said.

Mark turned to Annie and said, “Sorry Annie, I sometimes space out. What did you want?”

“What were you doing?” Annie asked, wondering why Mark was making intricate patterns with his fingers.

“I was training. I’m trying to become a supreme master as soon as possible, so my dreams can come true,” Mark said.

“How can you go to wizard school when you’re only ten?” Annie asked.

“I’m not ten,” Mark said angrily.

“You just said you were ten,” Harry commented.

He calmed himself. He knew from personal experience that you can’t win an argument about being a child. Anything you say to defend yourself is proof that you are indeed a child.

“Sorry Annie, I didn’t mean to shout. Believe it or not but I was born six months before your sister and two months before Harry. That makes me older than all three of you,” Mark said and smiled at Annie.

“Then how come you seem like you’re ten years old?” Annie asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark grimaced. “That’s one of two reasons I need to become a supreme master. I just want to become normal, like Harry.”

“I don’t understand,” Jane said, confused. “Why do you think he’s ten?”

“Can we please talk about this somewhere else? We’re disturbing everyone,” Mark begged.

Annie got up and the rest followed. They went to a semi-private location and continued the conversation.

“Annie, why do you think Mark is ten years old? Mark, is that normal for people to think that?” Jane asked.

“For some reason I feel I’ve answered this question before,” Mark mused. “Annie, all of us have something called incarnational attributes. That’s a big word for things like age and personality.”

“We studied that last year,” Jane said. “What has that got to do with anything?”

“Everything,” Mark said. Mark looked at Annie. “There is a saying: The eyes of the heart can’t be deceived by glamour. That means that people in a heart-to-heart relationship will always see the real you.

“All my loved ones view me as being ten years old, even though I was born seventeen years ago. I believe the only way to fix that is by becoming a supreme master,” Mark said.

“Of course, becoming a supreme master like my parents is really cool, since magic is so much fun. You’re going to become a wizard when you grow up, aren’t you? Being a wizard is the best. You can have more fun than anyone else. I don’t understand why so few people want to become wizards,” Mark continued, excitedly.

“Yes, I want to become a wizard,” Annie said and gave Mark a big smile. “Do you want to see some magic tricks?”

“All right,” Mark said eagerly.

Annie pulled out a deck of cards from her pocket and did a few tricks with them. She also did tricks with coins, handkerchiefs, and various other items. Mark watched with rapt attention.

Annie finished the show and Mark clapped. “That was incredible Annie. I used to do that when I was your age. I know you will become an excellent wizard. The world is filled with amazing things, which are completely hidden from muggles.”

“What’s a muggle?” Annie asked.

“A muggle is a non-magical person. They reject all magic, live in tiny worlds, and are terrified of the infinite. I feel sorry for them,” Mark sighed.

Mark grabbed both of Annie’s hands, looked into her eyes and said. “Never be afraid Annie. Fear robs us of our happiness. Embrace the world of magic and be happy. Come. Let’s see the rest of the events.”

Mark got up and the others followed. It was fun going from booth to booth, viewing the events the students put on.

“It’s time to go Annie,” Jane said and walked towards the street. As they reached the curb, a royal limo pulled up and an old dude stepped out.

“What’s up James?” Mark said and smiled at him.

The driver nodded his head and opened the door.

Jane entered the limo. Annie approached the limo, paused, turned around and ran to Mark. She hugged Mark and ran back to the limo. Seconds later they were gone.

“I see you have a new girlfriend, you lucky dog,” Harry said and elbowed Mark.

“Shut up,” Mark said and turned around. “It’s past time for me to start training again. I’ve been slacking off lately. I’ll be coming home late, or I might stay at the shack. Later.” Mark gave Harry a back-hand wave and walked away.

After talking to Annie about magic, he was all fired up about training. He had been in a slump since Christmas, making it hard to train. Now the slump was gone and he was determined to make up for lost time.

Mark arrived at the shack and undressed. He stepped out of the shack and faced the swamp. Mark took a deep breath, feeling renewed energy surging through him and knew that this training session would be good.

Before he knew it, dawn broke. He continued training since there was no school for the week and he didn’t feel hungry or sleepy.

The phone rang. Mark had set it up so that he could receive phone calls using his Book of Knowledge. It was convenient since he currently had no pockets.

Mark answered the phone, “Hi Harry, what’s up?”

“Are you okay?” Harry asked. “I haven’t seen you in days.”

“I haven’t had this much energy since I don’t know when. I didn’t want to waste it, so I’m training nonstop. Why don’t you join me and we’ll train together?”

“This is the last day of the spring festival and Jane wanted to see you,” Harry said.

“Tell Jane I’ll meet her near the front of the stage in ten minutes. Talk to you later. Bye,” Mark said and hung up.

Mark did a quick cleaning spell on himself and dressed. He then ran back to school. It was a good day for a run.

Mark arrived twelve minutes later. He enjoyed the fresh air while he waited. The swamps tended to be stinky.

Five minutes later the royal limo pulled up. Jane stepped out of the limo and walked up to Mark.

“Hi Jane, what’s up?” Mark asked.

“What have you been doing?” Jane asked.

“Training,” Mark said. “Talking to your little sister about magic has really fired me up. What did you need?”

“Annie wanted to see you,” Jane said and moved to the side. Behind her was Annie. Annie scooted behind Jane the moment she got exposed.

Mark frowned in slight annoyance. He got down on his haunches and spoke to the hiding Annie. “Annie, what did I tell you about being brave? I’ve been trying to get a girlfriend for almost two years. Do you know how many women I’ve asked out? One thousand, two hundred and twenty seven,” he said. “Do you think I’m afraid of rejection? If you like me, say so. You are a beautiful princess, just like your sister. You have nothing to fear. Now come and give me a hug.”

Jane gave Annie a slight shove and Annie ran to Mark. Mark wrapped his arms around Annie and gave her a hug. “Be strong. Be brave. From now on I will be you big brother and you will be my little sister. Is that fine with you Annie?” Mark asked.

Annie nodded.

“Jane, is your sister naturally shy or is it just me?” Mark asked.

“It’s just you,” Jane said. “She has never acted like that with anyone else.”

“I’m glad Harry isn’t here or he would say something stupid like…” Mark began.

“There’s nothing like two lovers hugging,” Harry finished. Of course he would be here. He was the one that called Mark.

“I think someone needs an atomic wedgie, don’t you think Annie?” Mark said and kissed Annie on her forehead. He got up and said, “So what do you want to do everyone?”

“It’s incredible how much Annie likes you,” Jane said. “She’s being asking about you since she first met you.”

“That’s because I’m a genius who women find irritable and who men try to imitate,” Mark grinned proudly. He stuck his chin in the air and placed his fists on his hips. He cast an illusion spell that showed his nose growing into a two foot pole with a leaf growing at the tip.

Annie giggled. Jane wasn’t laughing and neither was Harry. Mark dispelled the illusion and said, “That was a joke. I don’t have that big of an ego.”

“But what you said is true. You’re the smartest, coolest guy I know,” Harry said. Jane nodded.

“Oh yare?” Mark said. “In that case, why is it I don’t have a girlfriend?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” Jane said.

Annie opened her mouth, and then closed it.

“That’s because you’re bound by idiotic rules,” Mark exclaimed. “If it weren’t for those stupid rules preventing commoners from dating or marrying royalty, I would have asked you out ages ago.”

“Why is it forbidden for commoners to date nobility?” Harry asked.

“That’s because when a princess is single, people feel she belongs to them,” Mark explained. “Such things affect the country in ways most people don’t understand.

“Nobility and royalty are bound to the land by ancient magic. That doesn’t prevent me from being friend with Jane and Annie. In fact anyone can do that, since that brings them closer to the people. They, having plenty of commoner-friends but no lovers, strengthen the country. It’s not fair but that’s just the way it is.”

“So it’s impossible for a commoner to marry a princess,” Annie said.

“No, there’s one way,” Mark said. “The princess has to issue the Princess Challenge…It’s strange, but I feel as if I’ve explained this before.”

“How does the princess issue the challenge?” Annie asked eagerly.

“Let’s see now…the princess has to say the words, ‘I, princess whoever, take whoever as my champion, to fight for my honor and win my hand in the field of dreams.’ It has to be witnessed by at least two people,” Mark said. He stood up and changed the topic. “It’s time for lunch. Let’s go eat.”

They went to another student restraint and sat down. The waitress brought them a menu and waited. They ordered and the waitress left. A minute later, the food was brought. They ate.

Mark looked at Annie sitting next to him. With mouth full Mark asked, “What did you just say?”

“I said, ‘I, Princess Annie, take Mark as my champion, to fight for my honor and win my hand in the field of dreams,’” Annie said.

“Annie, you can’t do that. You’re too young,” Jane said in horror.

“It’s my fault,” Mark apologized, feeling hot under the collar. “I tend to answer questions without thinking of the consequences. Annie, your sister is right. You should only do that when you turn sixteen.”

Mark turned to Jane and said, “Annie didn’t say my real name, so it didn’t count, I hope.”

Feelings hurt, Annie asked, “Don’t you want to marry me? You said I’m cute.”

“Annie, are you aware of how difficult a Princess Challenge is? It’s one of the most difficult things someone can possibly do. If I fail, many people will get hurt, including your sister and parents,” Mark gently explained. “Countries have been destroyed because of this. Countless thousands of people have died. That includes famine and pestilence, plagues and war, to name a few things.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” Annie cried.

Mark wrapped his arms around Annie and hugged her tightly. He didn’t want his adopted sister to cry. “It’s not your fault. It’s my fault for not realizing your feelings,” he said. “The secret service will notify your parents. Let’s hope they can handle this. In the meantime, let’s eat.”

Mark tickled Annie until she laughed. “Better eat your food before I finish it. Then again, it doesn’t matter who eats, since it all goes to the same place,” Mark said and ate with relish.

They finished eating and revisited the other festival areas. Time to leave came. “Can you play with me again?” Annie asked.

“Sure, whenever I’m not in school,” Mark replied.

“How about tomorrow,” Annie asked.

“I have to go to Dragonia tomorrow,” Mark said.

“Can I come with you?” Annie asked.

“I’m sorry but you’re not allowed to go there,” Mark answered.

“But I’m a princess. Why can’t I go?” Annie complained.

“Because your parents won’t allow it sweetie,” Mark said. “If you really want to play with me, Jane will arrange it. Now give me a hug before you go.” Mark hugged Annie and kissed her on the forehead.

Harry and Mark watched the two princesses drive away in the limo. “What are you doing tomorrow?” Harry asked.

“I’m visiting my niece in Dragonia. She always misses me when I’m away. I think she has almost as big a crush on me as Annie,” Mark said.

“How come she can’t visit here?” Harry asked.

“That’s because they haven’t taught her how to wear clothes yet. She still hates the feeling of clothes,” Mark replied.

“Are you saying you play with her naked?” Harry asked.

Mark frowned. “You make me sound like a pervert. If you want to understand – why don’t you spend the summer with me in Dragonia? That should be enough time to understand – you should discuss it with Stephaney, perhaps bring her along.”

“Hah, she’d never agree to that,” Harry said.

“That’s too bad. I’m going back to train. See you later,” Mark said.

“Do you like Annie?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Mark nodded. “She feels like family. See you later, unless you want to train with me.”

“I’ll pass on that. Your training sessions can be a little too intense for me,” Harry said.

Mark shrugged and walked away. It was time to train like there was no tomorrow.

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In a secret room deep within the royal palace (or maybe not), seven shadowy figures convened.

Figure one spoke, “It was fortunate that the second heir didn’t use his real name. That would have been disaster.”

Figure two asked, “But is that sufficient? Her feelings for the boy are unusually intense.”

“What if we arrange an accident?” a third figure asked.

“Impossible,” figure four replied. “Strong magic protects the dragon child. It would just backfire on us.”

“What if we erased their memories and placed a compulsion for them never to meet?” the fifth figure spoke.

“We could use the dark arts to redirect the princess’ feelings. Let her love the tiger instead of the dragon,” the sixth shadow said.

The last of the shadows spoke, “The dragon child has the legal right to associate with the first heir.”

Shadows nodded. “That’s too bad,” the third said.

The seventh spoke, “Let’s forbid the dragon child from meeting the second heir in either of his legal forms without permission from the master. Should legal contact be made, let all memories fade for as long as the master commands it.”

“Is all in agreement?” the first asked.

All were in agreement and the seventh directed the spell -

Seasons passed and seasons faded,   
Times together are fleeting  
Being together means being jaded,  
For partings come after the meeting

Should Annie Van Duyn of house of David called,   
Try to meet the boy  
Block the meeting with the iron wall,   
And make sure there is no joy

Should Marcus Lucas of Draco name,   
Try to meet Annie  
Break the meeting with some pain,   
With a big fat kick to his fanny

Every time the two should greet,   
In all his legal forms,   
All shall forget that two have met,   
Till the time to reveal is born

…

Ten minutes later and the illuminated ones complete the spell.

A thought popped in the first figure’s mind. What would happen if they should accidently meet, while the dragon wore a form that wasn’t legally recognized? That thought faded from mind as the spell took effect.

The first dismissed the others, not remembering why the meeting was called. The others in attendance faded from the room, never knowing that the seventh was an imposter.

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Monday rolled in and Mark completely forgot about Annie. It was as if a magical force had erased his memory.

Mark walked to school with Harry. “What’s the matter Mark? You look depressed,” Harry asked.

“For some reason, I feel I’ve forgotten something vitally important but I can’t remember what,” Mark mused. “I wonder if too much training can fry one’s brain.”

“What’s your obsession with training? You’re not going to die if you don’t graduate with the highest wizard level in school history,” Harry asked.

“You don’t train enough,” Mark accused. “Did you speak to Stephaney about the summer?”

“Not yet,” Harry said.

“To be a great wizard, you need to stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone. Tell Stephaney that,” Mark said.

During lunch they met Stephaney. Mark looked meaningfully at Harry and waited. Reluctantly Harry asked, “Stephaney, Mark has invited us to spend the summer with him at Dragonia.”

“You will have a lot of fun there,” Mark said. “In contrast to the worlds in the Sea of Chaos, this world is dull and lifeless. I’m convinced your wizard level will increase if you go.”

Stephaney thought for a moment and then agreed. “Sounds like fun,” she said.

“By the way, we Dracos are naturalists if you didn’t know,” Mark said. “I had considered inviting Jane since I like her. Unfortunately that’s not possible since she’s a princess.”

“What exactly are naturalists?” Stephaney asked.

“Naturalists don’t like clothes,” Mark said. “Think of it as always being at the beach or hot spring bath.”

“Hot springs are fun. I haven’t been there in a long time,” Stephaney said.

“If you like hot springs, then there’s one on campus,” Mark said. “I train there all the time.”

“That’s right. You’ve wanted the school to open one, didn’t you?” Stephaney remembered.

“I have a shack in the swamps and a small hot spring I setup. If you want, we can go this evening and train,” Mark said.

“I can’t come today. I have an appointment,” Stephaney said.

“That’s okay. Come whenever. Harry knows the location. Harry hates training with me because I always push him to almost eighty percent of his limit,” Mark said.

“Eighty percent,” Harry exclaimed. “You don’t do that. You always try to push me to two hundred percent of my limit, just like you do to yourself.”

“Nonsense,” Mark denied. “I only go to ninety five percent.”

“Have you ever asked Jane to train with you?” Stephaney asked.

“Of course not,” Mark exclaimed. “It’s a capital offense for a guy to see a princess naked.”

“Why would you – Oh. Hot spring,” Stephaney said and blushed. “Now I understand.”

“It’s the only way to train,” Mark nodded. “Once you start, you’ll never go back.”

“I’ll think about it, but don’t you dare look at me with perverted eyes,” Stephaney warned.

“What’s wrong about perverted eyes?” Mark asked innocently. “You should be flattered when men look at you. It means they’re acknowledging you as being special, unless of course you have low self-esteem.”

“I don’t have low self-esteem,” Stephaney said adamantly.

“Then you won’t have a problem,” Mark replied. “Come whenever you want to. Speaking of time, it’s almost time to return to class. See you later.”

Mark walked to class and promptly forgot about the conversation, or to be more precise, he filed away the conversation.

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Days later Mark was training in the swamp when Harry and Stephaney showed up. He stopped his training and greeted them. “Hi Stephaney, Harry. I’m glad you came. What would you like to practice on?”

“I’m a little weak on water divination,” Stephaney said, looking embarrassed.

“No problem. You better put your clothes away before they get dirty,” Mark warned.

“It’s okay, I’ll leave it on. Don’t you feel embarrassed standing like that?” Stephaney asked.

“The human body is a beautiful thing. Don’t be ashamed. Now let’s start,” Mark said and moved to an area of the swamp that he had previously cleaned up. It was a forty by forty foot pool with sand at the bottom and rocks surrounding it. Steam rose from the pool.

“I can’t go in there. My clothes will get all wet,” Stephaney said.

Mark just looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

“Okay I’ll do it, but you turn around,” Stephaney said.

Mark turned around and waited. He heard a splash behind him and Stephaney said, “Okay, you can turn around.”

Mark turned and looked at Harry. “Get in here, you’re training too.” Mark then looked at the water between Stephaney and him and said, “What’s the object of today’s divination?”

“What’s the weather like tomorrow?” Stephaney said.

Harry jumped in and slowly walked towards them. He gave off a creepy vibe. “Get away from me you pervert,” Stephaney screamed and blasted Harry with a ball of fire. She then hid behind Mark.

“Harry, why are you acting so weird? You’re boyfriend and girlfriend, aren’t you? Stephaney, if you love him, you’ll bear with him until his…until he gets used to you,” Mark said. He realized that training would be impossible with them if they didn’t resolve their differences.

Mark focused his attention on a spot twenty feet away and cast a rain spell. Making it rain in one spot was much harder than making it rain like normal. A tiny cloud formed and turned dark. Tiny flashes of lightning appeared and rain fell. That distracted Stephaney from Harry.

“That’s incredible Mark. There’s no way I could do that,” Stephaney said.

“That’s because your element is fire, which is the opposite of the water element we’re using now,” Mark said and looked at Stephaney. “I’m impressed you’re so comfortable in water. Normally fire users hate water.”

“Normally I do, but I love hot baths. You fixed this place up nicely,” Stephaney said.

“Okay Stephaney, let’s do the water divination spell now,” Mark said as he let the miniature rain cloud disappear.

“How come I don’t feel embarrassed in front of you?” Stephaney asked.

“That’s because I’m a naturalist. I grew up like this, surrounded by countless men, women and children from my clan,” Mark said. “To me you are the same, regardless of whether you wear clothes.”

“You also don’t have a sex drive, being only ten years old,” Harry said.

“Shut up Harry, or I’ll give you an atomic wedgie,” Mark said. “That’s the advantage of clothes. You can give people wedgies.”

Stephaney and Mark trained while Harry watched. Evening approached and Stephaney said, “It’s time for me to go home.”

“You’re comfortable with me, which means that you can come to Dragonia for the summer,” Mark said. “Be patient with Harry. He needs time to grow. See you later. I have more training to do.”

9. Summer Time

Only by leaving behind our fears and uncertainties,

May we enter new and greater worlds.

Mark and the others met in the student council room for the last meeting of the year. Maurice Brown and John Hankins were graduating this year. Two new members would replace them.

The new VP of PR would be second year student Heather Farrow. She would serve for her third and final year.

The new Secretary was Samantha Smith. She was a first year student, going into her second year.

Both Maurice and John decided to go to Wizard college and study higher magical laws.

Everyone discussed their summer plans.

“Harry said that you invited Stephaney and him to Dragonia for the summer,” Mama-Duke said.

“Yes Mama-Duke. Would you like to come as well? Everyone is welcome,” Harry said.

“Yes please,” Mama-Duke said excitedly. “I heard it was an incredible place.”

“It should be, considering it’s the birthplace of humanity,” Mark agreed. “Believe me, it’s more incredible than you can possibly imagine. I’ll even show you the Garden of Eden, although none of us may enter – make a comment Harry and I’ll smack you.”

“Do you get many visitors?” Mama-Duke asked.

“Almost none since it’s a controversial place,” Mark replied. “Also, most people don’t know it exists, thanks to our arch-enemies, the Tiikeri clan. That’s fine with us, since it’s our home and not a tourist stop.”

In the end, only Mama-Duke decided to go with them to Dragonia. “When are you leaving?” Mama-duke asked.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Mark said. “Remember, you don’t need to worry about clothes.”

“How about tomorrow,” Mama-duke asked uncertainly.

“Just call when you’re ready,” Mark said. “My uncle will pick us up and then we’ll pick you up.”

“Okay,” Mama-duke agreed.

“What are your plans?” Sylvia asked Jane.

“Annie has been feeling lonely since Christmas and so we decided to take a vacation in Hawaii,” Jane said.

Mark nodded. “I saw your sister last month on TV. She looked so cute sitting there hugging her stuffed cat toy. She also looked so sad. I felt like giving her a great big hug.”

Harry opened his mouth, but Mark hit him on the head before he could say anything. “Ow! I wasn’t going to…” Harry started.

“Yes you were,” Mark replied.

The gang laughed, sharing the inside joke.

“Don’t let Annie hear you call that a cat,” Jane said. “It’s a kitty-cat dragon.”

There was something about the word kitty-cat dragon that got to Mark. He felt choked up and had to cough to get rid of the feeling.

“Are you okay Mark?” Jane asked worriedly.

“Yes. Just clearing my throat,” Mark said. “Let’s all have a great vacation. See you all this fall.”

“Oh, before I forget, here are invitations for my birthday party,” Jane said.

Her birthday was on July 23.

“What are we supposed to wear?” Mark asked. “I’ve never been to the palace before. Is it formal or informal?”

“Just don’t go naked,” Mama-duke laughed.

“No I won’t,” Mark said seriously. “I value my skin too much. Besides, Harry always reminds me when I forget to dress.”

At that, everyone laughed, including the princess.

“If you wish, I’ll meet you the day before and I’ll help you with clothes,” Jane assured Mark.

Everyone said their goodbyes and left. Mark headed for the swamp, ready to train again. Before he knew it, it was daybreak. He ignored it and continued training.

Uncle Arthur’s chariot arrived and hovered above Mark’s head. Seconds later, he was taken up. Uncle Arthur gave Mark a bone crushing hug and said, “Good to see you again my boy. You shouldn’t train so hard or your brain will explode.”

Uncle Arthur let go of Mark and looked at him. “My, aren’t you a little muddy? You like playing in the swamps a lot, don’t you?” Uncle Arthur snapped his fingers and the dirt and grime covering Mark disappeared.

Mark couldn’t help but admire his uncle’s skills and power.

Mark sighed. Having to train so much was such a pain. Unfortunately, there were no such things as short cuts. Everything was gained through hard work.

“Hi Mark,” Harry said. He stood beside Stephaney.

“Hi Harry,” Mark said. He turned to Uncle Arthur and said, “Uncle Arthur, one of my friends, Mama-duke, asked to come as well,” Mark said.

“No problem my boy,” Uncle Arthur said as he turned Mark towards the cockpit and slapped him on the back. Mark staggered forward. “Take us there and pick him up.”

Moments later they were at Mama-duke’s house. Mark called Mama-duke using his book of knowledge. A moment later Mama-duke stepped out, wearing only shorts, shoes and a backpack.

Mama-duke stepped aboard, found himself overdressed, and put his shorts and shoes away.

“Did you do any special training for this trip?” Harry asked Mama-duke.

“What are you talking about?” Mama-duke asked, confused. “What special training?”

“I took Harry to several naturalist resorts and made sure he laid plenty of cute girls,” Uncle Arthur said. “That cleaned him up good.”

“You slept with other women?” Stephaney asked, shocked.

Uncle Arthur laughed. “Don’t be angry Stephaney,” he said. “By laying other women, he has become a better partner for you. Come to think of it, you should do the same thing. It will help you grow as an adult.”

Feeling like a kid ease-dropping on an adult conversation, Mark said, “I’m going upstairs to enjoy the view.”

Mark stepped on the sundeck and watched the scenery go by. He always felt inadequate around adults, especially when they held adult conversations.

Flying at Mach speeds they soon arrived at the east coast. In the distance, the wall of storm clouds, dividing the real world from the Sea of Chaos appeared. They entered the Sea.

Mark loved the Sea. The Sea didn’t care about age, or lack thereof. It just existed in all its infinite beauty.

“That is incredible,” Mama-duke said, admiring everything with new eyes.

“There’re so many places I want to show you that we’ll never have time to see everything,” Mark said proudly.

“Look everyone, there’s a tiny Bonsai tree growing on a rock,” Stephaney pointed.

Uncle Arthur laughed. “That tiny tree is over sixty miles tall. It’s the Tree of Life, and that rock is over eighty miles in diameter.”

They zoomed in to the Tree and the Tree exploded in size. The guests watched speechlessly as they approached a branch.

They landed and Mama-duke commented, “What a pretty day. What a beautiful blue sky. Why is there a sun in a blue sky?”

“I’ll show you to your rooms and then I’ll explain everything. You don’t need anything so you can leave your stuff here. Please follow me,” Uncle Arthur said and lead the way.

They entered the cottage by the pond on one of the branches of the Tree of Life.

“What a pretty house,” Stephaney commented and looked around. “It’s so warm and cozy.”

“Thank you my dear,” Uncle Arthur said and walked down a corridor. “Harry and Mama-duke, this is your room. Stephaney, that is your room next to Mark’s room.”

“I have to see Mark’s room,” Mama-duke said and barged in. He looked around and said in surprise, “It’s a kiddy room.”

“It’s not a kiddy room,” Mark shouted angrily. “It’s a very manly room.”

“Come on everyone, there’s plenty to show you,” Uncle Arthur said. The group followed and passed through a bright red door.

“Let me tell you the story of Genesis,” Uncle Arthur said.

10. Genesis

Moses supposes his toeses are roses,

But Moses supposes erroneously,

For nobody’s toeses are posses of roses,

As Moses supposes his toeses to be

-- Unknown --

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” Uncle Arthur intoned.

They walked down a corridor lined with doorways.

“The power of the Word created this universe ages ago. Ages later and the Earth was formed. At that time there was only one continent and its name was Pangaea, also known as Atlantis,” Uncle Arthur continued.

“It was a beautiful, lush continent, teaming with life.

“The Elohim planted the Tree of Life at the center of the continent. It grew and flourished as commanded by God.

“In time, it grew to over forty miles tall, dwarfing all other life on the planet.”

They stepped out of the Corridors and found themselves in a park-like setting filled with people. A thousand feet away was an immense megalithic stone wall with a gate in the center. The gate swung open and the group saw inside.

Beyond the gate were animals and children wandering around and playing. A couple walked towards the gate bearing an infant.

A vine shot out of the gate and gently picked up the child. It pulled the child back in and the gate closed.

Harry looked at Mark and saw fear on his face. “What’s the matter Mark? Are you afraid that the Garden of Eden will reclaim you?”

“O-of course not,” Mark stammered. “I’m no baby.”

The gate reopened and children walked out and were greeted by relatives. The relatives strolled away with the children. The gate closed.

Uncle Arthur continued the story. “The Elohim created the Garden of Eden, as you see there, within the branches of the Great Tree. In the center of the Garden, the Elohim planted the Caretaker.

“Finally, the Elohim brought forth the first of the human race and presented them to the Caretaker to take care of.

“The Caretaker, along with its animal helpers, raised the children and thought them the ways of God. At the age of twelve, the Caretaker gave the children its blessing and then released the children. Animal helpers outside the garden took the children and raised them to adulthood.

“At the age of sixteen, the children were given the Wizard’s Initiation and thought the more advanced ways of God that couldn’t be thought before the initiation.

“These children grew up, had children of their own, and presented their children to the Caretaker, as you saw a few minutes ago.”

“You mean that vine was the Caretaker?” Mama-duke asked in surprise. “This is not what we were thought in school.”

“That was just one of its branches,” Uncle Arthur said. “It speaks in a voice only children under the age of twelve can hear.”

Stephaney looked at Mark’s terrified face and noticed a bead of sweat flowing down his face. “Mark, are you alright?” she asked worriedly.

“Uncle Arthur, can I please be excused? I don’t like being here,” Mark said in a breaking voice.

“Of course son,” Uncle Arthur replied.

Mark turned around and ran back into the Corridors.

“I feel sorry for Mark,” Uncle Arthur said. “It can’t be easy being eternally ten years old.”

“Are you serious? Mark is ten years old? How is that even possible?” Mama-duke asked.

“Come on everyone,” Uncle Arthur said. “There’s nothing more to see here. Only those who have never received the Gift of the Caretaker may enter Eden.

“Why aren’t adults allowed in the Garden?” Stephaney asked.

“The Garden of Eden is just the physical manifestation of the world of the child,” Uncle Arthur explained. “The world of the adult and the world of the child are separate in a way that most people can’t understand. Children can’t enter the world of adults until they receive the Gift of the Caretaker. Then the child becomes an adult forever and leaves behind all things of childhood.”

Stephaney nodded in understanding. Uncle Arthur continued his lecture.

“Time passed and the human race grew and spread across the super-continent of Pangaea. Both the Tree of Life and Eden grew in order to accommodate the greater human population.

“Then something important happened. The people decided that they didn’t need the Caretaker to raise their children. Instead, they felt they were fully capable of raising their children on their own.

“At first everything went well, since the people were deeply infused with the Knowledge of the Lord.

“Unfortunately they weren’t able to teach their children the ways of God in the perfect way that only the Caretaker could. That wasn’t surprising, since the Caretaker, also known as the Tree of Knowledge, was created specifically to impart Knowledge.”

Uncle Arthur scratched his chin and then commented, “It’s strange that the Judeo-Christian bible acknowledges that the Tree of Knowledge is at the center of Eden, but views it as something evil. It is after all the focal point of the entire Garden.”

The group stepped out of the Corridors and entered an outdoor eating area. They spotted Mark at a table, stuffing his face.

“Hey Mark, you’re eating like a pig as usual,” Uncle Arthur said and slapped Mark on the back.

“Hi guys, sorry for running out on you,” Mark said between mouthfuls of food.

“Come on everyone, let’s eat,” Uncle Arthur said. “The Tree of Life is capable of producing every kind of food imaginable, and all of it is 100% healthy, delicious and non-fattening.”

“It even produces hamburgers?” Mama-duke asked in surprise.

“And pizza and coke,” Mark said and took a sip.

The group grabbed food and Uncle Arthur’s story continued.

“Generations passed and mistakes in their knowledge of the ways of God accumulated. Groups of people discovered that their version of the ‘Truth’ differed from other people’s version of the ‘Truth’.

“There was division and eventually wars, as competing ideologies collided.”

“Why didn’t God stop the fighting?” Stephaney asked.

“Because we have free will,” Mama-duke answered. “We can obey God’s laws, or we can depart from it at our choice.”

“That’s right,” Uncle Arthur agreed. “Tell me something, what do you think will happen if a large group of people with advanced knowledge of wizardry and no wisdom were to unleash their power upon the world?”

“Plagues, famine, death and destruction,” Harry spoke for the others.

“That’s correct. Did they acknowledge their fault, repent and return for instruction? No they didn’t. Instead they blamed everything on the Caretaker.

“Finally, one group of individuals conquered the others and created a single global empire...”

“Atlantis,” Stephaney interrupted.

“Correct,” Uncle Arthur nodded. “The primary mission of the newly formed empire of Atlantis was to eliminate all knowledge of wizardry from the world. They considered it evil, since the plagues and other things came about by the misuse of wizardry.

“Unfortunately, eliminating wizardry from the world was impossible, since everyone still had free and unrestricted access to the Tree of Life and could bring their children to the Caretaker if they chose.

Mama-duke got up from the table as realization sank in. “No way,” he exclaimed.

“Yes way,” Uncle Arthur smiled. “They tried to destroy the Caretaker. Unfortunately for them they couldn’t enter Eden. They then tried to destroy the Garden of Eden, and with it the Caretaker. Again that was impossible since the Tree of Life protected both.

“The Atlantians brooded over this problem for centuries. Being immortal, the ruling class and elites had plenty of time to ponder. Eventually they figured a way to destroy the Tree of Life, and finally get rid of the evil called wizardry.

“After additional centuries of planning, they finally put their plan into motion and blew up the Tree of Life…”

“That’s horrible,” Stephaney screamed in shock. “How could they do something so horrible?”

“Don’t worry Stephaney, the Tree is fine,” Uncle Arthur laughed aloud.

“Anyway, the resulting explosion ripped Pangaea apart. Parts of it drifted westward and became North and South America. Parts of it drifted eastwards and became Europe, Asia, and so on…”

“So that’s why no one can find Atlantis,” Mama-duke mused. “The remnants of the island continent were too large to see.”

Uncle Arthur nodded and continued the story. “The explosion couldn’t harm the Tree, since it had divine protection. The same couldn’t be said about the fabric of the universe. It ripped, exposing the Sea of Chaos. The Tree of Life fell in and was forever lost.

“Centuries later, the cataclysm was referred to as the Great Flood, since it cause a 400 foot rise in seal levels, and the myth of Adam’s fall came into being.

“All knowledge of wizardry was wiped from the general population. Without the initiation, and because of the pathogens left by the previous wars, the life-spans of the general population dropped to less than a century.

“Time passed and an elite named Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham, was born.

“Being an elite, Jacob was given the initiation, which was then secret to the world. Jacob then passed the secret of the initiation on to his thirteen sons, but not his daughters…”

“Wait a minute,” Harry objected. “The bible says that Jacob only has twelve sons.”

“I’m getting to that part,” Uncle Arthur said. “Jacob and his first twelve sons believed that God was a man.

“Jacob’s thirteenth and youngest son believed that God transcended the concept of male and female. After all, God was pure Existence and wasn’t the product of sexual union. Only animals can be male and female.”

Stephaney commented, “In other words, all men are animals.”

At that, Uncle Arthur laughed so loud that it caused some nearby people to turn in annoyance.

“I’m not an animal,” Harry muttered.

“Yes you are,” Stephaney replied.

That caused Uncle Arthur to laugh even louder, annoying even more people.

Uncle Arthur wiped tears from his eyes and continued. “Anyway, this was a major philosophical difference between the families. Jacob and his twelve sons labeled Draco and his wife Lilith demons. A fight broke out and they tried to kill Draco and his family.

“Draco and family fled into the Sea of Chaos. There they spent forty years searching for, and eventually found the Tree of Life. They named its base island Dragonia and their family has been living here ever since.”

“You guys are so lucky to be instructed by the – Caretaker,” Mama-duke said. “When I have kids of my own, can I bring them here?”

“You’ll need to clear it with your wife first,” Uncle Arthur warned. “But yes, you may bring them here. The rule is simple. The children need to spend at least twelve hours a day in the Garden. The other twelve hours can be spent with you, doing whatever you want.”

“Come on everyone, there are so many things I want to show you,” Mark said eagerly.

“Have fun kids,” Uncle Arthur said. “I have stuff to do.”

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It was 11:00 AM PST. Jane called Mark and said, “Hi Mark. I promised to help you pick something to wear for my seventeenth birthday party. When should I come and pick you up?”

“It’s all right Jane. I know all about fashion and stuff, but I choose to ignore it, since I’m a guy. I found some clothes in my closet I received from some relative for Christmas, although I don’t remember from whom,” Mark replied.

“I find it hard to believe a person like you can have a fashion sense, especially since you don’t believe in clothes. I’ll come and see what you have,” Jane said.

“Okay Jane, you can come anytime. I’ll be ready in a minute,” Mark replied.

Jane’s heart skipped a beat and she added, “Can I bring Annie along? She just sits in her room all day and just reads my school books. I want her to get some exercise.”

“No problem – wait a minute, I’ll need to put all my porn away,” Mark said with a giggle in his voice.

Replies like that always made Jane feel she was talking to a ten-year-old boy. All little boys were slightly crude and naughty. They enjoyed physical humor like pooping, or in Mark’s case, remote-pooping.

Jane knew that Mark loved little-boy humor, although he tried to hide it. She also knew that covert sexual adult humor always went over his head. That was too bad, since his uncle was a funny man.

Jane put down the phone, feeling excited. She wanted Annie to meet Mark for some unknown reason.

Jane entered Annie’s room and found Annie on the floor, surrounded by a mountain of books. She was casting pretend spells with a pretend wand.

“Annie, you shouldn’t stay in your room all day. It’s not healthy. Let’s go out for a bit and get some fresh air,” Jane said.

“No thanks,” Annie said. “You go. I need to study to become a great wizard.”

Jane watched as Annie tried to cast a spell that she had yet to learn. It was futile, of course. Magic doesn’t work without the initiation.

Feeling sorry for Annie, Jane bent down and hugged her little sister. She knew that Annie was lonely, but didn’t know how to help her.

Just then Marjorie stuck her head into the room and said sternly, “You’re going and that’s final.”

“Okay mum,” Annie sighed and placed her toy wand into her backpack. The two walked out the door and stepped into the limo.

Five minutes later, they arrived at Mark’s place. The princesses stepped out of the limo and the limo drove away.

Jane walked to the front door and Annie walked close behind. Arriving at the door, Jane pressed the bell.

“Harry, can you please get that?” Mark called.

“Why can’t you get it…Never mind,” Harry replied. He opened the door and found Jane standing there. Behind her was Annie. This was the first time he saw the little princess in person.

“What’s the matter Annie? Why are you hiding? Are you feeling shy of Harry?” Jane asked.

Still hiding, Annie shook her head and looked inside.

Harry returned to the couch and resumed watching a sitcom.

Jane entered, half-dragging Annie. “Where’s Mark?” Jane asked and then spotted him sticking the top of his head out from his room like a timid rabbit.

*What’s the matter with these two?*Jane wondered. *Why are they both acting strange?*

“Mark, why are you being shy in front of my sister?” Jane asked.

“I’m not being shy,” Mark said defensively. “I just haven’t dressed yet.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked. “You’re dressed in better clothes than I’ve ever seen you wear.”

A thought crossed Jane’s mind, *He really is a ten-year-old boy.*

Seeking to break the ice, Jane said, “Mark, Annie is as obsessed with magic as you.”

“Rally?” Mark asked and stuck his head out the door.

“Annie always surrounds herself with my magic books and is always studying,” Jane said.

Mark stepped out and said excitedly, “I bet you can’t wait to take your initiation. I was like that at your age.”

“What made you decide to become a wizard Mark?” Jane asked.

“It was meeting my First Parents when I was eight,” Mark said excitedly. All shyness disappeared as he sat down at the edge of a couch.

Annie too lost her shyness and stepped out from behind Jane. Jane asked, “First Parents?”

Eagerly Mark began. “They are the most incredible people in the universe. They are overflowing with life and vitality. It feels like you could do anything with their help. It’s hard to explain how incredible they are.”

“I wish I had First Parents,” Annie said sadly.

“If you wish, you could share my First Parents,” Mark said and held his arms out.

Annie ran into his arms and gave him a hug. She started bawling. At the same time, tears trickled down Mark’s eyes.

Jane stared at the two in surprise. It was like two best friends meeting after a forced separation.

Mark’s form wavered and blurred. He opened his eyes in fear and touched his face. He then cast a pain spell on himself and the wavering disappeared.

Jane looked at Mark in surprise. She knew some people used pain as a means of controlling strong emotions, but why did he need to do that, and why did his form blur?

“Harry, did you see that? His body was…” Jane began.

“Don’t say anything Harry or I’ll stop tutoring you,” Mark shouted.

“He tutors people?” Annie asked.

“That’s right Annie,” Jane replied. “He’s our VP of Education. When it comes to magic, he’s the best.”

Annie turned around and looked at Jane. “I want to be the best in magic too.”

“You can be Annie,” Mark said and kissed Annie on the cheek. “You can do anything you want to if you work hard enough for it.”

That wavering Jane saw earlier bothered her. It was like an illusion spell about to break. Somehow, his current appearance wasn’t his true appearance. He was like someone suffering from Peter-Pan Syndrome, trying desperately to grow up but failing completely. Jane looked at Mark, feeling a twinge of pity.

Mark cringed. “Please don’t look at me like that. It’s true I train too much, but there’s no harm in training. Isn’t that right Annie?”

“That’s right,” Annie nodded. “One day I’ll be as cool as my sister and big brother.”

“I didn’t know you had a big brother,” Mark said.

“I meant you, silly,” Anny replied.

“How dare you call me silly,” Mark said. “For that I shall tickle you.” Annie giggled.

“By the way Jane, this is the outfit I found in my closet. I don’t remember receiving it. Is it fine for tomorrow’s party?”

“Yes,” Jane replied. “That’s perfect.”

“Mark, do you want to see some magic tricks?” Annie asked.

“I’d love to see some magic tricks,” Mark responded eagerly.

After the show, Mark said, “That was incredible. Come into my room and I’ll show you some new tricks.”

Jane joined Harry and watched the sitcom. In the background she heard Annie and Mark laughing and playing like two children.

“It’s getting dark Annie,” Jane called. “It’s time for us to leave.”

“Aw, so soon?” Annie grumbled. “We only just came.”

“You can play with Mark another time, if it’s okay with Mark,” Jane said.

Mark and Annie returned to the living room. “Of course it’s okay,” Mark replied. “I haven’t had this much fun in I don’t know when.”

Mark waved as the two sisters exited the apartment. As the door closed, he said, “Thanks for not commenting.”

“Comment about what, the fact that you have a new girlfriend?” Harry asked.

Mark hit him on the head with a pillow. Moments later, all memory of contact between Mark and Annie disappeared.

11. Birthday Party

It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to.

-- Lesley Gore --

Jane looked at Annie over the breakfast table. “Annie, when was the last time you went out?”

Annie shrugged and nibbled some bacon. She paged though a book on her lap.

“I promised Mark I would help him pick clothes for my birthday but forgot. Why don’t you come with me? We’ll have fun laughing at Mark’s bad fashion sense,” Jane suggested.

Annie felt excitement bubbling within her. That was replaced with a feeling of dread. She felt a sinister voice saying, *stay away from Mark*.

“No thanks Sister Jane,” Annie said. “You go. I need to study.”

“No buts, young lady,” Marjorie said in no uncertain terms. “You’re going. Now go get dressed.”

Annie went to her room, feeling excited again. If her mother said so, then it was all right.

Jane called Mark. “Mark, I promised to help you pick some clothes to wear. When would be a good time to come?”

“I can be ready in five minutes,” Mark said.

“Okay Mark, see you in half an hour,” Jane said and hung up.

Forty minutes later, Jane rang Mark’s door bell. Mark opened the door and welcomed Jane in. Annie followed Jane.

“Harry is still sleeping since it’s only 9:00AM,” Mark said. “By the way, this is what I found in my closet. I don’t remember where I got it from, but I like it.”

“It looks good on you,” Jane said and Annie nodded.

Annie spotted a stack of textbooks on the table and ran to them. “Sister Jane, how come you don’t have this book?” She looked up at Mark and said, “May I please borrow this book?”

Mark looked at Jane in surprise.

“She’s obsessed with magic,” Jane explained. “Annie, why don’t you show Mark some of your magic tricks?”

“Okay Sister Jane,” Annie said and took stage-magic props out of her backpack.

Mark watched with rapt attention. He clapped when the show finished. “That was incredible Annie,” Mark said. “I’ll show you a few tricks I learnt when I was your age.”

Half way through the show, Harry groggily left his room fully dressed and entered the washroom. A minute later, the shower turned on.

“Sister Jane, what is the meaning behind the wizard’s second form?” Annie asked.

“I’m sorry Annie but we’ll only learn that this coming semester,” Jane said.

“There are multiple reasons Annie,” Mark began. “To begin with, humans are a strange mixture of divine and animal. As a result, it is only natural that we have two forms. Since the beginning, when God created the first people and placed them in the Sacred Garden, until now, our divine nature has always been expressed through the human form.”

“Does that mean that God looks like us?” Annie asked.

“No Annie,” Mark replied. “God is a concept that is beyond the limited human mind to comprehend. As a matter of fact, Earth isn’t the only world where God seeded human life. There are countless worlds filled with people. However, most don’t look like us, or even think like us. Wait a second while I get something from my room.”

Mark went to his room and brought back a tablet and a workbook. He sat back down on the couch and Annie snuggled up to him. Mark wrapped his arm around her and turned on the tablet. “Our enemies are blocking knowledge of people not of this world, which is why you won’t find this in normal textbooks.”

The screen showed a giant bug colony. “These people have a hive mentality,” Mark said. “The concept of individuality is foreign to them. Then there is this species.”

“Those creatures looked like walking broccoli,” Annie said and giggled.

“They’ll be safe from me since I don’t like broccoli,” Mark said and giggled also.

“I hate broccoli too,” Annie agreed. “I don’t know why grownups force us to eat that stuff.”

“I know,” Mark agreed.

“How would you know?” Harry asked as he stepped out of the washroom, ready for the party.

Mark answered by throwing a pillow at Harry.

“These people have no gender,” Mark continued. “Instead, they spawn from those dangly things over there. As a result, the concept of sex has no meaning to them. They don’t have relationships like human adults do.”

Mark showed the next picture. “I visited these people with my parents when I was just ten years old. They spawn directly from their World Tree and spend their entire lives playing.”

“They’re so pretty,” Annie said. “They look like angels.”

“They love it when people visit them,” Mark said.

“So how come people think that we are the only ones created in God’s image?” Annie asked.

“Let me tell you about Genesis,” Mark said.

Half way through the story, Harry said, “I saw the real Garden of Eden, or at least the outside of it. It was so cool.”

“Mark, can you please take me to see the Garden of Eden?” Annie asked.

“I’m sorry Annie,” Mark said. “We live as God intended, without clothes or baggage. As you know, it’s a capital offense for a guy to see a princess naked.”

“That’s a stupid rule,” Annie said angrily.

“I’m sorry Annie but that’s an ancient law that even us Dracos can’t break,” Mark said. “The law states, ‘A human male may not look upon the naked body of a princess and live, unless that male be her betroved or a family member.’”

“Does that mean that you could see me naked if I married you?” Annie asked.

“That’s correct Annie,” Mark replied. “Not just me, but the other Dracos as well, since they would then be your family.”

“That means you can see Sister Jane naked as well,” Annie said and giggled.

“That’s enough Annie,” Jane scolded. “Stop talking about such naughty things.”

Both Mark and Annie giggled at Jane’s embarrassment.

“Mark, what’s your full legal name?” Annie asked.

“It’s Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan,” Mark replied. “The laws of morality that affect princesses were established just after the fall of Atlantis. The will of all the people of the world has only served to strengthen these laws, which is why even we aren’t immune to them.”

“Can Annie marry you?” Harry asked.

“Not really. Only specific lines of descent are recognized. For instance Annie and Jane are recognized as princesses because they directly descend from King David, who comes from the tribe of Judah,” Mark answered. “My line isn’t recognized, being descended from Lord Draco.”

Mark queried the Book of Knowledge for any Dracos who had either royal or noble blood.

“There is a way,” Annie insisted. “All I have to say is, ‘I, Princess Annie Van Duyn of the house of David, take Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan as my champion, to fight for my honor and win my hand in the field of dreams.’ ”

“Here it is,” Mark said and passed the tablet to Jane. “These are five Dracos with noble blood, who are not married. She can marry a Draco if she wants to and then come to Dragonia.”

“This one is cute,” Jane said, eying a twenty-eight-year-old.

“Jason is an idiot,” Mark warned. “I think he might have some Tiikeri blood in him.”

“I hate Tiikeris,” Annie said and grimaced. “Unfortunately, my dad is trying to get me to marry one. Dilbert is a major asshole.”

“Annie, princesses must never say crude things,” Jane scolded.

“You mean like fart?” Annie asked.

Mark laughed hysterically.

“How many times have I told you?” Jane scolded. “You must say, ‘break wind’.”

“But I didn’t break wind,” Annie insisted. “I farted.”

That comment only made Jane angrier and Mark laughed even louder.

“Annie, do you fart like this?” Mark asked. He placed his lips against Annie’s arm and blew against it. The result was a melody composed of farting sounds. Annie giggled.

“Mark,” Jane reproached. “Please don’t teach my sister such crude things.”

“It’s okay Jane,” Mark soothed. “Annie is an intelligent girl. She would never do anything to embarrass her family. I assure you, the only times she will do crude things is in private with you or with me. Isn’t that right Annie?”

“That’s right,” Annie replied and blew a raspberry against Mark’s arm.

“By the way Jane, I forgot to say, ‘Happy birthday’,” Mark said and tossed a package to Jane.

“I’m surprised you’re so comfortable with the princess,” Harry marveled.

“Here’s how I see it,” Mark said. “We’re all children of God. We all have equal status in the eyes of God, regardless of what the world thinks.”

“That’s right. After all, we’re both direct descendants of Abraham and Jacob,” Annie added.

Harry looked at Mark with new respect. “I had no idea you were so important,” he exclaimed.

Mark threw another pillow at Harry. “Don’t be stupid Harry. I’m the same person you’ve always known. You know the story of my clan. The other tribes have disowned us and rejected us as being evil. You even visited Dragonia.”

“I know. But hearing it from the princess changes everything,” Harry objected.

“It changes nothing,” Mark said angrily. “I’m going to kick your ass until you finally dis-respect me like you normally do, or I render you incapable of sitting. You’re my best friend.”

“I remember when my friends realized I was a princess and they were just commoners,” Annie said sadly. “I felt lonely. I wish I was born a commoner.”

“Don’t be sad Annie,” Mark soothed. “I’ll always treat you like my beautiful baby sister.”

Mark looked at Harry and angrily said, “Say it. Say what you want to say.”

Harry took a deep breath and shook himself. “Say what?” he asked. “That your girlfriend is almost the same age as you?”

“That’s better,” Mark nodded. “By the way Jane, why don’t you open your present?” Mark added, wishing he had a similar present for Annie.

“Mark, there’s something in your pocket,” Annie said, pointing.

Sure enough, Mark found a gift box sticking out of his pocket that wasn’t there seconds ago. He took it out and handed it to Annie. “Thanks mum and dad,” Mark said, and then, “It seems that my parents want me to give this to you.”

Jane opened her box and found a broach. Annie found a similar broach.

“You shouldn’t have,” Jane exclaimed, admiring the golden object covered in precious jewels.

“Money is no big deal for those who walk with God,” Mark shrugged. “God did tell us to dominate the earth. What do you want to do now?” Mark asked. For once he didn’t feel like training.

“Can we please go to that world with those angels?” Annie asked.

“Sure thing Annie,” Mark said. “Do you have a craft – of course you do. The palace should have something.”

Mark put the tablet on the table.

“Annie, I have another present for you,” Mark said. “This is a workbook for young wizard hopefuls like you. This is my old one. I hope you like it.”

The workbook read, ‘*Life Lessons for the Wizard in You.’*

Annie read the dedication. “To a very special princess, who loves magic just as much as I – Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan.

“I love it,” Annie said happily and hugged Mark.

“I guess it’s time to go,” Mark said.

Annie got up and pulled on Mark’s arm.

All four headed for the door. A royal limo drove up as the group approached the curb.

“What’s up, James?” Mark greeted the chauffeur as he stepped in. They drove away.

“This is so cool. This is the first time I’m riding in a royal limo,” Mark said and looked out the window.

“You’re such a kid,” Annie said. She giggled when he turned towards her.

Annie stopped giggling and said, “Déjà Vu.”

Mark nodded and said, “At least twice before.”

They pulled up to the palace and stepped out of the limo.

“Come on,” Annie said and pulled Mark by the hand. “I’ll show you my room.”

“Don’t run in the corridors,” Jane cautioned as she and Harry followed.

They entered the royal suites and found Marjorie. Mark bowed graciously to the queen and said, “Greetings, Majesty. I’d like to give this to you as a token of appreciation for knowing your daughter.”

Marjorie said, “You shouldn’t have,” and opened the present. She looked at the broach and said in surprise, “This is worth a fortune. How can you afford it?”

“It’s no big deal, for those walking with God. You should see the collection of pretty stones and stuff I’ve collected in my travels,” Mark said. “If you’re free, I can take you and your family there.”

Marjorie attached the broach to her dress. Beaming with happiness, she said, “I’d love to go dear.”

That was the end of the trip to Annie’s room.

“Majesty, do you have a vehicle capable of sailing through the Sea of Chaos?” Mark asked. “I normally rent something, but not at such short notice.”

“You fly?” Marjorie asked in surprise.

“Yes Highness,” Mark said. “I have logged over five hundred hours of time flying through the Sea of Chaos.”

Marjorie looked at Mark and said, “It’s too bad you weren’t born a prince. According to my daughter, you’re a superior individual.”

“He can be,” Annie began. “All he has to do is marry…”

A butler interrupted Annie by saying, “The royal jet will be ready in five minutes Mum.”

“Thank-you Bernard,” Marjorie said.

“Wait a minute,” Annie called. “I need to put my book away.” She ran to her bedroom. She returned moments later.

Everyone followed the butler out of the room.

“Stop looking so nervous Harry,” Mark whispered. “The queen isn’t going to bite your head off.”

“Easy for you to say,” Harry mumbled.

They stepped out of the royal suite’s private exit. A corporate jet waited for them.

“That only goes Mach 2.6 at most and makes a racket. Do you have anything faster than this?” Mark asked. “It’ll take hours to get to the Sea with this. Maybe we should postpone this trip.”

“We have a Draco Chariot,” the pilot suggested. “Unfortunately, no one can enter it or knows how to fly it.”

“Come on,” Annie said. “Let me take you there.” She pulled on Mark’s hand and led the group.

“That’s excellent,” Mark exclaimed. “With that we can reach the Sea in minutes.”

“How come your technology is so much better than everyone else’s?” Marjorie asked as they walked to the hangers.

“That’s because we aren’t afraid of borrowing technology from other worlds. Just like us, other clans have secret technology they never share with outsiders,” Mark explained. “By the way, I’m going to rely on my parent’s power to speed the trip and make it safer.”

Marjorie nodded. “Jane told me they ascended several years ago. Have you seen them since?”

“Unfortunately no,” Mark replied. “The Elders make it a rule not to make direct contact with us, since their presence is so powerful that it can change our destiny and nullify our free will. They do however give me presents and stuff when they think it’s appropriate.”

“Like my broach,” Annie said.

“Originally I only brought a broach for your daughter,” Mark explained. “But then Annie came and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. I sent a silent prayer to my parents and the broach appeared in my pocket. That’s the same way I got the broach for you and this box for your husband.”

“There’s the hanger,” Annie said excitedly.

“Annie, stop pulling so hard or you will make Mark fall,” Marjorie scolded.

“It’s okay, Majesty,” Mark said. “All children should be happy and full of life.”

“I wish that were true,” Marjorie said. “But Annie’s been depressed since Christmas and the doctors don’t know why. I can’t believe how happy she is with you.”

“That’s because I am a Draco,” Mark smiled.

“To be a Draco is to be cool,” Annie said. “I wish I were a Draco too.”

“That’s impossible dear,” Marjorie said.

“There is a way, Majesty,” Mark said. “I gave Jane a list of several Dracos that are recognized nobles. Here is the list – You may have marriage interviews with them if you wish.

“As a matter of fact, Jane thinks this candidate is cute,” Mark added.

The mother looked at Jane and Jane blushed. “Thank you for the list. I’ll consider them for both Jane and Annie.”

They entered the hanger.

“I don’t want to marry them,” Annie grumbled. “I want to marry Mark.”

“Leaping lizards,” Mark exclaimed before anyone could respond. He pointed at the chariot. It had the royal insignia and Annie’s name. “There is no question, Majesty. That is a wedding gift from my clan to your daughter. In theory, only Annie and her future husband should be able to open the door or fly it, unless the owner lends you a key. I can fly my uncle’s chariot because he gave me permission.”

Annie dragged Mark to the chariot and placed her hand on the door. The door opened.

They stepped in and the others followed. They entered the cockpit and Mark said, “Annie, sit in the co-pilot’s seat and activate the chariot. Everyone else, please take a seat.”

Mark sat in the pilot’s seat and started the engines. They rolled out of the hanger. Five minutes later, they passed through the palace gates.

The chariot quickly ascended and Mark said, “I just activated the cloaking system. This will allow us to pass through the territories of other countries without bothering them. I can also control the chariot through my Book of Knowledge.

“Majesty, would you care to come upstairs? You can only appreciate how incredible the world is from the roof.”

“Okay dear,” Marjorie agreed.

Everyone stepped out of the elevator and onto the sundeck. Below them the landscape zipped by. “This is amazing,” Marjorie marveled. “How come I can’t feel any turbulence or breeze?”

“That’s because the strongest storms on Earth are nothing compared to the storms in the Sea of Chaos, Majesty,” Mark said. “Few earthly events, such as the cataclysm known as the Great Flood, can harm us.”

“Mark,” Harry whispered urgently. “Speaking of floods, I need to – you know.”

Mark looked at Harry in annoyance. “This wouldn’t have happened if you learnt that spell. Remember, that spell should be trivial for you since you have a wand. Follow me.”

As Mark and Harry walked away, Annie asked, “What spell is Mark talking about?”

Jane watched Mark leave and said, “Mark has the mind and heart of a ten-year-old boy.”

“I know,” Annie replied. “What has that got to do with the spell?”

“He invented a spell to help him go to the washroom wherever he is,” Jane replied. “He considers it his greatest discovery. He said I should learn it so I can become a true princess. Real princesses don’t go to the washroom.”

“Just like me,” Annie giggled.

“That’s strange,” Marjorie said, looking confused. “It’s as if hidden forces are trying to get Mark and Annie married. But that’s impossible. Ancient laws, dating back since the Flood, forbid royalty from marrying commoners.”

“The Princess Challenge,” Annie said.

Marjorie looked at Annie in shock. “Who told you about the Princess Challenge? Whatever you do, you must never issue that Challenge. Do you understand me young lady?”

Almost in tears, Annie asked, “But why mom?”

“Because if Mark fails, Washington will be destroyed,” Marjorie said and hugged her daughter. “Thousands of people will die, possibly including your sister, dad and even me. Mark is the most incredible little boy I ever met, but that just means that the challenges he will be forced to face would be that much greater. I wouldn’t want to give that much pain and hardship to anyone, especially not someone as sweet as him.”

Annie bawled like a baby. The mother cuddled her daughter on one of the couches of the sundeck.

Just then Mark entered, pushing a cart full of food. Harry followed close behind. “What’s going on? Why is everyone so sad?” Mark asked.

“For some reason my daughter wants to marry you,” Marjorie said.

“That’s impossible,” Mark replied. “I’m just a commoner. Annie, you don’t have to marry me to be with me. You can hire me as your chief wizard and then we can play together whenever you like. Isn’t that the best? Come give your big brother a hug.”

Mark sat on the couch and cuddled with the little girl.

“We’re approaching a storm,” Jane warned.

“That’s no storm,” Mark said. “That’s the Sea of Chaos.”

They entered seconds later.

“Hey look, ducks,” Annie said, pointing. Sure enough, there was a series of clouds shaped like ducks. They followed each other, waddling slowly across the sky.

An explosion resounded above them. The chariot shook slightly.

“Majesty, what would you like to drink?” Harry asked, happily taking on the role of a servant.

He served Marjorie, then Jane, and then handed a plate to Mark. Mark fed food to Annie, who was now sitting on his lap.

Off in the distance Dragonia came into view. They stopped fifty miles away. “That’s Dragonia, Majesty. I’m sorry I’m not allowed to bring you closer,” Mark said.

Marjorie frowned. “Is it because I’m an outsider?”

“No Majesty,” Mark answered. “It’s because we’re a bunch of naturalists. We live as God intended, before the fall of Adam.”

The chariot zoomed away. They entered an area filled with floating equations and mathematical formulas. “Just beyond this area live a people that resemble Star Trek Vulcans. They spawn directly from their World Tree and they don’t have any emotions that we can understand. They spend their lives pondering philosophical questions. We won’t be going there because I think they are boring.”

The equations were replaced by bunny rabbits and fluffy kittens. “Kitty-cat dragons,” Annie said excitedly. “Mark, can you please become a kitty-cat dragon when you get your second form?”

Harry laughed, “Mark, a kitty-cat dragon. That would be fun to see.” He leaned on a chair to the side of the others.

“Mark,” Marjorie asked. “Is there such a thing as a kitty-cat dragon?”

“The Universe is infinite, Majesty,” Mark replied.

“Annie, a person’s personality, family history and other things control what their second form will be. For instance, Harry would probably become a Leprechaun because of his heritage and because of his magic wand. Your sister will become an angel because she’s so sweet and gentle. Draco’s always become dragons. Unfortunately, I won’t know what type I’ll become until school starts.”

They burst out of the Sea and into an entirely different world. Above them was a greenish sky with a sun and two moons. Below them were multi-colored clouds. Off in the distance was the planet’s World Tree. The Tree seemed almost made of clouds and was floating on top of a cloud layer.

“This world is a gas giant almost three billion light years away from us in a galaxy near the Virgo Constellation. We had to open a path to this world because they don’t have a Sea of Chaos,” Mark explained.

“Amazing,” Marjorie marveled. “The universe is your playground.”

“Here’s the fun part,” Mark said. “Annie’s chariot is asleep. Can you imagine what it could do when it awakens?”

“Are you saying this ship is alive?” Marjorie asked, startled.

“That’s correct,” Mark said. “It will awaken when Annie marries.”

They approached and were soon surrounded by cherubs. The cherubs resembled toddlers with tiny wings on their backs. They didn’t have legs. Instead they had mermaid-like tails and were completely naked.

Despite being naked, they exposed nothing to embarrass the queen.

“So pretty,” Annie said and jumped off Mark’s lap. She ran to greet them. They surrounded her and spoke to her with high-pitched voices. Annie giggled and clapped. Mark joined them and giggled and clapped as well.

“I wonder what they’re talking about,” Marjorie mused.

“Who knows?” Harry said, forgetting himself for the moment in the wonder of the world surrounding him. “Perhaps they speak in a voice that only those who never ate of the Tree of Knowledge can understand.”

A tear flowed down Marjorie’s face. “You have no idea how relieved I am to see Annie happy,” she said. “If only Mark was born of noble or royal blood.”

Jane sat next to her mother and said, “It’s too bad that the Princess Challenge is so impossibly difficult, but I feel if anyone can do it, it’s him.”

“Come on, you two,” Marjorie called. “It’s time to go home. Dad will be finishing his work day in about five minutes.”

The cherubs drifted away and the chariot turned around. Off in the distance storm clouds formed. They headed for the clouds and entered.

Annie hugged Mark and said, “Thank-you Mark for showing me the cherubs. They were so much fun to talk to.”

“You’re just like one of those cherubs, Annie. Isn’t that right, Majesty?” Mark asked.

“Yes dear,” Marjorie replied. “Thank you for bringing me here. I had no idea that so much existed. It’s a humbling experience.”

Annie raised her arms to Mark and he carried her. “Jane, what do you think of our trip?” Annie asked.

“This place really is incredible,” Jane said.

“All this and much more is available to those who embrace the world of magic,” Mark said. “Unfortunately, there are people who want to seal this away. It’s tragic.”

“I’ll put the food tray away and clean up,” Harry said and left.

“Majesty, does it ever bother you when people behave like that?” Mark asked. “Annie noted that we share Abraham as our ancestor. Now Harry is acting funny. It’s making me feel lonely.”

Marjorie nodded. “I remember when I lost some of my friends, when they discovered the difference between them and me. Royal status can be a burden. You’ll get used to it.”

Mark wasn’t sure how to respond to that and so change the subject. “I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to show you the places I like collecting jewels from, Majesty. Perhaps I can take you there another time.”

“I’d like that dear. Tell me dear, what do you think of Annie?” Marjorie asked like a mother.

“She brightens up the world and her presence makes me feel happy and at peace. Her passion for knowledge and magic is amazing in our world filled with too many muggles,” Mark shared. “I wish she were my age and going to the Academy with me. We would then be the bestest of friends. I think she has what it takes to be one of the great wizards of our time. I hope you’ll allow me to tutor her when the time comes.”

They exited the Sea of Chaos and headed towards the eastern shore of North America and the country of South Carolina.

“By the way, do any of you need to use the lady’s room?” Mark asked, noting that they both acted as if they needed to go.

“Yes please,” both Jane and Marjorie said together.

“Annie, show them were it is,” Mark said and tried to lower Annie to the ground. Annie stuck like glue.

“Please follow me,” Mark said and led the way. He waited as each entered and did their royal thing.

That done, they returned to the sundeck as they approached the Cascade Mountains. Mark slowed the chariot down as they went over the mountains since he thought the mountains were pretty.

“Everything is put away,” Harry informed Mark.

“Thanks Harry, you will one day make an excellent butler,” Mark said sarcastically.

Annie giggled at that comment.

Moments later they landed in front of the palace gates. A guard approached and Mark called, “I’m transporting the royal family.”

The guard noted Annie in Mark’s arms and said, “Yes sir. You may proceed sir.”

Mark flew the chariot through the gates and headed for the hangers. Moments later they were parked.

“If you will follow me Majesty, Jane, best friend,” Mark said and led the way. They stepped out of the chariot and Mark closed the door.

“If you don’t mind, I think I will go home,” Harry mumbled, looking stressed.

“Jane, did you invite any commoner friends or are we the only ones?” Mark asked.

“Sylvia, John, Mama-Duke, and Samantha said they would be coming,” Jane said.

“See?” Mark said. “You won’t be alone. Please stay. It will be fun.”

“All right,” Harry agreed reluctantly.

They entered the palace via the royal entrance. Ravenswood was there, talking to a servant. He turned and greeted his wife. “Hello dear. I hear you took a trip with this Draco boy.”

“Hi dad,” Annie said and waved.

“Hi dad,” Jane greeted as well.

“Good evening, Majesty,” Mark said and gave the king a shallow bow. He didn’t want to give a full bow for fear of dropping Annie. “Jane invited us to her birthday party and my best friend Harry suggested we get presents for the entire family. We gave your beautiful wife and daughters broaches.”

‘Harry,’ Mark said. ‘Reach in your left pocket and take out the gift.’ Harry nervously did as instructed and handed the gift to the king.

“You shouldn’t have,” Ravenswood said and opened the gift. “I’ve been wanting to get a new tie pin but kept forgetting. Thank you both.”

“Daddy, I had so much fun,” Annie bubbled. “First we met Mark at his place and he thought me some new magic tricks. Then he took us into the Sea of Chaos in the *Princess Annie*. I saw Dragonia. It was so pretty, floating among the storm clouds. Then we met cherubs and played with them. I wish you came.”

“Princess Jane, the guests have arrived,” a servant said.

“Thanks Sadie,” Jane nodded.

They went to another room filled with people. “Happy Birthday Princess Jane,” the people called.

Jane was swamped by countless people wanting to shake her hand.

“Annie, don’t you want to play with your friends?” Mark asked. Annie shook her head.

Mark looked around and found the council members. He headed their way and Harry followed. Harry looked relieved when they met.

“Come on everyone,” Mark said. “Harry is stressing out from being surrounded by royalty.”

They walked to a private place to talk.

“How come you’re carrying Princess Annie?” Mama-duke asked.

“She seems to have become attached to me for some reason and refuses to get down. She hasn’t left my side all day,” Mark explained.

“What, not even to go to the washroom?” Mama-duke asked.

“Real princesses don’t go to the washroom,” Annie said.

“I did not know that,” Sylvia marveled.

Now that he was among friends, Harry recovered his composure and said, “Does that mean Mark is a real princess?”

Annie giggled. “Mark, you’re a beautiful princess.”

“Speaking of princesses, shouldn’t we be eating?” Mark asked. “The best thing about birthday parties is the food.”

Mark headed for the food table with the others in tow. He hovered two plates and loaded them with food. He headed to a nearby table and the plates followed him. Moments later the others joined him at the table.

“The food isn’t bad,” Mark said between mouthfuls of food. Twenty feet away, Jane sat on a chair surrounded with gifts. She unwrapped expensive presents and showed them to the guests.

After the gift unwrapping, the parents and others made speeches. By that time Mark was stuffed. “Oh man, I think I might explode if I eat more. I think I gained ten pounds.”

Mark lumbered to a vacant lazy-boy chair and sat on it. He then adjusted Annie on his lap and leaned back. Annie curled up in a ball in Mark’s arms and closed her eyes.

Mark overheard people asking who he was and why he was snuggling with the princess. He didn’t care. It felt good cuddling with Annie. Both Annie and Mark fell asleep at about the same time and missed the rest of the party.

Of course, there wasn’t much of a party after he fell asleep. As usual, Mark’s curse kicked in and his form reverted to that of a ten-year-old boy.

There sitting on the chair was a little boy in oversized clothes and waist-length ruby-red hair. Snuggled in his arms was Annie.

The party stopped as everyone stared at the two. Seconds later the king and queen approached.

“Harry, what’s going on?” Jane asked.

“I think you’ve heard me tell the world that Mark is an eternal ten-year-old boy. This is what I meant. He always reverts when he falls asleep,” Harry explained.

“Why does he have hair like a child prince?” someone asked. “Doesn’t he have green eyes?”

“Dear, please check his eyes,” Ravenswood asked. “Try not to wake him. Better yet, let me cast a sleep spell.”

Marjorie stepped towards the two children and gently touched Mark’s face. Seeing no response, Marjorie gently pried open an eye. There staring back was a purple eye.

There were murmurings as everyone tried to understand why a teenage boy turned into a child prince.

Jane covered her mouth with her hand and said, “Oh my god. I remember something. Annie issued the Princess Challenge this morning. At the time, I wasn’t paying attention and didn’t notice.”

“Was there a second witness?” Ravenswood asked.

Harry nervously raised his hand. “I remember her saying something like, ‘I, Princess Annie Van Duyn of the house of David, take Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan as my champion, to fight for my honor and win my hand in the field of dreams.’

Ravenswood shook his head gravely. “This is bad. This is very bad. Unfortunately I can’t do anything right now since it is outside of normal business hours. I will clear my schedule and deal with this crisis the first thing in the morning.”

“What is the Princess Challenge and why is so bad?” someone asked.

Ravenswood took a deep breath, wiped sweat from his face and explained.

“You mean we’re all going to die?” a woman screamed rather shrilly.

Both Mark’s and Annie’s bodies jerked. Mark’s body reverted back to normal and he opened his eyes.

Upon waking Mark noticed two things. First, he was badly entangled in his clothes and had the overwhelming urge to remove them.

Second, people were staring at him.

“Everyone, please vacate the room for five minutes,” Ravenswood commanded.

The guests complied, leaving only Ravenswood, Mark and Annie. “Annie, please close your eyes and get up. Mark, please fix your clothes.”

Both Annie and Mark did as instructed. “Majesty, may I ask what just happened?”

“Mark, do you know what happens when you go to sleep?” Ravenswood asked.

“The same thing that happens to everyone who goes to sleep, I assume?” Mark asked.

“Do you always wake up half-naked?” Ravenswood asked.

“I wake up all-naked, Majesty. I am a naturalist and I always sleep without clothes,” Mark replied, unsure as to where the king was going.

“So you don’t know,” Ravenswood murmured. He then called, “Okay everyone, you may come back in.”

Mama-duke came to him and said, “Dude, I didn’t know you were a prince.”

“What are you talking about? I have no royal blood in me,” Mark denied.

“Okay everyone, I think we should end the party,” Ravenswood said. “I hope you all have a safe ride home.”

“See you later Mark,” Mama-duke said and left. The others followed him to the door.

“Harry, just a moment,” Mark called. He turned to Jane and said, “I’m sorry for ruining your party Jane, although I don’t remember what I did.” He turned to the king and queen and said, “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Mark gave Annie a hug and a kiss. “Try not to study too hard or your brain might explode.”

Mark walked out the door with Harry close behind. Ravenswood continued pacing and then stopped. “I was thinking about something fundamentally important to the country but I can’t remember what,” Ravenswood said. “Maybe I need to mark something on my calendar.”

“Mark,” Annie mumbled and began crying.

“Why are you crying?” Marjorie asked.

“I don’t know,” Annie whaled. “I feel as if my best friend has just left and I will never see her again, and worse of all, I don’t even know who she is.”

The other three just stood there, feeling a sense of loss they didn’t understand.

Beyond the palace, Mark and Harry walked home. “It was a fun party, I think,” Harry commented. “Unfortunately, I can’t remember exactly what happened at the party.”

Mark just nodded, feeling depressed. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to train. I’ve been slacking lately and I need to make up for lost time.”

-- End of Part 1 --

Part II -   
The Princess  
and the  
Kitty-Cat Dragon



1. The Second Form

Destiny moves,   
and what was once strange,   
becomes an everyday occurrence

It was the Friday morning of the first week of school. With a new year came new professors.

“Welcome class,” Griller, year 2 homeroom teacher greeted. “You’ve been waiting a long time to achieve your second form, some longer than others.

“Everyone, please follow me to the Temple of Transformations,” Griller instructed and led the way.

“I can’t wait to find out what type of dragon I’ll become,” Mark enthused. “I’m assuming I’ll be a fire type dragon since I have red hair.”

“I’m betting you’ll become a sludge type dragon, since you live in the swamps,” Harimau sneered. His cronies laughed.

Mark ignored him. Nothing good ever came from fighting with an idiot.

The class entered an area filled with statues of the most common beings students drew their second forms from.

In the center of the monument garden was a concrete stage 800 feet in diameter.

“As you can see,” Griller said. “The stage is big enough for even the largest second forms. Now please form a line behind Mark and we shall begin.

“Whoever thinks that Mark is going to become a sludge monster, raise your hands,” Harimau called.

Mark wasn’t surprised when Harimau’s cronies raised their hands. Everyone knew that Harimau was planning some sort of trick on him. This was obviously it.

“That’s enough class,” Griller shouted angrily.

Griller spoke to Mark, but in a voice that everyone could hear. “Mark, walk up the steps and to the center of the stage. Your transformation will be automatic. The rest of the day is free so that you may get to know your second form.”

“Is it possible for a certain asshole to alter Mark’s second form?” Harry asked from behind Harimau.

“On this sacred alter, to do that would require the help of a supreme master,” Griller assured. “There is no way such people would agree to help Mr. Tiikeri with some stupid practical joke. Whatever we see on this stage will be recorded as Mark’s true legal from.”

“In other words, if Mark turns into a sludge monster, it’s because sludge is his true inner nature,” Harimau said. “Isn’t that right, Professor Griller?”

“That is correct Mr. Tiikeri,” Griller agreed. “Now Mark, kindly climb the steps.”

“Good luck discovering your inner sludge self,” Harimau said and slapped Mark hard on the back. The cronies laughed as usual.

Mark felt a strange creepy feeling at the place Harimau hit him. The feeling spread throughout his body and disappeared as he staggered up the steps.

Finally on stage, Mark felt the same strange creepy sensations pass through his body. He walked towards the center of the stage and the sensations increased. His perception of the world changed and he felt himself shrinking slightly. His sense of sight disappeared, replaced by a powerful sense of smell, sound and touch.

Mark stopped and perceived the world around him. He was aware of his fellow students and Griller. He was also aware of the surrounding statues, the ground and the air, because of the microbes and other living things. However, he had no awareness of the sky above.

Mark moved back towards the others without bothering to turn around. He wasn’t sure how he was moving but he was moving. Also, for some reason he didn’t seem to have either a front or a back, since his awareness was 360 degrees.

Paying attention to the others for the first time since the transformation, Mark noticed Harimau on the ground. He was rolling in laughter. The other students emanated an aura of revulsion.

“Oh my goodness, Mark has turned into an evil sludge monster,” Ester Whalen called out and crossed herself. She then covered her nose.

Harimau laughed even louder than before. He then stopped when a coughing fit overtook him.

“Mark, if you can understand me, focus on what it means to be human,” Griller said. He too was gagging.

Mark did as instructed and his bodily sensations changed to that of a human. Smell, sound and touch diminished to human levels as his vision returned.

Mark looked at himself and found himself to be the same as before. Looking behind, he found a trail of slime that gave off the scents of the swamp.

Still choking from laughter, Harimau sputtered, “Professor, please show mucus boy what he looks like.”

A three dimensional image appeared in front of Mark. It looked like a fresh steaming pile of manure. It moved around, leaving behind a slime trail.

Mark looked it in horror. “Professor, is it possible that Harimau played a practical joke on me. Maybe he did something to me when he hit me. I felt something.”

“As mentioned before, that’s not possible,” Griller assured. “This is a sacred event that the school takes very seriously. As a result, everything that happens here is recorded and analyzed by people hidden from view.

“By the way, the watchers contacted me. What you felt was a harmless prank called a Willie.

“Don’t feel bad Mr. Lucas. Your form is appropriate to your Earth Element. It will help you greatly with your work with nature.”

Mark walked down from the steps as Griller cast a cleansing spell on the stage. Mark’s residue disappeared, along with the stench.

Mark approached the other students, but they shied away from him. Harry looked at him with pity. Mark wandered off to the corner to sulk. His life was ruined. He would never get a girl – who would ever want to associate with a sludge monster?

Harimau walked up the steps and strutted onto the stage. As he walked towards the center, his form blurred and flowed. Moments later a blood-red tiger with black stripes appeared. It was massive, even for tigers and had bright red eyes.

Harimau walked back and Griller clapped. The other students joined the clapping. Harimau walked down the steps and transformed back. Grinning from ear to ear, Harimau walked to the back of the class.

Mark had the overwhelming urge to take Harimau’s wand and rip his guts open with the blade. The shame he felt for having such a disgusting second form was getting to him and he wanted to take his anger out on Harimau.

Mark was momentarily distracted from his pity party when Harry climbed the steps with his Leprechaun wand in his hand. He stepped on the stage and transformed into the classic image of a Leprechaun. He had green clothes, a large-brimmed pointy green hat, a healthy copper-colored beard and a pipe in his mouth. He walked down the steps with his walking stick and changed back. He put his wand away and walked to Mark.

“Cheer up old man,” Harry said. “It’s creatures like you that make life possible. You are an important part of the circle of life.”

“Also the most disgusting,” Mark added, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

The last student discovered their second form and Griller said, “Remember students, you need to practice changing back and forth between your two forms until they become second nature. The rest of the day is free for you to train.”

“Do we have to?” Mark complained.

“I’m sorry Mark but you don’t have a choice. Not if you want to go all the way and become a supreme master,” Griller said.

“Okay girls, who wants to ride me?” Harimau called. The ladies crowded around him and climbed aboard until all twelve ladies of the class were astride him, with room to spare. He walked around in circles while the ladies giggled.

It wasn’t fair. First he was cursed with a condition that made everyone think he was only ten years old. Then he was denied a wand, and even an element. Now he had the most disgusting second form in the universe.

Mark had thought that he wanted to be rejected for reasons other than age, but that was no longer true. The scenario unfolded in his mind. Mark walks up to a girl and asks her out. She backs off, holding her nose and says, ‘No way. I don’t want to date a walking pile of poo.’

Mark wandered off, with Harry hovering close behind.

“You shouldn’t stand so close to me,” Mark whined. “You might get – you will get cooties from me.”

“I’m sure Harimau did something to you,” Harry said.

“You heard the professor,” Mark replied. “It’s impossible for him to do such a thing, and it would be impossible to get a supreme master to agree on such a childish prank.

“I don’t think you should associate with me for your own good. I’m going to the swamps, where I belong.”

“Mr. Banks,” Headmaster Emerson called. “I need you to run an errand for me. It’s important.”

Torn between responsibilities, Harry said, “Talk to you later,” and followed Emerson.

Mark wandered towards his new swampy home, unsure what to do.

What did sludge monsters do? Mark wondered. They recycled the refuge of the world and so completed the circle of life. They were like buzzards that cleaned up road-kill, or the microbes that rotted meat.

In other words, Mark was the spawn of a degenerate world.

2. Kitty-Cat Dragon

The complete unconditional acceptance

Of one person by another

Is the sexiest thing in the world.

Annie sat in her room, surrounded by books.

“Come on Annie, it’s time to take a bath,” Jane said.

“You go,” Annie replied. “I have work to do.”

“What are you reading?” Jane asked.

“*The Structure of Magic*, by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. It’s a book on Neuro-Linguistic Programming,” Annie said and held the book up. “The basic principle is that we create a representation of the world and act on it as if it were the real world.”

Jane nodded. “I learnt about that last year. Through experience and hard work, we increase the complexity of our model. Our wizard level increases in proportion to our understanding of the world.”

Jane chuckled and added, “You remind me of Mark. He’s a magic fanatic, just like you.”

Annie’s heart skipped a beat when she heard the name. “Who’s that?” she asked excitedly and got up.

Jane guided Annie out the door and towards the hot springs at the back of the palace. The hot springs were for the exclusive use of the royal family.

“Mark is a schoolmate of mine,” Jane said, wondering why she brought up his name.

“What kind of person is he? Do you like him? Is he fun to be with?” Annie badgered Jane with questions.

“He’s a sweet boy who never hesitates to help anyone in need. He’s crazy about magic and loves to eat,” Jane said with a smile. She realized that she was rather fond of Mark.

They stepped into the hot springs and ladies-in-waiting undressed them.

“Is he cute?” Annie asked and giggled.

“Please stop squirming Annie,” Becky, Annie’s Lady-in-Waiting scolded.

Jane thought for a second and said, “Yes. He really is a super cute boy. I’m surprised he doesn’t have a girlfriend.”

“What does he look like?” Annie asked excitedly.

“He has Ruby red hair, emerald green eyes like kiwis, and a light dusting of freckles on his cheeks,” Jane said. “Don’t forget his trademark moustache.”

“Why don’t you make him your boyfriend?” Annie asked.

“You know I can’t do that,” Jane objected.

“But with magic all things are possible,” Annie argued. “Okay, so some ancient old farts created those laws thousands of years ago. Who cares? If we are determined enough, we can change them and gain control of our destiny.”

“Okay Annie, I finished,” Becky said. “You may enter the hot spring now.”

Annie ran and jumped into the pool.

“You sound like Mark,” Jane said and joined Annie in the pool.

“Does he treat you as an equal, or does he worry about rank?” Annie asked.

“He doesn’t know the meaning of rank,” Jane laughed. “He isn’t afraid of scolding me when he think I need a scolding or hugging me when he thinks I need a hug. He’s always a gentleman, but he’s a naughty little boy as well. He is most definitely one of my best friends.”

Annie felt overcome by a feeling of loneliness. “I wish I had a best friend.”

“Don’t you have best friends?” Jane asked.

“You can only have friendship among equals,” Annie replied. “You and Mark are equals, despite what the world says. Also, none of my friends are interested in magic. They know they don’t need to work for the rest of their lives, and so magic is just a waste of time and effort for them.”

Jane looked at Annie with pity. She had way too much experience for someone so young. “I know what you need,” Jane said. “You need a pet.”

Annie brightened at that. “I want a kitty-cat dragon,” she said excitedly.

“Annie, be reasonable,” Jane begged. “There is no such thing as a kitty-cat dragon. Daddy has searched the world and beyond to find such a creature. He would do anything to make you happy, but he can’t do the impossible.”

A tear rolled down Annie’s cheek. She placed both hands together and prayed from the bottom of her heart, “Please First Parents, please give me a kitty-cat dragon. I promise to love him, kiss him, hug him and take care of him. I even promise to clean up his poop.”

Jane gave her cute sister a hug. If only Annie could understand that magic can’t solve everything.

Jane let Annie go and asked, “Who are the First Parents you just prayed to?”

“They are my fairy godparents,” Annie replied. “All princesses have fairy godparents.”

“Where do you think fairy godparents live?” Jane asked.

Annie shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe in the Sea of Chaos. I read about Dragonia, where some believe the Tree of Life resides. Maybe they live there.”

“Mark was born and grew up in Dragonia,” Jane said. “He took a few classmates there for summer vacation.”

“Aw, you’re so lucky to go there,” Annie said wishfully. “I wish I was born there. It must have been fun growing up in the Garden and playing with the guardians and the Caretaker.”

“Who are the guardians and the Caretaker?” Jane asked.

That stumped Annie. “I don’t know, but there has to be guardians and a Caretaker. Who would take care of the kids?”

“I didn’t go there Annie,” Jane stated with a frown. “There’s no way I would go to a place filled with perverts. They run around naked and hug and kiss and do who knows what else.”

“But we run around naked also, and we hug and kiss all the time,” Annie pointed out. Putting words to action, Annie gave Jane a hug and a kiss on the lips. “Does that make us perverts also?”

“No Annie, because we are girls,” Jane objected. “Boys by nature are perverts.”

“Why?” Annie asked innocently. “Is it because they want to do what we go?”

Jane realized she couldn’t win the argument with her sister. She knew that all boys were perverts, but her sister wouldn’t understand. Annie was still innocent and was in a sense still living in the Garden of Eden.

Unable to respond to Annie’s arguments, Jane raised her voice and used her ‘I’m the adult and you’re the child’ voice. “You’re still a child dear. You’ll understand when you become a teenager.”

“You mean when I accept the gift of the Caretaker and become old like you,” Annie said angrily.

“Don’t take that tone of voice with me, young lady,” Jane said angrily. “You don’t know anything about life.”

“I know more than you can possibly understand,” Annie shouted. She turned around and swam away.

Jane regretted raising her voice. Annie was just an innocent child, still vulnerable to the sinful ways of Man. It was her job to protect her. In time Annie would understand. Jane felt a twinge of regret for Annie’s future loss of innocence.

Annie swam away, upset that Jane was treating her like a child. She was nine years old.

But Annie felt sorry for Jane, so burdened by Original Sin.

Original Sin, also known as Shame – that was something Annie couldn’t understand, even though she had read about it several times in her books. That explained why she sometimes forgot to dress, causing Becky to scold her.

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Mark found himself in the swamps where he usually trained. It wasn’t so bad living here, was it? There were plenty of flies to keep him company.

It didn’t matter. A Draco always moved forward.

Mark closed his eyes and cast the transformation spell he had learned years ago, but only now was able to use.

Mark felt his body shrinking and the sensations coming to him changed. It was time to train as a sludge monster.

Mark opened his eyes. Something was wrong. The sensations he felt were completely different than when he was on the stage. A realization came to him. He had eyes to open.

Just then a bird flew overhead. An impulse overtook him and he shot into the air. All thoughts of his second form disappeared as he began the hunt.

Just as he was about to catch his prey, the bird twisted and escaped. Being new to flying, Mark spiraled out of control and crashed into the ground.

Looking around, Mark found himself in a well-maintained resort-style hot spring. *I didn’t know there was a hot spring on school grounds,* Mark thought.

It was a high quality hot-spring. The heat and the steam felt good, but he was loath to enter the water. Instead, he hopped on top of a rock, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

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Annie forgot her argument with her sister as she stared in wonder at the most incredible thing she had ever seen in her life.

There in front of her was the prettiest kitten she had ever seen.

The pure white kitten was sleeping in a nest made out of its own tail and gently purring.

Annie fell in love with it instantly. She clasped her hands together and looked up into the sky and whispered, “Thank-you First Parents.”

She reached out to the kitten and then stopped. She didn’t know how to pick it up. Turning around, she spotted Jane.

“Sister Jane, come here,” Annie whispered and waved franticly at Jane. “I found my kitty-cat dragon.”

Noting Annie’s excitement, Jane leisurely swam to Annie. She then spotted the cat. “What a pretty cat,” Jane marveled. “I wonder where it came from.”

“That’s not a cat,” Annie scolded. “That’s a kitty-cat dragon. I don’t know how to carry him.”

Jane gently wrapped her hands around the cat’s body and picked it up. It continued sleeping.

Jane then handed the kitten to Annie and admired the kitten’s tail. The body was barely six inches long while the tail was twice as long, at around twelve inches.

Jane thought the tail was unusually long and fluffy, but then again, she knew nothing about cats. She was a dog person.

Annie gently held the kitten’s bum in her hands and held it against her chest.

Giddy with happiness, Annie slowly walked towards the ladies-in-waiting.

Within sight of them, she screamed, “Look Lady Becky, Lady Simone. I have a kitty-cat dragon.”

The kitten jerked awake and found itself being carried. Looking up, it saw Annie’s face. Its eyes changed from slits to fully round.

“Be gentle with the cat Annie,” Jane cautioned.

The kitten jerked its head towards Jane and trembled with fear. A moment later, it started squirming, trying to escape.

“What’s the matter Grundy?” Annie asked worriedly. “I love you and would never hurt you.”

The kitten shot straight upwards and into the sky. It hovered ten feet in the air, seemingly standing on its tail. It looked around and shot directly towards the wall surrounding the palace ground and towards the direction of the school.

“Please don’t go away,” Annie cried and ran after it. Realizing the water was getting in her way, she got out and ran towards Grundy.

The ladies-in-waiting ran as well.

They saw it zooming towards the sky. It stopped, as if colliding with an invisible wall, and dropped like a stone to the ground.

“No Grundy, please don’t die,” Annie screamed in horror.

The ladies-in-waiting ran ahead of Annie, trying to catch the flying kitten.

The kitten flew up again, none the worse for wear. It collided with the invisible wall a second and then a third time.

The ladies caught up to the creature just as it zoomed in another direction. Becky cast a spell and the cat froze in midair. It slowly floated back downwards to the waiting princess.

Annie gently held the cat in her arms and felt it shivering in terror. “Why are you so scared Grundy?” Annie cried, with tears dropping on Grundy’s face.

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Mark was startled awake. At first, he wasn’t sure where he was. He then noticed he was being carried by – he looked up and saw Princess Annie’s face. He recognized her from TV.

“Be gently with the cat Annie,” a voice to the right called.

Mark jerked his head to the right and trembled with fear. He was in the private bathing area of the royal palace. Being here was certain death for him.

Mark had seen Jane naked and that was a death sentence.

In panic he squirmed, trying to get away. Annie said something but he wasn’t paying attention. A moment later he got free and shot straight up into the air.

He looked around and aligned himself with the school dormitories. A second later, he sped forward to safety. The possibility that security was tracking him from the time he entered the palace grounds never occurred to him.

Down below, Mark saw the palace wall. Excitement built inside of him at the possibility of escape.

Just then Mark collided with an invisible wall. The wall gave a bit, absorbing the impact and preventing injury. He tumbled to the ground, dazed.

In a panic and unable to think straight, Mark tried to cross a second and a third time.

Giving up, Mark zoomed in another direction. Just then, an invisible hand grabbed him and stopped him in mid-air. The force pulled him down and backwards.

That was just too much for Mark to bear. His soul split in two. 73% percent of his soul detached, leaving 23% behind.

No longer swamped by the animal nature of the host, rationality came to the detached 73%.

Mark hovered in place, trying to figure out what was going on. He looked down at his host body and was surprised to find a kitten shivering in Annie’s arms.

*I’m a kitten? My second form is that of a kitten?*

Thinking back to the Second-Form ceremony, he realized that that asshole Harimau had played an evil practical joke on him. He had transferred the transformation spell to him, hidden under the Willie spell. He vowed to give Harimau the Willies when he saw that tig-poo next.

But how did that fool do the impossible? That was a mystery for another time. Right now he had more pressing things to worry about, such as saving his skin.

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Grundy the kitty-cat dragon felt an invisible force grip its body and pull it down. Just then it felt a huge part of its soul rip from its body.

Souls are like holograms. They can divide multiple times and still contain everything of the original. Also like holograms, the more you divide a soul the hazier it becomes. In other words, it becomes harder to think and act independently of the body.

Seconds later, Annie gently held Grundy in her arms.

“Why are you so scared Grundy?” Annie cried, with tears dropping on Grundy’s face.

Grundy stopped squirming and gently wiped Annie’s face with the end of his tail. He felt sorry for the girl, but he could do nothing for her.

Annie relaxed slightly and Grundy shot out again, trying once again to escape. This time he only flew five feet when Becky cast another capture spell.

“Annie, get dressed,” Becky ordered. “We need to take this cat to your father.”

Grundy turned towards Becky and mewed. He didn’t like her.

“Please stop Nanny Becky,” Annie cried. “Can’t you see how terrified he is?”

“Annie, please dress,” Jane said and got dressed.

Becky tried to hold the Grundy in her arms, but he scratched her and tried to escape again. Becky gave up and let it hover, trapped in mid-air.

Five minutes later, everyone was decent. However to Grundy, they all looked the same.

“Let me carry it,” Annie said as they headed for the royal family room.

“Sorry Annie, I can’t let you carry him. He has sharp claws,” Becky said and rubbed her face. There was blood on her hand.

“He would never hurt me,” Annie said. “He loves me.”

“Don’t blame me if you get scratched,” Becky said. She then addressed the cat and rubbed her scratched face. “Okay cat, if you know what’s good for you, you won’t try to escape. Do I make myself clear?”

Grundy nodded, wanting to scratch her again.

Annie gently picked Grundy out of the air and hugged it. Rubbing a paw, Annie said, “See? He’s gentle with me.”

Becky moved her hand close to Grundy and he jerked away. Upset by the cold reception, Becky walked beside Annie, making sure the evil cat didn’t do anything to force her to punish it. Mark followed close behind in his spirit form.

They entered the family room and Annie spotted her parents. They were sitting down and having a conversation about nothing in particular.

“Mum, dad, we found this kitten sunning itself in the hot springs and Annie wants to make it her pet,” Jane said.

“He’s not a kitten,” Annie said angrily. “He’s a kitty-cat dragon.”

“She is pretty,” Marjorie said. “Where did she come from?”

“It looks scared,” Ravenswood said warily, looking intently at Grundy. “Why is it scared?”

Just then fear gripped Annie’s heart. She finally knew why Grundy was scared, and she was scared for him as well. “Please daddy, you’re not going to kill him, are you?”

“Why would I kill him? Is there something you’re not telling me young lady?” Ravenswood asked. He was no longer a father, but a very scary man.

“Because he saw me naked, and boys aren’t allowed to see princesses naked,” Annie whimpered as tears flowed. “Please don’t kill him. I love him.”

The king got up. Both Annie and Grundy cringed in fear. Mark hovered above in ghost form, unsure how to save his other half.

Desperate to protect her beloved sister, Jane asked, “Annie, how do you know that Grundy is a boy?”

“Because he’s not a girl,” Annie stammered, barely audible.

“Let me rephrase that. How do you know that he is *not* a *human* boy?” Jane asked, emphasizing the word human.

That question took Annie off guard. “Because he’s a kitty-cat dragon,” Annie stammered, stating the obvious.

Ravenswood sighed in relief and sat down. “Annie dear,” Ravenswood said gently. “Only human boys are subject to that law. Animal boys don’t count.”

That confused Annie. “But a boy is a boy, regardless of species.”

“No Annie, that’s not true,” Marjorie said. She turned to Ravenswood and asked, “What if that’s a human boy in his second form?”

“If that’s true, then he would have to suffer the full force of the law,” Ravenswood said gravely.

Mark once again went through his options, but found no solution.

“Jane, please tell us exactly how you found him,” Ravenswood commanded.

“Both of us went to the hot spring to take our usual bath when Annie spotted Grundy curled up in a ball and sleeping on a rock. Annie called me over and asked me to pick him up so she could carry him.

“Grundy woke up, discovered he was being held by Annie and tried to escape over the palace wall. He collided with the invisible barrier. That’s when Lady Becky used her magic to trap him. We then brought him here,” Jane finished.

“So he wasn’t actually spying on you two,” Marjorie noted, trying to smooth things out, the way mothers usually do. “In fact, I don’t think he realized where he was until he awoke in Annie’s arms. Poor thing. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“So how did he get there?” Ravenswood asked thoughtfully.

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Feeling the tension break, Mark said to his other self, ‘Grundy, can you hear me?’

‘Yes,’ Grundy replied.

‘You should be safe now,’ Mark said. ‘Eventually they’ll let you out of the palace walls. At that time, you’ll be free to return to me.

‘In the meantime I’ll create a temporary body and act as if nothing happened. You pretend you were never anything other than a kitty-cat dragon.’

‘Okay,’ Grundy agreed.

Mark wandered off, thinking what he must do. First he had to leave the palace grounds. That was a problem. There was a barrier surrounding the entire palace. It extended into dimensions beyond the physical. Mark had encountered that barrier the previous year when he took his Wizard’s Initiation.

There was an exit. It was the palace gates where people entered and exited.

At the entrance Mark found people passing through and being checked by palace guards.

Mark saw a noble in a limo and merged his soul with the noble’s body. He waited nervously and sent a silent prayer to his parents, *Please mum and dad, let everything go smoothly.*

Thankfully no one stopped them and they passed through.

Mark headed for the swamps, grateful that that his life as a sludge monster was almost over. Seconds later, he arrived at the shack.

Breathing a figurative sigh of relief, Mark thought of the future. Once his other self returned to him, he would show the world his true second form.

Admittedly being a cat wasn’t something to be proud of. He would have preferred being a dragon. However, it sure beat being something zombies aspired to becoming.

Then a horrible thought struck Mark. It would be a death sentence if he ever showed his second form to anyone. The king would know instantly that he had spied on his daughters and his death would be certain.

He had no choice but to live the rest of his life as a sludge monster, shunned by all.

Mark cast the Second-Form spell and the fermenting vegetation and other thing rose up and engulfed his spirit. Focusing on his training of forming the swamp matter over the last year, he created a human form for himself.

The form was rather good, better than he had ever made it, but he still looked like a creature from the black lagoon.

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Back at the palace no one spoke. The silence was interrupted when the king’s chief wizard, Grandmaster Rachael, entered. “You called for me, Majesty?” she asked.

“Can you please tell me if that’s a real cat or if it’s a wizard in disguise?” Ravenswood asked.

“I could check his data,” Rachael suggested and pulled out her wand. She stretched the wand into a tablet and cast a spell.

Rachael read, “He is male, aged ten, species dragon, sub-species kitty-cat, soul mass is 27%, element is ice, average wizard level is 32…”

“So he’s a rookie wizard,” Ravenswood interrupted. “That means he just graduated from Magic Academy or is just about to graduate.

“Grandmaster Rachael, please check everyone with a wizard level of 32 and cross-reference them against everyone who has that type of second form.”

Grandmaster Rachael paused a few seconds and said, “I found nothing sire. Without more data I have nothing.

“Also, I can’t read his mind or his history. I have strong magical interference.”

“Well, he’s male, aged ten…” Ravenswood considered and then stopped. He turned to his chief wizard and, “Wait a minute. Did you just say he was ten years old?”

“Yes Sire,” Grandmaster Rachael replied. “According to my reading, he just turned ten today.”

The king breathed a sigh of relief and said, “Thank goodness.”

“I don’t understand,” Simone, Jane’s lady-in-waiting said. Unlike Becky, Simone never took the wizard’s initiation.

“It’s forbidden for a person to take the wizard’s initiation before the age of sixteen,” Annie said with a big grin. “The twelve Supreme Masters who initiate the ceremony would never allow it. According to the books, the consequences are too dire to mention.”

“So what are the consequences?” Simone asked, curious.

“I’m sorry Lady Simone but no one really knows,” Ravenswood said. “As Annie said, the consequences are too dire to mention, and so it’s left unmentioned. The supreme masters would never break that law. Therefore, it’s impossible for Grundy to be human.”

Now that the tension was gone, Annie ran to her mother and handed Grundy to her. The mother held Grundy in her hand and scratched his stomach. Feeling safe at last and enjoying the tummy rub, Grundy purred and stared at the queen.

“What beautiful green eyes, like kiwis,” Marjorie murmured.

That comment reminded Jane of Mark. Come to think of it, he too had a wizard level of 32 for both Water and Air elements (combined, they made the Ice element). They both received their second forms today.

Jane felt a shiver run down her spine as she realized that Mark came from a clan of dragon masters. Come to think of it, Mark perfectly fit the bill. Jane decided not to say anything, because she didn’t want his death on her conscience. Despite being a boy, he was no pervert.

“The only question is, how did he get there?” Ravenswood mused.

“Get where, Majesty?” Rachael asked.

Ravenswood explained the details.

“I see,” Rachael nodded. “He came through a loophole in the palace’s security system.”

“There’s a hole in the security system?” Ravenswood asked, shocked.

“As you know, birds and other creatures are allowed to cross the barrier,” Rachael explained.

Ravenswood nodded.

“How does it work?” Rachael asked rhetorically. “It uses a simple rule. Nothing that has the intension of crossing the barrier may do so. Birds fly through because they are unaware that the palace exists. It also allows air to pass through, which is convenient, since we would suffocate when the palace gates close for the night. I suspect that Grundy was – wait a minute. Grundy can’t fly. He has no wings.”

“Of course Grundy can fly,” Annie said emphatically. “All dragons fly. Grundy, show them how well you can fly.”

Grundy obliged by circling around Annie’s head. He then perched on Annie’s shoulder and wrapped his tail around her neck.

Ravenswood opened and closed his mouth several time. He then said, “Annie, please don’t get too attached to him.”

“Dear,” Marjorie said worriedly. “Do you intend to test him?”

“I have no choice dear,” Ravenswood nodded. “The ancient prophesy has to be fulfilled.”

“Dear, can’t you make an exception?” Marjorie asked.

“I’m sorry but laws have to be obeyed, always,” Ravenswood pronounced. “Horrible things will happen if we don’t obey laws, especially ancient laws.”

Marjorie sighed. Her husband was stubborn to a fault when it came to obeying laws.

“Grandmaster Rachael, please continue with your explanation,” Ravenswood said.

“I suspect that Grundy was flying, minding his own business, when he accidently crossed the barrier. Perhaps he was chasing a bird. The bird crossed and he followed,” Rachael suggested. “He then took a nap on a rock because the heat made him sleepy. He awoke, realized where he was, and tried to escape. The barrier then activated and blocked his path, which was why he was captured.”

“That still doesn’t explain where Grundy came from,” Ravenswood mused.

On impulse Jane pulled out her phone and called Mark. Mark came from a clan of dragon masters. If anyone would know, his family would. She put it on speaker so everyone could hear.

“Hi Jane,” Mark answered, sounding dejected. “What do you need?”

Jane looked at Grundy and realized she had falsely accused him of being a human in her mind. Thankfully she didn’t say anything.

“Are you okay Mark?” Jane asked. “You sound bummed out.”

“No I’m not okay,” Mark said angrily. “I have the most horrible, most disgusting second form in all of creation.”

“Sludge monster,” Annie supplied.

There was a pause and Mark said, “That’s right. I am an evil sludge monster.”

“Sludge monsters aren’t evil,” Rachael corrected. “They come about when the world needs purification.”

“Isn’t that the definition of evil?” Mark asked.

“This isn’t good,” Ravenswood murmured worriedly. “The prophecy is coming about too fast. Mr. Lucas, I would like to schedule an interview with you to discuss the prophesy and your place in it. Please come to the palace on Monday, right after school.”

“As you wish Majesty,” Mark replied slowly, sounding confused.

“I’m sorry son,” Ravenswood said. “Being the child of prophesy is never easy.”

“See you Monday,” Jane said and hung up.

A maid waited for the conversation to end and then said, “Majesties, dinner is ready.”

The family adjourned and Rachael took her leave.

Annie sat down at her seat and a maid placed piping hot soup in front of her. Ann took a sip of soup and burned her mouth.

Grundy responded by blowing on the soup. The cool breath touched the soup and cooled it down. “Thanks Grundy,” Annie said and took a sip. She then said, “Grundy, come down here and I’ll feed you.”

“Sorry dear but no pets on the table,” Marjorie said.

“But he’s family,” Annie protested.

“Annie, I told you,” Ravenswood said. “Don’t get attached to him. On Monday I’ll be giving him a test the kings in our family have been giving all dragons for hundreds of years.”

“But he’s just a cat,” Jane argued.

“He’s not a cat,” Ravenswood denied. “He’s a magical creature who can fly, is surprisingly intelligent, and has an icy breath. Also, he flies in a way only dragons do. Did you see how his head leads and his body follows, as if he were riding on train tracks? That mode of flight is unique to dragons.”

The king paused for emphasis, and then continued. “He has all the qualities of an ice type dragon, although he looks like no dragon I’ve ever seen. Maybe dragons are more common than we realized, but we just never recognized them. Then again, maybe the only reason he’s a kitty-cat is because that’s what Annie wished for. I suspect Annie maybe part of the Prophesy as well.”

“I did wish for him,” Annie admitted. “I prayed to my First Parents – I mean fairy godparents and they gave him to me.”

“What exactly is this Prophesy?” Jane asked.

“I’ll tell you first thing Monday morning, 9:00 AM sharp,” Ravenswood promised. “On second thought, I’ll tell you after school, when I meet your friend Mark. I don’t want you to miss school.”

In the meantime Annie tried to feed Grundy while he perched on her shoulder.

“Annie, don’t do that or you will spill all over yourself,” Marjorie admonished. “Oh all right, Grundy may sit on the table since he’s so tiny.”

Grundy spiraled onto the table as if he were a train. Annie presented him with a spoonful of soup. He drank it and looked at Annie. He seemed to say, ‘*I’ll eat if that will make you happy, but I don’t need to eat. Remember to eat. You’re a growing girl.’*

“Okay Grundy, I’ll eat,” Annie said. “But it’s fun feeding you.”

“You’re right daddy. Grundy does have an interesting way of flying,” Jane, who never before saw a dragon, commented.

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When a person gets a second form, it’s like they are reborn. There is a learning process involved. Flying came instinctively to Grundy since he was a dragon. However, he didn’t know who or what he was. Now that the stress was over, Grundy let his former life as a human fade into the background. He wouldn’t need that knowledge as long as Annie kept him as a pet.

Grundy sat on the table and allowed Annie to feed him. The soup was good. The other courses followed and finally dinner ended.

The family returned to the family room. Grundy liked Annie and enjoyed sitting on her shoulder. He even liked the sister and the mother. However, he was terrified of the father. The father was like a vicious beast waiting for an excuse to pounce. Yes, just being a kitty-cat dragon was for the best – better than being dead.

Grundy looked down at his paws and wondered what he looked like.

“Come on Grundy,” Annie said. “Let me cuddle you.”

Grundy obliged by presenting himself in front of Annie. Annie spent the rest of family time kissing and petting Grundy.

“It’s time for bed,” Becky said.

“Okay Lady Becky,” Annie said. She kissed her mother, father and sister and followed her nanny to her room.

When they entered the bedroom, Grundy spotted a mirror and flew to it. He then hovered there and admired himself. He finally knew what he looked like.

“I wonder why cats – I’m mean kitty-cat dragons love staring at themselves in the mirror,” Becky commented as Grundy intently stared at himself.

“This is the first time Grundy has ever seen himself in the mirror,” Annie said. “He was wondering what he liked like.”

“How do you know?” Becky asked as Annie finished getting into her nightgown.

Annie only shrugged. “I don’t know.” She went to the washroom and brushed her teeth. “Come on Grundy, I need to brush your teeth,” Annie called.

Grundy came and Annie brushed Grundy’s teeth with her own toothbrush. Teeth brushed, they went to bed. Annie cuddled with Grundy and fell asleep.

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Annie and Grundy work up bright and early Saturday morning and Annie brushed their teeth. She didn’t bother with the little girl’s room since she hadn’t needed to go since the Christmas of last year.

Annie dressed and they met the family for breakfast. “Hi mummy, daddy, Sister Jane,” Annie said happily. “Can we have a party to celebrate Grundy’s arrival?”

“Sorry dear but not today,” Ravenswood said.

It was then that Annie noticed that her parents had a big fight. She hated it when they fought, especially since there was nothing she could do about it. It was frustrating to be a child. You had no control.

Annie ate in silence and fed Grundy. “Annie,” Ravenswood said. “I need to place an invisibility spell on Grundy. I don’t want anyone to know about him until Monday. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Okay daddy,” Annie said, wondering what all the fuss was about.

The day was a typical Saturday as she visited friends and lazed about.

Annie wanted to show off Grundy to her friends, but her dad said to wait for Monday. As a result Annie spent the day studying with Grundy.

Finally bath time came and they headed for the royal hot-springs. Grundy wasn’t looking forward to getting wet, but he didn’t want to leave Annie’s side.

They entered the bathing area and Grundy jumped on a rock in the middle of a pool and settled down in a nest made from his tail. He closed his eyes and waited for Annie to finish bathing.

“Come on Grundy, I want to give you a bath,” Annie said as Becky washed her hair.

“Annie,” Becky said. “Cat’s – I mean kitty-cat dragons don’t like getting wet. Don’t worry. He knows how to keep himself clean.”

“Okay,” Annie said reluctantly and waited for her nanny to finish.

Shower finished, Annie entered the water and swam to Grundy. He stared at her and blinked his long eyelashes at her. “Please, Grundy,” Annie begged. “Come swim with me.”

Annie’s begging finally overcame his reluctance and he jumped in the pool with her. For the next half hour, she had fun playing with her new pet.

“Annie, it’s time to get out,” Jane said.

Reluctantly Annie got out, along with Grundy.

Jane knelt in front of Grundy and snickered. “You look like a drowned cat Grundy.”

Grundy looked at Jane with an annoyed expression. He jerked his head upwards and to the right, snubbing her. He then walked away with all the elegance of any proud cat, despite being soaking wet.

A moment later, Grundy shook himself, spraying everyone. Fully dry, Grundy jumped back on the rock and waited for Annie to get dressed.

Jane looked at Grundy and realized just how strange the creature was. After that display, no one could accuse him of being a human boy. He was most definitely a cat, despite eyes that were identical to Mark’s.

Jane finished dressing and wondered about the eyes. She shook her head and decided that there were mysteries that couldn’t be solved.

Jane headed to the family room with her sister. She couldn’t wait for Monday, when she saw Mark and could talk to him.

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Mark practiced night and day on the spell to generate a golem body for himself. By 6:00 AM Monday morning, he had something that was almost identical to that of a human. That only made the creation monstrous.

Out of time, he gave up and called to his parents. ‘Mum, dad, please help me with this spell. I promise to practice hard on the spell whenever I have free time.’

Blessing granted, Mark examined his arm and marveled at what an Elder could do. There was no doubt. No one would know he was wearing a fake body.

That also made him feel depressed. Despite studying magical theory since he was eight years old and working like a dog for the last year, he had only barely scratched the surface of the infinite possibilities that were expressed in the Life Force of the universe, otherwise known as magic.

Mark marveled that his parents had ascended at the young age of 435. The amount of effort they must have spent achieving that goal boggled his mind.

Mark headed for school and greeted his friend Harry just before school started.

“I was worried about you,” Harry said.

“I was training,” Mark replied. “How about you? Do you feel comfortable with your second form?”

They entered class and Harimau called out, “Look everyone, it’s the sludge monster.” His cronies laughed.

Mark felt the urge to ram his fist up Harimau’s nose.

It really hurt Mark that the world thought he was a disgusting sludge monster, especially when he had a perfectly good second form.

True, being a cat was kind of lame, but it was infinitely better than being a sludge monster.

He wished he could tell the world the truth, but that wasn’t possible, since that was a death sentence. The king would kill his real body should the knowledge come out.

To be a Draco was to be strong. He had to let go of the idea that he had a normal second form and accept what fate gave him.

Acceptance of the inevitable was a life lesson he had to master, or he would go crazy.

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Annie entered the dining-room with Grundy perched on her shoulder. Her mother and father weren’t talking to each other.

“Don’t be upset mummy,” Annie said. “My First Parents gave Grundy to me because they love me. Nothing bad will ever happen to Grundy as long as I love him.”

“There’s no such thing as fairy godparents,” Marjorie lectured.

“I’m certain there’s a very good explanation as to why Grundy showed up when it did,” Ravenswood warned.

“There’s a good change your beloved Grundy will die because of your pig-headed father,” Marjorie said angrily.

Annie looked at her father with deathly seriousness. She spoke slowly and with authority. “Daddy, if my baby dies, I will never forgive you and hate you forever.”

The emotional temperature of the room dropped to below freezing. Ravenswood saw a coldness and a steely hardness in his daughter he never saw before. It terrified him and sent a chill down his spine.

Annie turned to her mother and said. “I will hate you too, for not protecting my baby.”

For a few seconds there was absolute silence as parents, sister and servants stared at Annie.

Then Annie gave everyone a radiant smile and said, “I’m not worried because I know my daddy would never hurt my baby.”

Ravenswood stared at Annie and his resolve wavered. He knew then that he was looking at the next Monarch.

“Annie, a king must do what a king must do,” Ravenswood said solemnly. “When you become Monarch, you will understand. However, I’m prepared to accept any and all punishment you deem to bestow upon me for the sake of the country and the world.”

The family ate in silence.

“Jane, you don’t need to go to school today,” Marjorie said. Jane just nodded.

Time passed and they waited. “Come on everyone,” Ravenswood said. “It’s five to nine. There’s no point in waiting.”

They followed Ravenswood to another part of the palace. Ravenswood greeted his subordinates and issued commands. They then entered the limo and drove away. Five minutes later they arrived at a large warehouse Annie never saw before.

The structure was nondescript. They entered and discovered themselves surrounded by vast mountains of treasure. The vastness of the treasure put Aladdin’s treasure to shame.

Ravenswood looked at Grundy and noticed no reaction. Jane however was freaking out. She ran to a pile of gold and stared at a necklace.

“I didn’t know we had such vast quantities of wealth,” Jane marveled, clearly wanting to try out the necklace. “Did this all come from the Sea of Chaos? From what Mark said, I can believe that’s possible.”

“A dragon has a sense for treasure that’s unsurpassed by any other creature,” Ravenswood remarked. “Annie, what does Grundy think about what he sees surrounding us?”

Grundy meowed. Annie translated. “Grundy says that all this treasure is fake. There is nothing of value in this warehouse.”

“How can you say that?” Jane said and picked up the necklace. It was exactly the type she wanted but knew they couldn’t afford. The necklace seemed perfect to her in every way, down to the weight.

“Grundy is correct,” Ravenswood said. “All the treasure in this warehouse is fake. It is used to weed out real dragons from fake dragons. Only a real dragon can pass this first test.”

“In that case, can I have this necklace?” Jane asked.

“I’m sorry Jane,” Ravenswood replied. “The magic that makes it look real is confined to this warehouse. There is no point in removing it. Let’s move on to the next test.”

Feeling disappointed, Jane tossed the necklace back into the pile of treasure and followed the others.

They passed through another set of large doors and entered a corridor.

“The reason everything is so big is because dragons can be rather large,” Ravenswood explained. “Even then, sometimes it’s not large enough. Centuries ago, a previous king had to make special preparations for a dragon of titanic proportions. Its head alone was bigger than the previous warehouse.”

“Is Grundy the smallest dragon?” Annie asked.

“No Annie,” Ravenswood said. “I’ve seen dragons the size of mosquitoes.”

They approached another set of doors. The doors opened as they approached.

This hanger also contained vast quantities of treasure.

“It’s hard to believe that all this is fake,” Jane said.

Grundy mewed. “There is treasure hidden here,” Annie translated.

“Very good Grundy,” Ravenswood praised. “Please lead us.”

Grundy got off Annie’s shoulder and lead the way.

“Is this dangerous?” Jane said nervously. “Why is it so dangerous to dragons?”

“You’ll find out in due course dear,” Ravenswood said solemnly and followed Grundy.

They followed the visibly agitated dragon. His body shivered and he looked feverish. “Daddy, why is Grundy shaking like that?” Annie asked worriedly.

“The true test has started dear,” Ravenswood said. “This will get worse from now on.”

Annie grabbed Grundy from out of the air and held him to her chest. A second later, Annie shivered and a gleam of lust shone in her eyes. Annie walked with single purpose intent.

“Annie please let go,” Ravenswood said worriedly. “You could die.”

Ravenswood tried to grab Annie, but she avoided him without seeming to. She then ran and the others followed. “Please Annie let go,” Ravenswood cried as he chased his daughter. “Your death is too great a punishment for me to bear.”

They entered another area and Annie stopped. In appearance the new area was no different than any other area.

“We’re surrounded by billions, no, trillions of dollars’ worth of treasure. Priceless works of art, expressing the depths and breaths of the human experience,” Annie said softly.

“Jewels holding ancient histories and artifacts holding curses… Treasures nations have killed for are here.

“The wealth of other races is here as well, entire races that were slaughtered for their treasure. Wealth beyond imagining,” she intoned. Her voice vibrated, like talking in front of a fan.

Ravenswood touched Annie’s shoulder and jerked his hand away. He rubbed his scorched hand and said to his wife, “Sorry dear, but I can’t separate them. The test can’t be stopped. On the bright side neither has suffered a heart attack yet.”

Jane squeaked, “Why is the ground shaking?” She knew the answer the moment she said it. Annie was shaking the ground.

“Now for the final test, you may take any one piece of treasure you wish,” Ravenswood cried with tears flowing down his face.

Without hesitation, Annie walked a few feet and picked up steel nut from the floor. To Jane, it looked identical to the nuts she saw attached to the warehouse wall and holding the structure up.

The heat and energy radiating from both Annie and Grundy was unbearable and Jane felt sunburned.

Annie held her hand out and the nut split down the center. Grundy reached a paw towards the left half of the nut and the piece flew towards it. Grundy took the nut and flew two feet away from Annie.

Grundy mewed and Annie spoke at the same time. Jane tried to understand the words but couldn’t quite catch the meaning. They sounded something like, “Yawa sessap ytinrete litnu dna won ,yppah uoy gnikam ot lliw dna efil ym etacided ot esimorp dna uoy ot luos dna traeh ym egdelp I.”

Annie raised her left hand to Grundy and Grundy touched the metal object to Annie’s ring finger. It flowed around Annie’s finger and transformed into a plain golden ring with a black line down the center.

At the same time, Annie touched the second half of the iron nut to Grundy’ neck. It flowed and formed a golden ring around his neck. It too had a black line on it.

Annie reached out and hugged Grundy to her heart. A moment later the two gave off a blinding flash of light.

Jane blinked and found Annie and Grundy back to normal. The love Annie and Grundy had for each other was amazing to Jane.

Jane crumpled to the floor and looked at her mom and dad. They were both crying like babies. That didn’t surprise her, since she too was crying like a baby.

The fake treasure disappeared, leaving behind the true treasure.

Dozens of people surrounded the family. They were the workers responsible for the maintenance of the test, among other things. They too were crying.

Teary eyed servants brought chairs. Jane and her parents sat on them. Annie walked up to her mother and sat on her lap. Her mother hugged her tightly to herself.

Rachael approached and said, “Majesty, with your permission, I’d like to return our national treasure to its vaults. As well, I would like to return the other treasures to the countries that supplied them for the test.”

Ravenswood nodded, trying valiantly to get a grip on his emotions. Moments later, servants brought drinks for the family.

Annie happily sang to herself while the others drank something to calm their nerves.

Ravenswood finally calmed down as the last of the vast treasure was shipped away. “I think I understand why Grundy survived the test. He had something no other dragon who faced this test ever had. He had a princess who loved him,” he mused.

“There is a mystical connection between dragons and princesses that few people understand. All male dragons yearn to find a princess and all princesses yearn to find a dragon to call their own. It’s the law, and yet no one thought about it.”

Ravenswood shook his head. “What a tragedy. All those poor dragons died for nothing.”

“I don’t understand,” Jane asked. “What just happened?”

“First things first,” Ravenswood said. “Annie, tonight we’ll have a party to welcome Grundy into our family.”

Grundy jumped onto Annie’s shoulder and Annie clapped. “Yay, we’re going to have a party.”

“Lady Becky, take Annie to school. Tell the teaches that she has permission to have Grundy with her at all times. Tell them that he is responsible for keeping her safe from now on,” Ravenswood said.

Becky bowed and left. Annie followed.

“Are you sure Grundy can keep Annie safe?” Jane asked.

“Believe me Jane, Grundy is a full-fledged dragon. He passed the test, which means that he’s more than capable of protecting Annie. He will risk his life to protect her.

“Now Jane, please go to school. I don’t want you to miss more school than you have to. I’ll explain everything this evening.”

“As you wish dad,” Jane said and kissed her parents.

Jane stepped outside and a limo pulled up to her. She stepped in, wondering what it would be like to have her very own dragon.

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Annie sang happily to herself as she played with her ring. Minutes later, the royal limo arrived at the school. Getting out, they entered the building and headed for class.

They arrived at class and Becky greeted Mrs. Taylor, Annie’s English teacher. She spoke loud enough for all to hear. “Mrs. Taylor, sorry for the interruption. The creature on Annie’s shoulder that looks like a cat is in fact a dragon...”

“He’s my kitty-cat dragon,” Annie interrupted. “Isn’t he pretty?”

“Don’t be silly,” a girl of noble birth from Oregon called out. “That’s just a cat. Besides, there’s no such thing as kitty-cat dragons. You’re so stupid.”

Angered by the verbal attack on his master, Grundy blew cold air at the attacker. The attack lasted about five seconds. Between them lay a trail of frost. Grundy stopped when the girl shivered.

Grundy then flew to the front of the class and flew in the classic sideways figure-8 symbol. He only made one pass before returning to Annie’s shoulder. That was a good thing, since dragons tended to get stuck in that pattern.

“Does anyone else doubt that Grundy is a dragon?” Becky asked. Seeing no reply, Becky continued. “The king has instructed that Grundy stay with Annie at all times. He is to be her guardian from now on. If you’ll excuse me.” Becky bowed and left.

Annie’s classmates rushed up and surrounded Annie. There were calls of, “He’s so pretty,” and “Can I pet him?”

Grundy obliged by presenting himself for the students to play with. Many of Annie’s classmates were jealous of Annie and her unique pet. “Why is it that only princesses get the best things?” an unknown person complained, a little too loudly.

Annie felt the jealousy and hatred and inwardly cringed.

Madison Tiikeri stood off to the side and glared. She didn’t like being humiliated. She spoke to her group of cronies in a loud voice. “I can’t believe such a pathetic creature can be a dragon. Then again, all dragons are pathetic.”

“Dragons aren’t pathetic,” Annie screamed. “Tigers are. They can’t even fly.”

“Tigers can too fly,” Helda retorted. “They just choose not to. Dragons, on the other hand, can only fly as if they are on train tracks,” Helda retorted. “How lame is that?”

“Why do dragons and tigers always fight?” the teacher asked rhetorically.

“Is it true that tigers can fly?” a boy with purple hair asked.

“Yes Sam,” the teacher replied. “However, flying isn’t an appropriate term for what they do. Tigers don’t fly. Instead, tigers are capable of creating trails in the sky, which they use to walk and run on.”

“Isn’t that cool?” Helda asked to no one. “Unlike dragons, they can move sideways and backwards too.”

“Let me show you,” Mrs. Taylor said and images appeared on the blackboard. The tiger on display ran on a path through the sky.

“The interesting thing about tiger paths is that anyone can use them as long as the tiger that created them wills it. Also, they can be made invisible to others.”

“How do you know that Annie will become a dragon?” Jessica Brando, Annie’s former best friend asked.

“Because Annie has a pet dragon,” Mrs. Taylor replied. “Like attracts like. Her intense love for her pet proves it.”

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The school bell rang and Mark stepped out of the classroom. For most students all that was remaining was doing necessary homework, before being free to have fun.

Mark, on the other hand, didn’t have time for fun. He had to train as if his life depended of it, because it did.

“Harry, the king requested I meet with him. He thinks I’m part of some ancient prophesy,” Mark said. “Tell the others I’ll do my council work when I get back.”

“You? You’re a part of prophesy?” Harry asked and laughed. “For some reason I find that hard to believe.”

“Perhaps he’s an ancient evil that’s destined to drown the world in poo and suffocate the world with farts worse than Harry’s,” Harimau suggested with a sneer.

“That’s a good one, Harimau,” a crony said and laughed hysterically.

Mark felt like hitting him. That was too close to the target. Instead of hitting Harimau, Mark blew at him.

Harimau coughed and waved his hand in front of him. His cronies scurried around, not knowing what to do.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Mark said. “I have an appointment with the king.” He walked away before Harimau could recover from the gas attack.

As they walked away, Harry whispered, “What did you do to him?”

“He’s unharmed,” Mark assured. “He just smelled a super strong fart.”

“You farted through your mouth?” Harry asked, surprised.

Mark laughed so hard that he fell to the ground. “Farted through my mouth. That’s so funny,” Mark laughed. He continued laughing all the way to the rendezvous point with Jane.

“What’s so funny?” Jane asked.

“Mark made a farting joke and now he can’t stop laughing. You know kids. They love their physical humor,” Harry explained.

“How old are you Mark?” Jane asked.

That stopped the laugh like a bucket of ice water.

Feeling inadequate, Mark said, “I was born six months before you.”

Seeing the pain on Mark’s face, Jane said, “I’m sorry I questioned your age. You’re a very mature person. Besides, even adults like physical humor. Your uncle Arthur is the funniest man I know.”

Mark brightened up like a ray of sunlight and gave Jane a hug. He let go and said, “Thanks Jane. Come, let’s go. I don’t want to keep the king waiting.”

Jane watched Mark walk towards the limo and wondered about him. He was the most incredible person she had ever met, someone who embodied the word ‘magic’.

Jane and Mark stepped into the limo and Harry watched the limo drive away. Mark looked out the window and pretended to be bored by the ride.

They stopped in front of the palace and got out. A few corridors later and they arrived at the king’s office.

“Welcome Marcus,” Ravenswood greeted. “I would like to see your second form.”

Mark looked around at the expensive furnishings and said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea Majesty. If you don’t mind, can we do that somewhere else?”

“Thank-you for your consideration,” Ravenswood said. “Please follow me.”

They left the office and arrived at a private outdoor location minutes later.

“Jane, I don’t want you to look at me when I change,” Mark warned. “Beautiful princesses shouldn’t see disgusting things.”

“I don’t mind,” Jane assured. “I love you.”

Jane’s face turned red. “I don’t mean I love you, love you. I mean I love you in a sisterly sort of way. If I had a baby brother, you would be it. Sorry. I won’t say anything more,” Jane babbled, trying to cover her embarrassment.

Those words hurt Mark. She still viewed him as just a child, despite his moustache.

Ravenswood interrupted the awkward moment and said, “It’s okay for you to love him, as long as you don’t do so in a romantic sort of way. Obedience to the law is essential.”

“I understand daddy,” Jane said hastily. “I would never do that – no offense, Mark.”

Mark just nodded.

“Jane, Mark is right. Princesses shouldn’t see certain things,” Ravenswood stated.

Jane wanted to argue, but she knew that arguing with her father was futile.

“Okay dad,” Jane said and walked away.

Jane hid behind a large rose bush and waited, knowing that the secret service wouldn’t rat on her in this situation.

“Okay Mark, you may change,” Ravenswood commanded.

Mark nodded and spread his arms. His skin and clothes changed color and took on various shades of brown. Within seconds, all resemblance of humanity was gone. Instead of a man, a creature composed entirely of the lumpy goodness of an overflowing outhouse appeared.

Jane covered her mouth, feeling nauseated, and yet she couldn’t look away.

As Jane watched, chunks and pieces within the creature moved and flowed within a base of brownish liquids. Stuff dribbled down onto the floor and made a puddle.

Seconds after the transformation began Jane was hit with the stench. That was too much for Jane. She ran away as fast as she could, hoping she could get away before the smell made her puke.

The creature descended into a blob and moved several feet. It then reformed into a sludge man. Seconds later, the creature was back to being human.

Mark cast a purification spell to clean the air and the slime on the ground. Unfortunately the slime had left a brown patch on the ground. Mark knelt by the dead grass and cast a spell. Moments later the grass was restored.

Mark glanced at the king. Ravenswood was green around the gills and was fighting valiantly to regain his composure.

Mark looked in the direction Jane had gone. “Damn,” he said. “I should have known she would be watching.”

Mark walked to a bush of blue roses and enjoyed the scent. “I love blue roses,” Mark remarked. “They are so pretty. However, I don’t like cut roses, or flower arrangements. In my opinion, flowers look best in their natural environment. The same is true with animals. I think they look the most beautiful in the wild.”

Ravenswood finally recovered. He looked at Mark. All kings had the power to judge the character of their subjects. Ravenswood knew that Mark had a great deal of character. It was too bad that people would judge Mark only by appearance and not according to law.

“Thank-you Marcus for your demonstration,” Ravenswood said. “I apologize for acting in such a disgraceful manner.”

Mark nodded. “Is there anything else you require of me, Majesty?”

“Hundreds of years ago one of my ancestors discovered a stone tablet with some sort of prophesy on it,” Ravenswood began.

Jane stepped back into the garden, looking as if she had tossed her cookies.

“I’m sorry Jane,” Mark said with a drooping head. “I should have made sure you weren’t watching. I wish I could lock my second form away and never use it again. No one deserves to see that.”

“You didn’t mind showing my dad,” Jane pointed out.

“Noblesse oblige,” Mark explained. “A king must endure everything for the country and put the welfare of his people ahead of his own. It was necessary.”

“How come you have such great understanding of the duties of kingship?” Ravenswood marveled.

“I watched several immersive novels on royalty, including *The Unbreaking Wave, the life of Queen Jasmine the Great*,” Mark replied.

The king frowned. “It’s forbidden for a child under the age of twenty-one to watch an immersive novel of someone of the opposite gender. Whoever let you watch it is in a lot of trouble.”

Mark only shrugged. “My parents showed it to me when I was eleven. You can’t punish them. They ascended years ago and are now Elders.”

Ravenswood shook his head and said, “Unbelievable.” He then patted Mark on the shoulder and said, “I’m sorry son. It seems destiny has given you the short stick. Please follow me. You deserve to know the prophesy that your parents seem to be preparing you for.”

“Why is it so bad?” Jane asked.

“Imagine waking up in the body of a boy,” Mark suggested. “Then imagine drowning in another person’s memories. It can be harsh.”

“I see,” Jane said, trying to grasp the concept. The only thing she could agree on was that she didn’t want to be stuck in a boy’s body.

“Harsh is an understatement,” Ravenswood said. “You need a strong mind to handle it.”

They entered a section of the palace Jane never saw before. They emerged into a secluded courtyard. In the center was a 50 foot tall obelisk. The sides were covered in hieroglyphics unlike anything Jane had ever seen.

“This obelisk dates back to the ancient flood that destroyed Atlantis and created the continents as we now know them,” Ravenswood began. “Marcus, please tell Jane the history of the world up to the Great Flood.”

Mark did as instructed.

“Thank-you Marcus, you filled in some details I wasn’t aware of,” Ravenswood said. “Please note this obelisk. The message is written in the ancient language of Atlantis. Unfortunately, it’s written in a code we haven’t broken yet.

“We have however deciphered parts of the text. It mirrors what Marcus said about Genesis. However, it warns that the age of Man is coming to a close.

“It is well known within the inner circles of the secret clans that humans banished the Tree of Life to the Sea of Chaos.

“On January 6, seventeen years ago, the obelisk revealed something no one I questioned knew about. It has revealed that the Tree of Life is dying...”

“That’s horrible,” Mark exclaimed in horror. Tears flowed down his face. “My home – so beautiful,” Mark blubbered. Seconds later, Mark bawled like a baby.

Ravenswood reacted instinctively to Mark’s distress and gave him a hug, like he would a ten-year-old child in distress. “It’s okay Mark,” Ravenswood said. “God won’t let such a tragedy occur.”

Ravenswood waited until Mark calmed down. In the meantime, servants brought three chairs.

Once Mark regained control of his emotions, he said, “Thanks for the hug. I need to talk to my uncle about this. I assume you talked to members of my clan?”

Ravenswood sat down and Mark and Jane followed. Mark took an offered coke and slowly drank it.

“Why would my dad talk to members of your clan?” Jane asked Mark.

“Because they are the guardians of the Tree of Life,” Ravenswood replied. “It is their duty to take care of the Tree and see that no harm comes to it.

“Yes I spoke to them. They in turn spoke to their elders and their elders revealed that the prophesy on the obelisk is correct. There’s only one thing I don’t understand. Why was that revealed seventeen years ago?”

A servant took Mark’s empty glass and handed him another coke. “Thanks,” Mark said.

Mark then said, “That was the date I was born. I need to redouble my training.” He put the coke down and placed his face in his hands. “I don’t know if that’s possible. I even train in my sleep, using lucid dreaming techniques.”

Mark looked up at Ravenswood and gave him a big grin. “It’s all right. I can handle it. I am a Draco, after all.”

Ravenswood decided that there was no point in revealing more of the prophesy. Mark was already going above and beyond the call of duty. “What will you do after you leave here?” Ravenswood asked.

“I have council work to do, and then homework,” Mark said. “Then I’ll look for more ways to serve. Service to others is a powerful way of raising your level. Then I have to meditate on all my life lessons.”

Feeling sorry for Mark, Ravenswood thought of inviting him for dinner, but knew he was too busy – there was a way.

“How would you like to eat dinner with us?” Ravenswood asked. “My driver will drive you back to school and bring you here at ten to eight.”

Mark thought about it and then nodded. “New experiences are good. But I have to warn you, I eat like a pig,” Mark said and grinned at the king.

“There’s no point keeping you longer,” Ravenswood said.

Mark picked up his coke and drained it. He got up and handed the empty glass to a servant. “See you later Jane, Majesty,” Mark said and walked away.

Ravenswood looked a Jane and commented, “Mark is an incredible child. He has an innocence and a purity I’ve never seen in my entire life. It’s as if he has never partaken of the forbidden fruit and was never touched by original sin. It’s ironic that such a pure person has to be a sludge monster, and yet I suspect it’s according to law.”

Ravenswood paused, and then added, “It’s strange to meet someone who doesn’t view me as a king, but just as your dad. That felt amazing.

“The work day is almost over and I don’t have time to do any more work. Mark has taught me a valuable lesson. I’ve been too focused on everyday life and have completely forgotten the duty I have of increasing my spiritual level. I’m going to take a quick shower.”

“I’ll go take a bath with Annie,” Jane said. “Would you like to join us?”

“No thanks. I think hot springs are boring,” Ravenswood said and left.

Jane watched her dad leave and wondered why she invited him. The last time she took a bath with her dad was when she was just a child. She wondered if it was Mark’s influence, the only boy in the world who wasn’t a pervert. She chuckled, knowing Mark would be offended by that statement.

Jane headed back to school. She had council duty to attend to, and then homework. However, her mind wasn’t into either studying or working. Instead, she was thinking deep thoughts.

What did it mean to the world that the Tree of Life was dying? It was just a relic from the past, wasn’t it? Its loss was certainly a tragedy, especially for the Draco clan, but other than its historical significance, should the world even care?

Council duty and homework ended. It was time to go home.

Mark and Jane entered the limo and they headed out. Jane looked at Mark and knew he was studying.

“You know, at the rate you’re going, you’ll probably graduate with the highest wizard level in school history,” Jane said, trying to make conversation.

“Probably,” Mark said solemnly. “That’s a good thing. Only an idiot would do what I need to do.”

Mark paused and looked at Jane. He then hugged her and said, “You accept me as I am, don’t you, smelly farts and all?”

Jane didn’t recoil but just accepted his hug. She thought back at her experience watching him transform. She got violently ill at his revolting appearance and stench. She knew that was just below the surface. He was now and forever a sludge monster.

Mark blew some smelly breath at her and said, “That’s me.”

Yes, that was definitely part of him.

Jane knew that others would judge him, without getting to know the real him. Looking beyond the superficial was a life lesson that everyone on the path of wizardry must master.

Jane thought of multiple situations in her life where she judged others without justification. She thought of boys and realized that she had unjustly called them perverts, even though most would never harass a girl.

She thought back at the sludge monster transformation and knew she would feel sick again, but that was okay. Her opinion of Mark would never change. He would always be a sweet, lovable child.

As her father always said, you should only judge people according to the law.

All the experiences of her life and experiences with Mark came together in a brilliant flash of light and she finally understood the meaning of acceptance without any superficial judgment.

The light of revelation subsided and she knew she had leveled up. She had mastered a major life lesson, one that took many people decades or centuries to master, and she had mastered it, thanks to Mark.

“Thank-you,” Jane said softly.

Mark gave Jane an extra hug and then kissed her on the cheek. This time his breath smelled like breath mints, her favorite kind.

Mark let go of Jane and settled back on his seat. The limo passed through the palace gates.

“You are one of my best friends and I love you,” Mark said. “Master a few more of those life lessons and you’ll be the one graduating with the highest wizard level.”

Jane laughed. “I’m no way as incredible as you.”

The limo stopped in front of the palace and the chauffeur opened the door.

“Everyone is incredible in their own way,” Mark insisted. “You just have to discover the incredible inside of you.”

They entered the palace and Jane guided Mark to the royal suites. Mark formally bowed to the king and queen. “Good evening, Majesties.”

Mark glanced at little Annie sitting by the fire, scratching Grundy’s stomach. She was oblivious to everything but Grundy.

“How is it possible for you to be so pretty?” Annie asked and kissed Grundy on the nose.

Mark felt a twinge of jealousy. He had a regular second form, which he couldn’t use, just because Annie and Jane were princesses. It wasn’t fair that he was forced to use a fake body and pretend to be something he wasn’t.

“Mark?” Jane asked.

Mark turned to Jane and said, “Sorry I was distracted. What did you say?”

“What were you looking at?” Jane asked.

“I was looking at the cat your baby sister was playing with,” Mark replied.

“He’s not a cat,” Annie shouted angrily without looking up. “He’s a kitty-cat dragon.”

“Sorry Princess,” Mark said.

Mark turned to Jane and asked, “I remember seeing Annie on television playing with – a kitty-cat dragon toy. Did that come to life?”

“No,” Jane replied. “Annie found him sunning on a rock in our hot spring bath on Friday. No one knows how it got there.”

“Marcus, you’re an expert on dragons, aren’t you?” Ravenswood asked. “Have you ever heard of a kitty-cat dragon?”

“One of my aunts has one,” Mark said.

“Are they rare?” Marjorie asked.

“I – believe – my aunt mentioned – she only found one. I guess there’s a second one,” Mark replied.

“Did your aunt say is she lost hers?” Ravenswood asked.

At that, Annie cried, “No, I don’t want to give up Grundy.”

“She never mentioned it,” Mark said. “But I doubt she would take it away from the princess, since she obviously loves him so much.”

“Are you sure about that?” Ravenswood asked.

Mark sighed. “The princess can keep him forever if she wants. I give him to her,” Mark said, letting go of the idea that he was anything other than a sludge monster.

“Yeah,” Annie screamed happily and kissed Grundy again.

Mark turned away from a closed possibility and smiled at the mother. He was very close to mastering a life lesson, but he still hadn’t mastered it yet.

The life lesson was, accepting the things you cannot change.

Of course, the real reason he hadn’t mastered the lesson was because he still hadn’t accepted that his age was stuck at ten.

“Dinner is served,” the butler called.

They entered the dining room and the parents took the ends of the tables. Annie took one side and Jane took the other. Jane’s side had an extra chair. Mark waited to be seated and sat next to Jane.

The food was relatively simple, but expensively prepared. For reasons Mark couldn’t understand, fancy restaurants always gave insipid food, but covered it up with fancy decorations.

For real food you needed to go to a peasant restaurant. Mark ate the food, vowing to go for some real food later.

While eating, Mark realized something. Why was he eating when he was currently using a fake body? Of course, his parents made a fake that was so good that he couldn’t tell it apart from the real thing. In other words, his body, fake or not, was screaming for food.

Jane caught Mark staring at his own hand.

“What would be the consequences if the Tree of Life died?” Jane asked.

No one replied, so Mark took it on himself to answer. “Within the branches of the Tree of Life is the Garden of Eden. Within the Garden is the Caretaker.

“At the approximate age of twelve, all human children, regardless of where they live, receive the gift of the Caretaker and become adolescents and eventually adults.”

“You’re talking about the Forbidden fruit, aren’t you?” Jane asked. “What will happen if children don’t receive it?”

“According to the doctrine of the secret clans, nothing will happen. People will grow up like normal and live normal lives. In fact, they believe that the only way to achieve a perfect world is by preventing children from receiving the Forbidden Fruit. Then the world would be free from sin, as in the Garden of Eden,” Ravenswood said. He then added, “As described in the bible.”

“I don’t remember eating it,” Jane said. “Is it different when you live in the Garden of Eden?”

“According to my uncle, children outside Dragonia receive it unconsciously while sleeping. Draco children are different. At the right time, the children receive the physical fruit and forever exit the Garden. Then, surrounded by family and friends, they eat the fruit. It is a special coming of age ceremony,” Mark said, speaking in a measured monotone voice and absently playing with his food.

“You’ve eaten it, haven’t you? So what does it taste like?” Jane asked, interested.

Mark’s face became crimson red, rivaling his hair. He said nothing.

“Oh my God,” Marjorie exclaimed. “You’ve never eaten the Forbidden Fruit. You’re a seventeen-year-old boy and you don’t have original sin.”

Mark’s face became even redder, if possible, and he started fidgeting. *If this is a fake body, why am I feeling so embarrassed?* Mark thought to himself. There was only one possible answer. His body was not fake. That meant he could still advance in wizardry. Only through a physical body can mastery be achieved.

“You shouldn’t feel ashamed dear,” Marjorie consoled. “People have wanted to be free of Original Sin for countless thousands of years, and only you have achieved this.”

“It doesn’t feel like a blessing to me, but a curse,” Mark whimpered. “Why do you think I train so hard? It’s so I can become normal.”

“Normal is overrated,” Ravenswood declared. “If everyone were like you, countless laws could be thrown away.”

“Without perverted thoughts and desires, how could the human race multiply?” Mark asked.

“People have children for reasons other than the sex drive,” Ravenswood said.

“You take care of children, don’t you?” Marjorie asked. “When the time is right, you’ll find a girl and have children of your own.”

“The secret clans will be happy to find out that they were correct and we have nothing to worry about,” Ravenswood mused.

“If you say so, Majesty,” Mark said, not sure if what Ravenswood said was justifiable. Unfortunately, no arguments came to mind. His only argument was shot down.

Dessert was served and Mark ate in silence, not knowing when the perfect time to leave was. One shouldn’t leave just after dessert, but also one mustn’t stay too long after that. Between twenty and thirty minutes should be perfect.

After dessert the family adjourned to the family room. Annie sat on the floor and read a book on magic, while Grundy sat on her shoulder.

“I was like that when I was her age,” Mark commented. “I couldn’t get enough of magic. Magic is the most incredible thing in the universe. It’s too bad not enough people appreciate it.”

“Do you think Annie will become a great wizard?” Marjorie asked.

“Of course, Majesty,” Mark replied. “You only need three things to succeed. You need a burning desire, a strong work ethic and you must be willing to correct all mistakes and learn from the mistakes of everyone, and not just your own.

“If you have these qualities, nothing will be beyond you.”

“I’m going to become a wizard,” Annie sang and hugged Grundy.

Mark suddenly felt that it was time to go. “Jane’s mum, Jane’s dad, it was a pleasure meeting you,” Mark said and got up. “Jane, see you tomorrow in the council room.”

At the door, Mark bowed to the family and left.

“You have an amazing friend Jane,” Marjorie said. “It’s a shame he’s not royalty or nobility or I would have tried to marry you to him.”

“I’m going to be marrying Grundy when I grow up,” Annie announced. “Isn’t that right, Grundy?”

“Jane, you never told me what your second form was,” Ravenswood said. “I was so busy worrying about Grundy that I forgot to ask.”

“Sludge monster,” Annie said and then giggled.

“You like sludge monsters?” Jane asked.

“You do,” Annie said and opened a book.

“Do you know what a sludge monster is?” Marjorie asked.

“It is a creature of darkness, come into existence for the sole purpose of revealing the darkness within our souls and the whole world, and so bringing about a greater light,” Annie replied.

Annie then got up and said, “I have mastered a new magic trick. Do you want to see it?”

Annie did the trick but no one clapped. Feeling hurt, she sat down and opened a new book.

“Annie, how do you know these things?” Ravenswood asked.

“It’s written on that stone pillar in that garden,” Annie said. “It also mentioned Grundy, which was one reason why I’ve wanted a kitty-cat dragon.”

“Did it mention you?” Marjorie asked.

“Yup,” Annie nodded. “However, the words are really confusing and I don’t understand any of it, or what the Pillars of Hercules are supposed to be.”

“I can’t believe my baby is smarter than the so-called wise men of the world,” Ravenswood marveled.

“But you didn’t like my magic trick,” Annie protested.

“Come here and give me a hug,” Ravenswood said. She sat on his lap and he hugged and kissed her.

Grundy jumped off Annie’s shoulder and sat on a chair. He just stared at the father.

“Grundy doesn’t like me,” Ravenswood said sadly.

“He’s scared of you,” Annie explained. “He thinks your obsession with laws will one day get him killed.”

“Does that have anything to do with the prophesy? Don’t answer that. We’re outside of business hours,” Ravenswood said.

To break up the tension, Ravenswood said, “Annie how would you like to visit the South Pole?”

“I’d rather go north and visit Santa Clause,” Annie suggested.

“Perhaps another time dear,” Ravenswood said.

“Can I come dad? How come you’re going to the south pole?” Jane asked.

“Your mother and I have a council meeting with the secret clans,” Ravenswood said.

“Will Mark be there?” Jane asked.

“No dear,” Ravenswood replied. “For one thing, I doubt he’s a member of the inner circle of his clan, although his parents are, since they are elders. General clan members are never told anything.

“But he talks to his parents, doesn’t he?” Jane asked.

“He can’t talk to elders, even though they are his parents,” Annie answered and held her hands out to Grundy. Reluctantly Grundy approached and sat in her lap. Annie hugged him.

“How come?” Jane asked.

“It’s forbidden for elders to have casual contact with us, since their presence overwhelms us and destroys our free will,” Annie said.

“Annie is right,” Ravenswood agreed. “Although I suspect Mark’s free will may have been compromised. I feel sorry for that boy.”

“Come on dear, it’s time to go to bed,” Marjorie said.

Annie kissed her dad, mum and sister, and then went to the washroom to brush her and Grundy’s teeth. She then went to bed and hugged Grundy to herself as hard as she could. She didn’t want to lose him, ever.

3. The South Pole

On the path of self-actualization,   
we face the same problem multiple times,  
in multiple disguises,  
until we master all its variations.

Weeks passed and time for the trip to the South Pole arrived. Annie got into the limo and they drove to the royal hangers. The family boarded a private jet built by the Tiikeri clan.

“Why don’t we use the *Princess Annie*?” Annie asked.

“Because that’s a Draco chariot,” Ravenswood replied. “The other tribes don’t approve of the Draco clan.”

Ravenswood gripped Annie by the shoulders and said, “Please don’t tell anyone that we have that chariot. They will want to know why we have it, and I don’t have an answer for that.”

“Yes,” Jane agreed. “It looks like a wedding present.”

“That’s not funny Jane,” Ravenswood scolded. “It’s an embarrassment that we can’t get rid of. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“Okay dad,” Jane said.

Annie placed her backpack on the chair beside her and looked out the window. It was going to be a long flight and she brought plenty of books to read.

As expected, the flight was long and tiring. She wished they had taken her namesake. She read the documentation stored within the craft and knew it was superior to anything available on Earth, and vastly more comfortable then the jet the stupid Tiikeri clan had developed.

Hours into the flight, Annie fell asleep.

“Wake up Annie, we have arrived,” Jane said.

Crew handed Annie and the family coats and Annie hers put on. She put Grundy in her jacket and let him stick his head out of the front.

“Annie, Grundy is an ice type dragon,” Ravenswood said. “He won’t get cold.”

“Of course he’ll get cold. I have to keep him warm,” Annie whined.

Ravenswood let his daughter baby the dragon and stepped into the expected cold. This was his first time coming to Antarctica. He was surprised to find himself warm, despite the lightness of the jacket.

“The Tiikeri clan has good equipment,” Ravenswood admitted as he walked into the windy terrain of Antarctica. “It must be because they like living in extreme conditions – although for some reason, they hate the Sea of Chaos.”

“That’s because you only find dragons there,” Annie explained. “Dragons and tigers hate each other. Don’t worry Grundy, I’ll protect you from the bad tigers.”

Annie looked up and saw the Aurora Australis, Antarctica’s version of the northern lights. She turned around and saw something she never heard of before.

Far off in the distance a stream of energy shot out of the ground and disappeared into the sky, like a fountain. The width of the stream must have been hundreds of miles in diameter. The stream was strongest at the center and weakened as you went away from the center. Annie felt they were also in the stream, but since they were so far from the center, it was barely visible here.

The stream of energy seemed to react to stuff coming from the sun, causing the Aurora Australis.

Remember her science classes, Annie realized she was looking at the magnetic lines of force emanating from the South Magnetic Pole. The adults ignored the pole and so she said nothing. Adults were boring people who don’t pay attention to anything. They also grumble when you say things like, *I can see the South Pole*. Instead, Annie just enjoyed the view with Grundy, the only person in the world who could understand her.

“Tigers aren’t bad Annie,” Wally of Switzerland objected as he approached. “We tigers are the guardians of the law. If it weren’t for us, the Draco clan would have spread its sinful ideas throughout the world and covered the world with chaos.”

Annie ignored the king, or she would have gotten angry.

“It’s been a long time, Ravenswood,” Wally greeted.

“You too, my old friend,” Ravenswood replied. “I have some incredible news to share with the council. I can’t wait to tell everyone.”

“You’re such a tease, Ravenswood,” Wally grumbled. “Now I’m going to go crazy, waiting for the council meeting to start.”

“Why are we in the South Pole?” Jane asked.

“To be precise, we aren’t in the South Pole. That’s over 2,000 miles in that direction. The magnetic South Pole is approximately there and the physical South Pole is approximately there. Most people think they’re the same, but they’re not.

“The reason we’re here is because we are the hosts dear,” Wally explained. “We white tigers like the cold and ice. Besides, aren’t the southern lights amazing? You should visit my country sometime. We have incredible skiing.”

They entered a waiting vehicle and drove towards a large building near the seashore.

Upon entering, they were greeted by dozens of people. Voting members from all twelve secret clans were in attendance, along with family and servants.

The lodge buzzed with noise as adults gossiped and children ran wild.

“Dilbert,” Wally called. “Why don’t you greet Annie?”

“Hello,” Dilbert said. “Dad, my friends want to play with the seals. Can we go?”

“Okay son, but don’t be cruel to them,” Wally warned.

“Yes dad,” Dilbert said and ran away, resolving not to kill any.

“Daddy, can I go outside? This place is boring,” Annie asked.

“Okay dear, but don’t wander off too far,” Marjorie said.

Annie got out and walked towards the sea shore. Dilbert and his cronies pelted the seals with stones.

Annie ignored them, since that was what tigers did. They preyed on the weak. Of course, they weren’t doing that because they were tigers. They were doing that because they were assholes.

Annie walked away and sat on a stone away from everyone. She looked at the ocean and enjoyed the strength of the sea. Above her, the southern lights made the world seem magical.

She turned and looked at the great fountain of magnetic force issuing from the ground to the south of them.

“Oh Grundy, the world is so pretty,” Annie said. “Why does it have to be filled with assholes like Dilbert as well?”

‘That’s the way of the world, Annie,’ Grundy said sagely. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll protect you from them.’

Annie laughed. “You’re so sweet Grundy. Come on, it’s time to study.”

Annie pulled a book from her backpack and opened it up. “I don’t understand the reason for the second form, Grundy. Can you please explain this to me?”

‘To begin with, our race isn’t the only race in existence. God created countless races, spread across the multiverse,’ Grundy began, feeling he was continuing a lecture he began before.

‘Countless millennium ago, the Elohim planted our Tree of Life. But our Tree of Life isn’t the only one. One exists for each child race.

‘When we gain our second form, we reach out and take the form of one of our sister races. This binds us to the other races and them to us. It strengthens our bonds and advances the life force of Totality.

“I want to be a dragon, just like you,” Annie said wistfully. “Then we can have plenty of kitty-cat dragon babies. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Grundy mewed in laughter. ‘You’re only nine years old, sweetie. I will be yours for as long as you want me. We can have plenty of kitty-cat dragon babies if you want, but you have to wait till you grow up. Raising children is a big responsibility.’

“I know Grundy,” Annie said. “But I want to grow up and take the wizard’s initiation now.”

‘Try not to rush,’ Grundy said. ‘Enjoy your baby-hood while you can, because in three years you will receive the gift of the Caretaker and become a teenager.’

“Annie, it’s dinner time,” Jane called. “In a few hours they will move the lodge to the south pole.”

“Okay Sister Jane,” Annie said and got put her books away.

They headed back to the lodge. The wind picked up and blew snow everywhere. They walked on solid sheets of ice. The Tiikeri boots prevented them from slipping.

They entered and were greeted with the din of people talking.

In the half-filled dining room, Annie spotted her parents. Their table was next to Dilbert’s table. That wasn’t surprising, considering the bond the families shared. However, it was annoying. She hated Dilbert.

“Annie, you should socialize with all your peers,” Marjorie said by way of greeting. “The most important reason we brought you here is so that you can make friends with your peers.”

Ravenswood nodded.

“But I have the only person I need in the world,” Annie complained. “I don’t need anyone else.”

“Oh baby, Grundy is just a pet. He isn’t a person,” Marjorie said.

“He is so a person,” Annie replied angrily.

“So Annie, do you plan on marrying him, having little babies with him?” Dilbert asked, having spotted Grundy poking out of Annie’s jacket.

By now, the room was filled and everyone was settling down.

“Of course I’m going to marry him,” Annie replied.

“How about having babies?” Dilbert asked evilly.

“Of course,” Annie replied. “We will have plenty of babies.”

“Annie, do you know how babies are born?” Wally asked while sipping coffee.

“Of course,” Annie answered angrily. She hated being treated like a baby. “He will put his sperm inside of me and the sperm will enter my eggs. In nine months, we shall have babies.”

“I don’t think this is an appropriate conversation for the dinner table,” Marjorie warned.

“But how will he put his sperm inside of you?” Dilbert asked, enjoying the perverted conversation.

“That’s enough Dilbert,” Dilbert’s mother, Coralline, scolded, aware that the conversation had drawn a crowd.

“How should I know?” Annie said angrily. “I haven’t received the Gift of the Caretaker yet. I’m only nine years old.”

All conversation within the area stopped and people turned to stare at Annie. This caused a ripple effect. People noticed the silence in the area and became silent, wondering what going on. Within seconds the room was quiet.

Marjorie was red in embarrassment.

“Annie, dear,” Wally said. “Who told you about the Caretaker? Have you been associating with Dracos?”

Jane kicked Annie’s shin and shook her head when Annie turned. Both her father and mother were also making secret hushing motions.

“Of course not,” Ravenswood said, speaking the truth as he remembered it. “We have allowed Annie access to the royal library, as well as the library in the Magic Academy. Her library card only allows her access to books she’s legally allowed to view. Apparently that knowledge was in one of the books.”

“You should censor what your daughter views,” Wally scolded. People throughout the room agreed.

“I cannot do that,” Ravenswood objected. “The law is the law. If the law allows her to read the books her library card grants her access to, then I have no right to stop her.”

“And that’s why she’s confused now,” Wally said smugly.

In the meantime Jane had moved her chair over and was now next to Annie, ready to prevent her from saying any more embarrassing things. Both mother and father looked relieved at that.

“Annie, let me tell you things your father never bothered to tell you. It is the truth that we guardians of the world, the Illuminati, are trying to spread.

“Listen to him dear,” a distant relative urged. “Wally is one of the wisest people I know.”

Jane squeezed Annie’s leg, preventing Annie from speaking.

“In the beginning we lived in peace and harmony in the Garden of Eden. And God said, ‘And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

“‘But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.’

“King James Bible (Cambridge Ed.), Genesis 2:16-2:17

“Now do you understand?

“Unfortunately, because of our sinful nature, every generation our children insist on partaking of the Forbidden Tree.

“Annie dear, you’re an angel that has never partaken of the Forbidden Fruit. I would do anything to prevent that.”

Everyone in the room nodded in agreement.

Jane switched from squeezing Annie’s leg to hugging her. But the hug wasn’t a sisterly hug. It was a warning not to speak.

“Is that why you’re trying to kill...mmm,” Annie began, but was muzzled by Jane.

“How do you know?” Wally asked, in shock. “I can’t believe that knowledge is in the public domain.”

“Make sure that knowledge is fully purged from the public domain, by order of the council,” Wally commanded.

A man dressed entirely in black appeared in front of Wally. He knelt in front of his king with his head bowed and had a hand across his chest. His face was covered, except for his eyes and he looked like a ninja. “As you command, Majesty,” the man said and disappeared.

Wally turned back to Annie. He raised his voice to allow the entire room to prosper from his words of wisdom. “This is secret information that must not go beyond this room. Non clan members, please vacate the room.”

Wally waited as servants left. When given the signal, Wally commenced, “It is true what Annie said. Shortly after the first humans sinned, a group of wise men decided to do something about it.

“They tried to prevent their children from partaking of the forbidden fruit. Unfortunately, everything they did failed – Jane, allow Annie to speak.”

“What’s wrong with the gift?” Annie asked.

“You must understand, my dear,” Wally said gently. “In the Garden there was peace and harmony. When Man ate of the Tree, he started sinning. There was hatred, violence, debauchery, and all kinds of sin. Finally God had enough of all the sinning and caused the flood. It destroyed the evil Island of Atlantis and God removed the Tree of Life, the Garden of Eden, and the Forbidden Tree from this world.”

Annie knew Wally was lying, but didn’t know how to counter the deception, so she remained silent.

Wally continued, “All was well in the world. But then Man began sinning again. Somehow the forbidden fruit was coming into the world, despite the Forbidden Tree not being there.

“We decided that if we couldn’t prevent Man from eating of the Forbidden Fruit, we could destroy the Forbidden Tree, and thus free the human race from sin.

“What about the Draco clan?” Annie asked. “Aren’t they descends of Jacob, just like all of us?”

Veins showed on Wally’s forehead and his face turned red.

“It’s true that Draco was the thirteenth and last son of Jacob,” Wally admitted. “However Jacob disowned him. The other twelve sons tried to purge the world of the heresy. Unfortunately, the sinner entered the Sea of Chaos and escaped with his Demon wife and spawn.”

Again Annie knew that Wally was lying, but she couldn’t pinpoint the lie, and so she couldn’t counter.

“The descendants of Jacob have been fighting the evil Draco clan ever since. The only thing we’ve been able to do so far is tie their hands and prevent them from acting freely. Rest assured, they and all the evil they stand for will be purged from the world. Once the Forbidden tree is killed, a new dawn of peace and prosperity will come about.”

At this, everyone in the room clapped.

“Call the servants back in,” Wally shouted. “I’m hungry.”

Conversation began as the servants entered and food was served.

Annie sat in silence, feeling the disapproval of her parents, and the worry of her sister.

On stage, singers and comedians entertained the rulers of the world.

Annie fed Grundy and had a conversation with him in her mind. She wished she was a member of the clan of Draco, instead of the tribe of Judah. She knew better than to tell her parents. They would just say that it was an honor for her to be a direct descendent of King David. They would then show her the genealogy, which she had no interest in.

The uneventful meal ended and they headed for their rooms. Marjorie gave Annie a scolding the moment the door closed.

“I’ve never been more embarrassed in all my life,” Marjorie shouted. “Please don’t speak about the Draco clan to anyone.”

“The only reason we do business with the Draco clan is because no law forbids it and we can’t discriminate against them for no legal reason,” Ravenswood stated.

“You can’t forbid something that doesn’t officially exist,” Jane noted and laughed.

“You’re right Jane,” Ravenswood agreed. “To the world they are just a minor group with no political significance. But they sell good equipment at competitive prices, which is why we deal with them.”

“Like the chariots,” Annie suggested.

“No dear,” Ravenswood corrected. “They never give those out to non-clan members, and no, I don’t want to speculate as to why we have one with your name on it.”

“Go to bed dear,” Marjorie commanded. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“Yes mama,” Annie said reluctantly. “Good night mama, papa, sister.”

Annie brushed her and Grundy’s teeth and then changed into her nightgown. She looked out the window at the rushing scenery as the lodge headed south. Magic was definitely cool.

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“Annie, try to play with the other kids,” Marjorie said.

“But the other kids are boring,” Annie complained. “No one wants to talk about magic, other than the magic other people do.”

“Let’s go dear or we’ll be late dear,” Ravenswood said.

“Who cares if we’re late?” Marjorie asked. “All they do is talk about nothing. I don’t see the value in any of these meetings.”

“I know dear, but it’s our duty to attend,” Ravenswood replied.

They left their suite and within minutes arrived at the meeting room. They were let in by security and took their seats near the rear of the conference room. They were royalty, but they were still lower level members.

Ten minutes later, the Grand Poo-bah started the meeting. The pledge of allegiance to the secret brotherhood began the meeting. Then came the reading of the minutes.

Once that was done, there was old business, and then new business. Finally, one by one, council members gave their reports.

Two hours later, it was time for Ravenswood and his wife to give their report.

Ravenswood began, “As you know, my family has been given the task of unraveling the prophesy of the Atlantis Stone. Last month Annie discovered a baby dragon while bathing. It has the appearance of a pure-white kitten...”

Ravenswood was interrupted with comments such as, how can a cat be a dragon?

The Grand Poo-bah banged his gavel and commanded, “Silence please. Brother Ravenswood, please continue your report.”

“We tested the dragon and it passed,” Ravenswood said. “It now wears the pillar of Hercules around its neck. In addition, the Pillar had split in two and Annie is wearing the second half on her ring finger. I don’t know the significance of this.

“I feel duty-bound to mention that Annie seems to have a natural ability to read the contents of the Atlantis Stone, although there’s much she doesn’t understand.”

“Is that why she knew about the Forbidden Tree, and things she shouldn’t know about?” someone asked.

“Maybe she can understand because she has yet to be touched by original sin,” someone else called.

“Silence please,” the Grand Poo-bah commanded. “Please continue Brother Ravenswood.”

“My daughter Jane has revealed that she knows a boy who has the second form of the legendary Sludge Monster,” Ravenswood continued.

The room burst into pandemonium as people tried to figure the significance of that. “Does that mean the end-times are here?” someone screeched.

Again the Grand Poo-bar silenced the room.

“Marcus Lucas is the VP of Education at the Magic Academy’s student council in Washington and is in the same year as Jane.

“Upon questioning him, despite being seventeen years old, he appears to be entirely devoid of Original Sin...”

Again he was interrupted by a noisy room.

The Grand Poo-bah banged his gavel until his wrist screamed in pain.

“He’s a sweet lovable boy who is obsessed with magic. His only issue is that he feels ashamed of the fact that he never received the Gift – I mean the Forbidden Fruit. I might add that he is a Draco...”

The room burst into pandemonium.

It took the Grand Poo-bar five minutes to get the room back into order.

“For those who don’t know, children of the Draco clan physically live in the Garden of Eden. At the appointed time, they take the Forbidden Fruit directly from the Forbidden Tree. They then eat the fruit in the presence of friends and loved ones...”

As expected, the room went crazy again. No one could believe how irresponsible the Draco parents were, not destroying the fruit, but intentionally giving them to their children.

One woman shouted, “They are demons.”

Ravenswood continued when the room calmed down. “Marcus has revealed to me that despite growing up in the Garden of Eden, he never received the Forbidden Fruit from the Forbidden tree.

Ravenswood continued. “As some of you know, the Atlantis Stone has revealed that the Tree of Life is dying...”

After the noise subsided, Ravenswood resumed, “We don’t know the significance of that, other than it made Marcus cry, but we can be sure that the Forbidden Tree will die as well...”

“That is my report,” Ravenswood finished after the final interruption. The clan members could read the facts and figures of his country later if they cared to.

“I propose we deal with Ravenswood’s report in a separate meeting after our regular meeting,” the Grand Poo-bar said. “Do I have a second? All in favor? Opposed? The Ayes have it. Let’s proceed to the next report.”

The rest of the meeting was uneventful. Finally lunch came and they adjourned.

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Dilbert and his cronies were up to their usual no good selves. It was an hour before lunch and they had nothing to do, since their parents were attending the council meeting.

“I can’t believe that stupid Annie wants to marry a stupid cat,” Dilbert ridiculed.

“I know,” Darien replied. “I can’t believe she said that the Forbidden Fruit was a gift. Talk about stupid.”

“Hey look, there’s Annie,” Philip pointed. “What do you want to do with her?”

“Hey Annie, come here,” Dilbert called. “I have something to show you.”

“No thanks,” Annie said. “I have no interest in what dumb boys have.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen mine,” Philip said.

“That’s a good one Philip,” Darien laughed.

Annie just rolled her eyes. All boys were so childish. ‘I’m glad you’re not a stupid boy Grundy.’

She was about to turn around and leave when they grabbed her and led her down a hall.

“Where are you taking me, you stupid boys?” Annie asked in annoyance. They were assholes, but she didn’t expect them to do anything bad to her. Also, she knew that Grundy would protect her if something bad happened.

“It’s not far away,” Dilbert promised and led them down several corridors. He then opened a door and shoved Annie out into the Antarctic cold without a jacket. The door closed with the boys laughing like idiots.

The biting cold and icy wind hit Annie like daggers of glass shards. Grundy reacted instantly. His body wavered and flowed around Annie. Moments later, Annie found herself wearing a snow-white winter jacket with pants, shoes, hat and gloves.

“That’s amazing Grundy,” Annie tried to say, but the wind drowned her out. Instead she said it in her mind.

‘Thanks Annie,’ Grundy said. ‘Let’s get back in.’

Annie tried to open the door, but it was locked. Panicked, she cried, ‘What happens if we’re locked out forever?’

Annie’s fear flooded Grundy. Overwhelmed, Grundy hurled a fireball at the door. It exploded, raining shrapnel everywhere. Fortunately Grundy protected Annie and they stepped in.

Lured by the explosion, adults came to investigate.

“What happened, Princess Annie?” someone asked. A moment later, one of the ninja security people appeared out of nowhere, crouching on the floor in front of Annie.

“That stupid Dilbert of Switzerland locked me out. Grundy had to blow up the door to let me in,” Annie replied angrily.

Annie instructed Grundy to change back and Grundy did so. Everyone looked in surprise at Grundy. No one had ever seen a shape-shifting cat before.

“I’ll make a full report to the necessary people,” the ninja guy promised and considered his next move. “Please follow me, Princess Annie. I’ll take you to your sister. The council meeting will adjourn in twenty minutes. You will see your parents then.”

Annie followed the shinobi and they found Jane.

“If you’ll excuse me Princess Annie, Princess Jane, I need to make a report to my superiors.” The man bowed and disappeared in mid-bow.

“What’s going on Annie?” Jane asked worriedly.

“That stupid Dilbert locked me out in the cold,” Annie said angrily.

“Oh my God Annie, are you okay?” Jane asked panicked.

“It’s okay Sister Jane,” Annie replied. “Grundy protected me.” She wasn’t upset or afraid, since she had her valiant dragon knight to protect her.

Jane grabbed Annie’s hand and guided her to the entrance of the council hall. Jane stood next to Annie and waited impatiently. The wait was torturous.

Seconds after the council meeting ended, security appeared in front of Ravenswood and Wally and told them the situation.

All four parents exited and met Annie and Jane. Marjorie gave her daughter a suffocating hug.

“Bring my son and the other boys here this instant,” Wally bellowed.

The boys appeared in front of them, looking confused. Then understand dawned, along with a growing sense of dread.

“We didn’t do anything,” Dilbert whined. That plea fell on deaf ears.

“Take us to the scene of the crime,” Wally commanded the kneeling shinobi.

The man got up and led the way.

The doorway was shattered, along with chunks of the surrounding walls, exposing other rooms. The wind howled outside, blowing snow everywhere. No cold or snow entered.

Wally looked at the tiny kitten on Annie’s shoulder and marveled. “Annie, your pet is incredible. That was a strong door.”

Annie blushed with happiness and said, “Thank-you.”

“Shinobi, please show us what happened,” Wally requested.

A screen appeared for all to see.

Dilbert and his cronies dragged Annie down the corridor, laughing and making fun of Annie. Annie looked annoyed, but not upset.

The three froze in terror as their crimes were exposed.

Dilbert pushed Annie out of the door and into the cold.

The screen split into three.

Screen 1 showed Dilbert’s posse walking away. Both Philip and Darien expressed their concerns about leaving Annie out in the cold. Dilbert brushed them off and they walked away. The screen then closed.

Screen 2 showed Annie exiting the lodge. Annie shivered the instant she stepped out of the lodge.

Screen 3 showed Annie’s face. Her face turned red and she shivered.

Within seconds of exiting, Grundy’s body wavered and flowed, forming a covering around Annie. She was now warm and safe.

Annie grabbed the lodge door with her gloved hand and tried to open it, but it wouldn’t budge. Panic showed on Annie’s face when she realized she was trapped.

Annie’s clothes quivered and a fireball appeared in front of Annie. A second later the door and surrounding area was demolished. They entered and were greeted by the shinobi and the others. Grundy turned back, leaving Annie with the shorts, summer shoes and t-shirt she originally wore.

The screens disappeared.

“Okay Dilbert, you have a choice,” Wally growled, barely controlling his anger. “You can be punished by Uncle Ravenswood or you can be punished by me. Keep in mind Annie almost died because of you.”

“B-but she didn’t die,” Dilbert stammered in self-defense.

“Answer my question!” Wally commanded, barely controlling his rage.

Dilbert considered his choices. His dad was upset because he had brought shame to the family.

Dilbert looked at Ravenswood, who had yet to speak. The look Ravenswood gave him chilled him to the bone. That was the look of a man who knew how to torture. Dilbert knew fear, like he never knew before.

“I-I’ll t-take you dad,” Dilbert stammered.

“Bad choice,” Wally said coldly. “If I were you, I would have chosen Uncle Ravenswood. I don’t know anyone more faithful to the law than he is. Ravenswood, what would you do to Dilbert?”

“I would prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law,” Ravenswood snarled.

“And what would the punishment be?” Wally asked.

“I’m not feeling rational right not Wally,” Ravenswood said as he watched his wife hug Annie. “I can’t speculate as to how the judge would rule.”

“But it’s only a little cold,” Dilbert objected, and instantly regretted his words.

“Just a little cold, you say?” Wally asked. “Dilbert, Philip and Darien, I want you to step out there and tell me what a little cold feels like. I’ll tell you when to come back in – you will be out for at least 30 seconds.”

Reluctantly the three exited the building. The cold sliced into them like a ravenous wolf. Within seconds their ears became red. The howling wind threatened to blow them away.

Wally slowly counted to thirty. He then waved them in. Shivering, they passed back through the barrier and into the warm interior of the lodge.

“You were out there for only 30 seconds, and yet you have frostbite,” Wally informed them. “Imagine five minutes out there. Okay Philip and Darien, let that be a warning to you not to blindly obey others. You two may leave.”

Looking relieved, the two boys ran away.

“Dilbert, your mother – dear, do you have anything to say?” Wally asked.

“Dilbert, you have brought shame to our family and our country. Your dad and I will decide on your punishment when we return home. In the meantime, you’re under house arrest. Return to your room and don’t leave.”

Dilbert glared at Grundy. “It’s your fault, you stupid cat. Why couldn’t you have opened the door quietly?”

Wally smacked Dilbert up side the side the head. “If Annie had died – causing the death of a royal is a capital offense. If she had died, you would have died as well. Go to your room now,” Wally barked and shoved him. Dilbert ran away, vowing revenge.

The shinobi knelt in front of Wally, bowed his head and touched his heart, indicating he wanted to speak.

“Yes, Shinobi?” Wally asked.

“Do you require this as evidence?” the shinobi asked, indicating the door.

“No Shinobi, you may fix it,” Wally said.

The shinobi disappeared. Seconds later the damage mended itself. It seemed like time itself was reversing as the door and surrounding area reassembled themselves.

Wally turned guiltily to Ravenswood and Marjorie. “I don’t know how to make it up to you two. I truly am sorry.”

“I’m glad you’re doing the punishing,” Ravenswood confided. “I doubt a judge would have done more than slap him on the wrist. If you’ll excuse me, I really need to hug Annie.”

Annie felt her dad shake as he hugged her. She hadn’t realized how upset he was until now. Her dad finally let go and scratched Grundy’s head until he purred. “You have no idea how grateful I am to you, my brave dragon knight.”

“That’s a great idea dear,” Marjorie said. “We can knight him, can’t we?”

Ravenswood thought about it and said, “Yes, saving the life of a royal is sufficient to warrant a knighting.”

“Annie, your pet cat is the most incredible creature I have ever seen,” Coralline marveled.

“He isn’t a cat,” Annie corrected. “He’s a kitty-cat dragon.”

“It’s true,” Marjorie said. “He’s the legendary dragon referred to in the...” She stopped, realizing she was about mention a secret.

“I think the only reason Grundy blew up the door was because he was reacting to Annie’s panic,” Ravenswood mused. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to go sit down. My legs are feeling a little weak.”

They walked to the nearest lounge and Ravenswood and Marjorie sat down on a couch with Annie in between. Wally, Coralline, and Jane sat nearby.

“Where did you find Grundy,” Wally asked.

“Annie found him and captured him,” Ravenswood said. “I don’t know where he came from and I don’t want to know. I’m making it a policy that no one inquires about his past.”

Wally nodded. “That’s going to drive people crazy. I know because you’ve piqued my curiosity.”

“Don’t worry,” Ravenswood said. “We’ll be discreet about it.”

“No ask. No tell,” Wally nodded. “His shape-changing ability, as well as his ability to hurl fireballs is going to raise some questions. Look at the time. We have less than twenty minutes to eat lunch.”

Everyone got up and headed for the cafeteria. People were already gossiping about Annie and her cat.

“He’s not a cat,” Annie said angrily.

“Let everyone think that Annie,” Ravenswood advised. “It’s for the best. In fact I think we should make everyone who doesn’t need to know forget the incident. I don’t want any unnecessary attention directed at Grundy.”

“Shinobi, carry out that order,” Wally commanded.

A shinobi appeared kneeling in front of Wally. He bowed and disappeared.

“Will Dilbert remember?” Jane asked.

“Yes Jane,” Wally said. “He needs to know since he’s going to be punished. The other boys don’t need to know since they are incidental. Only we six people and Dilbert will know.”

“And Grundy,” Annie said.

“Yes dear,” Caroline smiled. “And Grundy.”

That was the end of the idea of knighting Grundy.

The adults had a hurried meal and finished eating with three minutes to spare.

“Annie, we have to go now,” Marjorie said. “Please stay with Jane until we get back.”

“Why are you so upset?” Annie asked. “Nothing happened to me. Grundy will always keep me safe.”

“Annie,” Wally said gently. “It’s not possible for you to understand what you’re parents are feeling now, not until you have children of your own – or if Grundy is in danger.” With that, he and Coralline headed for the meeting.

With a last-second hug, Ravenswood and Marjorie headed for the meeting as well.

“So Annie, what do you want to do?” Jane asked.

“I want to see the pretty lights outside,” Annie replied.

“Sorry Annie, but there’s no way mum and dad will allow you to go outside – not today anyway,” Jane said.

“May I suggest the roof, Highness?” a waiter who was clearing the table suggested.

“You just take the elevators just outside the main atrium. The roof is spelled to keep you warm,” the man continued.

“Thank-you,” Annie said. “Let’s go Jane.”

They followed the instructions and found themselves on the roof. As promised, the area was warm. People milled about and gossiped. Above them, the aurora lit up the semi-dark landscape.

Annie looked at the streams of energy shooting out of the ground. For some reason, Annie could barely see it while inside. Outside, the energy was incredible.

“The world is so pretty,” Annie marveled, awed by the spectacle surrounding her. “I don’t understand why none of my friends want to become wizards.”

“Because magic is too much trouble,” a cousin whose name Annie didn’t remember said. “Why bother with such things when we are guaranteed an easy life. Besides, you don’t need to be a wizard to enjoy the world. You just need money.”

“Being rich or being a princess isn’t important,” Annie declared, scandalizing everyone in the area. “The only important thing is magic, and someone to share that magic with.”

‘Grundy, please get me the book, ‘Life Lessons for the Wizard in You’. Annie asked and walked away to a quiet area to sit. Jane followed.

Annie extended her hand and the book appeared in it. She opened it up and read. She had identified at least five life lessons she was certain she had mastered. If that was true, then she would become a level-five wizard within days of taking the initiation.

The first eight or so life lessons were easy. Most people could achieve them by the time they became teenagers, just by virtue of being alive and living within society. Those lessons conferred the ability to operate reasonably well in society and put us on the path to emotional maturity.

Achieving rookie status took work, but most people who took the wizard’s initiation achieved that by the time they reached the age of twenty – unless they were thick-headed or Dilberts.

Of course, the more advanced lessons took decades or centuries to master. That was in the future of Annie, and she wasn’t in a rush.

“How did you do that, Annie?” Jane asked, surprised. “When did you learn to do magic?”

“That wasn’t me,” Annie replied. “That was Grundy. I guess I should have asked you to do that. Sorry.”

“I can’t do that, Annie,” Jane confessed. “You need to be a rookie wizard to do that – which I guess Grundy is.” *And Mark. Why do I always think of Mark?*

Jane wondered about her feeling for Mark. He was an incredible person, but she had no interest in him, romantically. He was almost like a baby brother to her.

Jane considered looking for someone for him. Although royals were off limits, nobles weren’t. A commoner had the legal right to marry a noble. This happened more often than people realized. That was how commoners slowly moved up in status and how the royals and nobles gained power and prestige.

Jane watched the guests socializing as she sat with Annie. Servants walked around, ready to serve the elite of the world.

“Sis, instead of wasting your time here, why don’t you train?” Annie asked.

“You sound like Mark,” Jane laughed.

“Mark sounds like a smart guy. You should follow his lead,” Annie said. She then added, giggling, “Maybe even date him.”

Jane took her wand out and trained. Annie looked at her with approval and continued reading.

“Hi Annie,” Wally said and Annie jumped. “What are you reading?”

“It’s called, ‘Life Lessons for the Wizard in You’. The workbook is filled with notes from the previous owner,” Annie said. “According to the previous owner, watching anime is a great substitute for immersive novels.

“However, you must watch the show as if you were the main character and you must try to understand and integrate into yourself the lessons exemplified in the story. Then you must meditate on the story and see how it relates to your own life story. He included a list of shows for each of the life lessons described in the workbook.”

Wally extended his hand and Annie gave him the workbook. He opened the book to the front cover and read the inscription, “To a very special princess, who loves magic just as much as I – there is no name. I wonder who sent it.”

“Powerful magical forces surround Annie,” Ravenswood said. “It could be related to the prophesy. I have decided not to look into things I’m not supposed to. I believe it’s best to wait for destiny to reveal itself.”

Wally nodded and handed the workbook back to Annie.

“Your daughter is certainly mature for a nine year old girl,” Coralline commented. “She’s certainly more mature than my son. Annie, remember that you’re the boss and it’s your job to control Dilbert when the time comes.”

Annie made a sour face but didn’t say anything.

“I don’t think Annie relishes the idea of marrying Dilbert,” Jane said. “Unfortunately magic can’t solve everything.”

“I know Dilbert will mature,” Wally said. “You can be sure I will see to it.”

“Can making him watch those anime shows help?” Coralline asked.

“No,” Annie said emphatically. “It takes conscious effort to learn from ourselves, others, and the world around us.”

“I don’t know about you but I’m hungry,” Marjorie said.

“Can we eat here?” Annie asked, looking up.

“I’m glad Annie appreciates the beauty of Antarctica,” Wally said. He signaled a servant and gave instructions.

Within minutes servants turned a section of the roof into a dining area.

With the sun in the early evening position of the sky, there was plenty of mood lighting for dinner.

Grundy returned Annie’s treasured book back to her room and she took a seat for dinner. Grace was said and evening entertainment began.

“I wish Hanna Cortes was singing,” Annie said.

“Unfortunately Hanna Cortes married into the Draco clan last year,” Wally said. “Dracos are banned from these meetings.”

Annie glanced nervously at Grundy but said nothing.

“I remember now,” Jane exclaimed. “She married the comedian Arthur Lucas. My best friend invited me. He caught the garter – I remember him being with a date, but I don’t remember with whom. Doesn’t matter. I wish you had invited him. He’s the funniest comedian in the universe.”

“You’re right, he is funny,” Wally admitted. “I don’t like Dracos, but I have made an exception for him. I wish I could have invited him, but unfortunately he is our sworn enemy.”

“I saw the wedding on the news,” Coralline said. “Your friend did an incredible job dealing with the press.”

“Where was I?” Annie asked.

“At home, watching it on TV,” Marjorie said. “Where else would you have been?”

Annie just frowned and said nothing. She hated not being able to remember important parts of her life. She couldn’t even remember where her memories were missing, just that there was an emptiness she tried to fill with studying.

Annie stopped eating and cuddled with Grundy. Feeling better, she fed him.

Dinner over, the adults gossiped while the kids ran wild.

“Good grief,” Marjorie said. “It’s way past your bed time.”

“But it’s only 2:00PM,” Annie grumbled.

Wally laughed. “I’m glad Annie can make mistakes too,” Wally said. “Annie, we’re using Greenwich Mean Time since we’re hosting members from across the world. So the time is...”

“10:00PM, I know,” Annie sighed. “Too bad we aren’t using Pacific Standard Time. But I’m not feeling sleepy.”

“You can’t show you’re smarter than my baby using such simple things,” Ravenswood laughed.

“Goodnight mum, dad, Sister Jane, Uncle Wally, Aunty Coralline,” Annie said and gave out hugs and kisses.

Annie entered her room and jumped into bed. Grundy sat on her chest and stared into her eyes.

“I can’t believe you can change into clothes,” Annie exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

‘I didn’t know before,’ Grundy replied. ‘I just wanted to protect you.’

Annie looked at her open closet, filled with clothes. “Come on Grundy, let’s play dress-up.”

Annie got up and undressed. Grundy then jumped onto her shoulder. She rummaged the closet, but couldn’t find anything. “What do you suggest I wear?” Annie asked.

Grundy thought for a moment and focused on a costume he saw before. Within seconds Annie was wearing a tee shirt covered in watermelons, and an apple green skort. She also had shoes covered in grapes. The grapes turned into strawberries moments later.

“You’re amazing Grundy,” Annie said and hugged herself. She could feel Grundy’s presence surrounding her, but other than that, her new clothes felt like normal clothes.

Annie ran out the door and looked for her sister. She was in her room, studying. Annie hesitated, not wanting to disturb Jane.

Excitement overcame reluctance and she asked, “Jane, do you like what I’m wearing?”

Jane looked up and said, “That’s cute,” and continued studying. A moment later, Jane asked, “Where’s Grundy?”

Annie giggled. “I’m wearing him,” she said happily. “Isn’t it cool that he can change into clothes?”

Jane looked at Annie, not sure if it was appropriate to wear a pet as clothes. The only thing Jane could say was, “How does it feel?”

“Why don’t you try him on?” Annie asked.

“No thanks,” Jane said, not wanting to wear living clothes. “I don’t think mum and dad will approve of you wearing Grundy.”

“What’s the big deal?” Annie asked. “It’s not as if I’m wearing a boy.”

*I’m not sure about that*, Jane thought.

“Have fun studying,” Annie waved and left. She wasn’t sleepy so she decided to wander around.

Unfortunately, the others were following the rule that when it’s night, you sleep.

Having nothing better to do, Annie went to the roof and sat down to watch the magnetic south pole shoot its magnetic energy into the sky. The sun was low in the sky, shining its dim light over the barren landscape.

Annie lay down and watched the aurora. Grundy formed a pillow under her head, and reformed into a sweat-suit – comfortable for sleeping in, but also appropriate for public use. Annie drifted to sleep, embraced in a warm hug.

Annie woke up in her room when the lights gradually came on. She got out of bed and brushed her teeth. She then instructed Grundy to change into a summer dress and shoes.

Annie stepped into the common room of the family’s suite and greeted her sister and parents.

“Annie dear, where did you get those clothes you were wearing last night on the terrace, and where is Grundy?” Marjorie asked.

“This is Grundy,” Annie said and patted her chest. “He turned into this.”

Ravenswood looked at Marjorie and asked, “Is that allowed?”

“I don’t know,” Marjorie replied, confused. Wearing pets as clothes was unheard of. “There’s no law saying you can’t.”

“If it’s not forbidden, then it’s allowed,” Ravenswood declared. “It’s time for breakfast. We have plenty of work ahead of us.”

They headed for breakfast, greeting countless people on the way.

“There you are Ravenswood,” Wally called. He and his wife joined the others. “Young lady, you should tell someone when you go upstairs to sleep. Your parents were worried.”

“Sorry mum, dad,” Annie apologized and poured food onto her stomach. The food disappeared on contact.

“Annie, what are you doing?” Marjorie asked sternly.

“I’m feeding Grundy,” Annie explained. “He has to eat, even though he doesn’t have a mouth now.”

“I don’t know about that dear,” Ravenswood said. “Grundy is a creature of pure magic. He doesn’t need food, especially since he’s clothes right now.”

“He truly is a creature of prophesy,” Wally marveled. “We truly are living in interesting times. All the work of our tribes these countless millennium is drawing to a close. Soon we shall see the results of our endeavors. I can’t believe we shall live to see a world devoid of Original Sin. I can’t wait.”

“Remember, we still have to fight the war of Armageddon,” Ravenswood warned. “I have no idea how painful that’s going to be.”

“Why do we have to fight the war of Armageddon?” Annie asked. “Who are we fighting?”

“We shall be fighting the accumulated evil of the world, since the fall of Adam,” Coralline replied. “We don’t know how that evil will manifest, but we do know that it will manifest by the time you turn sixteen. We have seven years to prepare.”

“Already there is unrest in the world, just below the surface,” Marjorie added.

“By unanimous agreement, our stay will be extended by a day to deal with the situation,” Wally said. “Jane, you and the others will return home so you can go to school. It is essential you get excellent grades. The world is relying on you and your generation to help make a better world, which is free of sin and evil.”

“How about me?” Annie asked.

“You’re too young to go to wizard school,” Wally said. “It’s too bad. You have so much potential.”

“Why do I have to wait to turn sixteen before taking the initiation? Who made that stupid rule?” Annie complained.

“We don’t really know,” Ravenswood mused.

“We just know that the supreme masters who administrate the initiation strictly enforce it,” Wally said.

“We have plenty of supreme masters, don’t we?” Annie asked. “Can’t we change that law?”

“For reasons we don’t understand, none of our clans have had a supreme master in our ranks in over 900 years. The Draco clan produce a disproportionate number of supreme masters, and so they always officiate in the initiation ceremony. They are very strict about the age limit,” Wally said.

“Even then, the supreme masters we produced were few and far between,” Marjorie admitted.

“Isn’t the Grand Poo-bah a supreme master?” Jane asked. “He is 1300 years old, isn’t he?”

“He’ll be celebrating his 1352nd birthday in two weeks,” Coralline said proudly. “He is an exalted grandmaster with a level of 92 – the current highest we have.”

“Mark’s parents ascended at the young age of 435. Why is that?” Jane asked and instantly regretted her words.

The adults grimaced. They obviously didn’t like to hear about such things. “We can’t tell why one person makes it and why another, who is obviously more fit, doesn’t,” Ravenswood said.

“Our Grand Poo-bah is here because he wants to be,” Coralline argued. “That’s how great and generous a heart he is.”

Annie just frowned and finished eating. It was obvious to anyone with half a brain that the Draco clan knew something that the hidden tribes didn’t know, or refused to acknowledge.

Somehow the hidden tribes were fundamentally wrong, but refused to admit it. Going all the way to 1352 and not ascending was ridiculous. Even if the Grand Poo-bah wanted to stay, becoming a Supreme Master still was a worthy goal.

However, Annie was learning a fundamental life lesson. Sometimes it’s wisest to keep your mouth shut.

Annie needed to talk to that Mark boy and find the truth for herself. Seconds later, she forgot about her wish to meet Mark, but her desire to meet a Draco remained.

Annie then remembered a business acquaintance of her father’s who was a Draco – a Mr. Adam.

A thought entered Annie’s head. What happened to people who were high-level wizards, but who never ascended? They probably retired to an old folks’ home and spent the rest of eternity picking their noses and reminiscing about the good old days. That thought made Annie giggle.

“What’s so funny?” Marjorie asked.

“Nothing,” Annie replied. “Just thinking about a private joke.”

“It’s best we get going,” Ravenswood advised. “It may be boring but we have no choice.”

The grownups left the room, leaving Annie with her sister. “Come on Sister Jane, let’s go practice magic,” Annie said and dragged Jane to the terrace. Annie quizzed Jane and asked her to cast various spells. For the spell casting part, Annie practiced as well, but with a toy wand.

Lunch time approached and Jane realized that her grades were excellent in no small part to Annie’s help.

On impulse, Jane suggested, “Annie, it’s almost lunch time. Let’s go to our room. You need to change into normal clothes, so Grundy can eat normally.”

“Okay sister Jane,” Annie agreed and followed her sister.

“How come you’re so obsessed with magic?” Jane asked as walked.

Annie just shrugged, not knowing the answer.

Jane shook her head. She felt Annie’s obsession wasn’t natural and that the answer was right there in front of her, if only she could grasp it. She wanted to share with her parents, but had no idea what to say. As a result, she said nothing, but just brooded.

They returned to the terrace with Grundy perched no Annie’s shoulder.

Jane saw her parents coming and waved to them.

“Hi kids, what were you doing?” Marjorie asked.

“Studying,” Annie answered. “Sister Jane is starting to get good at magic.”

“Don’t study too hard or your brain will explode,” Wally warned.

Annie frowned. “Why does everyone think I study too much?”

“Because you do, sweetie,” Wally said. “It’s not natural. Kids your age should be playing and driving your parents crazy. But I suppose you have no choice, being a child of prophesy.”

They ate lunch in silence as a kaleidoscope of colors kept them entertained.

“I have an idea,” Wally said. He whistled and his personal wizard appeared. “Grandmaster Gildor, please arrange a tour of the Inner World for the children. I don’t want them getting bored.”

“As you wish, Majesty,” Gildor said. He cleared his throat and spoke, resonating his voice throughout the lodge. “Greetings, Brothers and Sisters of the Illuminati. Brother Wally of Switzerland has suggested I give a tour for your children of the Inner World. Please bring your children to the statue of the Grand Poo-bah on the terrace. I would like to start the tour in half an hour.”

Gildor closed his eyes for a second and summoned his ride. A yellow road appeared in the sky. It formed somewhere below the edge of the terrace and snaked up into the sky. It then spiraled downwards towards the oversized statue of the Grand Poo-bah.

A tour bus with black and white tiger stripes drove on the newly formed road.

The bus stopped in front of the statue and the road dissolved in the reverse order it formed, starting below the terrace. As it disappeared, the road left sparkling dust in its wake. The dust sprinkled downwards and disappeared.

Annie admitted that it was kind of cool, how it moved. However, it couldn’t compare to her ride at home. Annie suddenly felt homesick.

People trickled towards the bus as the families finished their meals. Annie and Jane got on the bus and climbed to the terrace. Jane took the aisle seat and Annie took the seat with the view.

Annie counted the number of rows and discovered it was 23. She counted again, and this time the number was 32. ‘Grundy,’ Annie said. ‘Is it my imagination, or is this bus getting longer?’

‘I don’t know,’ Grundy said. ‘Let’s count...Yes, it’s getting longer.’

“There’s space for everyone,” Grandmaster Gildor called out. “No need for crowding. Everyone can have their own seat.”

“Sister Jane, why don’t you take the next seat over? You’ll have a better view,” Annie suggested.

“I’m fine sitting with you,” Jane said. She had no interest in the tour, but had come just to keep Annie company.

“Okay everyone, sit back, for now we shall begin the tour,” Gildor announced. Annie glanced to the front and saw a road forming. The road spiraled around the statue and up into the sky. Seconds later, they were on their way.

Annie ran to the back of the bus and saw the road dissolving behind them. Annie then joined her sister as the bus sped away from the lodge.

“Come on, Sister Jane, let’s go to the front of the bus,” Annie urged and almost dragged Jane. The front was the best.

Gildor stood nearby and started his tour. “The Inner World is something most people don’t know exists. It was created as a template for a better world. However it has taken on a character of its own.”

Annie saw a black circle far off in the distance. The circle resolved itself into a shaft at least a mile in diameter. They approached and the road plunged downwards into the abyss.

“Don’t be afraid,” the tour guide said. “We are safe on the bus, and no one will get motion sickness. This shaft is exactly one nautical mile in diameter and five hundred miles deep.”

They followed the road into the shaft, and within seconds, down became forward. They were in what felt like a horizontal tunnel. Behind the bus the entrance slowly diminished.

“We shall accelerate, since this part is long and boring. We will arrive in the inner world in ten minutes.”

At first, the tunnel became dark. This darkness was then replaced by a glow that radiated from the walls.

Forward, or was it downwards, they went.

“This is why I like magic,” Annie affirmed. “Because the world is so beautiful. Do you think muggles could have these experiences?”

“You’re right,” Jane admitted. “Magic is cool.”

Annie stared forward, mesmerized by the speeding tunnel. She blinked and discovered herself outside. Ahead of them was the sun.

Feeling disoriented, Annie looked back at the opening of the tunnel.

Just then the road curved, placing the sun above them. Below them was a jungle. Beyond the sun was an ocean. To the right were mountains, as viewed from miles up. Annie tried to understand her surroundings.

A moment later, it all made sense. The inner world was a spherical hole in the mantle. The inner surface was covered with mountains, rivers, oceans and deserts. The center was the sun. The only question was, how big was the inner world?

“Welcome to the Inner World,” Gildor said. “It contains all the habitats of the Earth – jungles, deserts, oceans, tundra, and mountains. Since this is the inner world, sunrises and sunsets are impossible. Instead, the sun brightens and dims on a 24-hour cycle.

“The odd thing about this world is that it is bigger than the Earth. No one knows why that came about. Some speculate it is in another dimension, which is why muggles can’t see it.”

The bus approached an ancient city, filled with stone buildings and temples. People thronged the streets, going about their business.

“Millions of people call the Inner World home,” Grandmaster Gildor said. “By the way, washrooms are downstairs for those who need them.”

The tour continued with visits to other cities. However, they didn’t stop since there was no official contact between the inner and outer worlds and both the bus and road were invisible to the residents below.

“What’s going on over there?” a kid Annie didn’t quite remember asked.

A new road branched off the existing road in the sky and the bus drove down that road. No longer needed, the abandoned road dissolved.

What drew the boy’s attention was a festival.

“Okay everyone, I’m going to disguise you as local residents. Keep in mind their culture is very different than ours, so try not to talk to anyone,” Gildor warned. “I’m not sure what they’re celebrating. As you get off, you will be assigned an assistant. For your safety, please stay next to them. They will buy snacks and any trinkets you want. Your parents will be billed later.”

Annie and Jane got off the bus. They and three other girls were assigned to a middle-aged woman.

“Okay kids, let’s go,” the woman said. “By the way, my name is Margaret.”

They entered a street bustling with people. Each person was garishly dressed in all the colors of the rainbow. Some seemed to have invented new colors.

They passed a clothes stand and the kids tried on dresses. Annie stepped out of a changing booth with Grundy on her shoulder. The dress Annie wore was an effervescent pink that seemed to bubble and sparkle as she moved. The dress came with shoes and hair accessories.

“Sister Jane, what do you think?” Annie asked excitedly. She spun around, making the dress spray bubbles everywhere. The released bubbles popped, sprinkling diamond dust into the wind.

Jane had no words to describe the dress. “It’s beautiful,” was the only words she could say. Annie shoved a dress into Jane’s hand before she could say anything more and marched her to the changing room.

Minutes later, Jane emerged. Annie stared at her sister in wide-eyed wonder. “Wow, Sister Jane, you’re beautiful. We have to get these dresses.”

The other three girls bought dresses as well and met up with Margaret. Margaret then went to the store owner and negotiated the prices for the dresses. After much haggling, Margaret returned, not too happy.

“Those dresses cost a fortune. I had to get extra money from Gildor. Your parents are not going to be pleased,” she said. “Never mind. It’s worth the looks on your faces. Let’s get something to eat.”

The food was beautiful and colorful, like everything in the parade. Annie chose a snack that looked like a pink teddy-bear. It tasted like lychee and custard-apple.

A man with a creepy aura approached and said, “Ladies, I see you’re high-class people who know the value of fine things. Please come with me and I’ll show you some things you’ll not find anywhere.” With that, he looked around to make sure no one was watching.

He then came closer and whispered, “I even have items said to come from the Inner World.”

One of Annie’s companions, Barbara, asked, “I thought this was the inner world. Do you mean the outer world?”

That confused the weird man. “Inner World – Outer World,” he stammered. Quickly recovering, he said, “Oh I see, you’re making a joke. Never mind that, just see this merchandise.”

He opened his jacket and displayed his merchandise. He proceeded to quote prices. Margaret and the girls were hooked.

‘Grundy, what do you think of him?’ Annie asked.

‘I don’t like him. He stinks,’ Grundy replied.

‘Are we in danger?’ Annie asked worriedly.

‘I don’t think so. He’s not a wizard.’

The group followed a complete stranger down several alleys and finally into a deserted back alley. This area was rundown and downright seedy.

‘I’m scared, Grundy,’ Annie mumbled and hugger her pet to her chest.

Just then a dozen thugs stepped into the ally. Margaret was disarmed before she could act and thugs placed magic handcuffs, blocking any possible use of magic by anyone less than a master.

After being physically restrained, Margaret looked in horror at what had befallen her charges.

A gorilla of a man stepped up to them and hollered, “You did good Lennie. I can’t believe it. You nabbed five princesses from the Inner World.”

“Boss, something is happening to that white creature in the little princesses’ hands,” a scrawny man with the scent of blood said nervously. “It’s turning red and scary.”

An overweight wizard approached Jane. He wore wealthy clothes, but he reeked of booze, and was filthy on the inside. He scratched his jowls and licked his lips. “Damn, these princesses are sexy as hell.”

“Too bad these other girls are still babies,” a man with a missing eye and a scar across his face said. He then added, “Just joking ladies. We’ll play with you as well.”

In the meantime, Grundy was paralyzed, unable to decide what to do. It’s not easy making decisions when you only have 27% of your soul with you. Fury built up in Grundy’s body, waiting for a release.

Realizing what was about to happen, a man with a scar across his face closed his eyes and begged, “We shouldn’t be doing this. Bad things will happen.”

The stinky wizard ignored him. Instead he stared lustfully at Jane and cast a spell. Immediately Jane’s clothes were stripped from her. The undamaged clothes landed in a neat pile ten feet away.

The criminals stared at Jane with open-eyed lust. Jane cringed and tried to protect her modesty as best as she could.

That was the last straw. Grundy threw rationality out the window and let instinct take over.

Grundy shot out of Annie’s hands and spiraled upwards. As he did so, he grew larger and changed into a red Chinese dragon with gold highlights. With a head five feet in diameter and a body stretching over sixty feet long, Grundy zoomed around the group. Fire gushed out of every pore of his body, like rivers of sweat.

“Pitiful Humans, you have done what is forbidden. Prepare for your punishment,” Grundy roared in a voice filled with the pride of dragons.

It was now the thug’s turn to be terrified. The scrawny man wet himself and the fat wizard fainted. Several tried to escape but Grundy’s body blocked the way. The man with closed eyes continued covering his eyes.

“I’m burning,” a man with a claw hand screamed as he lost hair.

At that comment, Grundy hesitated a moment. He didn’t want the ladies to see a gruesome sight. He picked up the criminals and zoomed into the distance, leaving the girls alone.

The handcuffs on Margaret’s wrists fell away. She summoned her wand and helped Jane dress.

In the meantime Grundy flew to an isolated location with his victims. While flying, he tried to decide how he should torture the bastards for hurting his master’s sister.

The men screamed in pain as they slowly roasted.

As Grundy flew, he thought of Annie and their bond. He touched the ring around his neck – the eternal bond between master and pet. Anger ebbed and the fire died.

He realized for the first time that he really loved his master, and wished to be with her forever. The bond he had with Annie freed him from anger.

Grundy placed the men gently on the ground and cast a healing spell. He encircled then and spoke in a commanding voice, “It is time for judgment.”

“Please spare us,” an old man said. “You healed our injuries. Why kill us now?” He groveled on the floor. The others followed.

Grundy continued circling and said nothing for half a minute. He then said, “I will not judge you, but the Law will. It will take into consideration your entire life, what is in your heart, and things I have no understanding of. I give you one minute to prepare for judgment.”

Time ticked as both Chinese dragon and fugitives waited. Finally Grundy spoke.

I call upon the Ancient Laws,   
The Laws that bind and the Laws that release.  
Come forth now, Messengers of Eternity.  
Judge the actions of the living and the deceased.

May the fruit of all that we seek,   
come forth to judge us   
**NOW**!

The air grew still. Above, shadows appeared and zoomed towards the men. In appearance the apparitions looked like grim reapers, waiting to devour unsuspecting souls. A chill crept into the air and additional phantoms joined.

The phantoms poked and prodded the men, but passed through Grundy without being aware of his existence.

One by one, the grim reapers touched the terrified men. From out of their bodies, shadows were drawn. Each of the reapers spoke to the shadows and commanded, “Pass judgment.”

One by one the shadows said, “Guilty. Punishment. Death.”

The shadow of the man who hid his face said, “Guilty. Leniency. Repentance.”

The shadows of the men were returned to their rightful owners. The grim reaper assigned to the repentant man disappeared, but the others stayed.

*‘Judgment. Judgment. Judgment,’* the phantoms called.

*‘Judgment,’* the grim reapers replied.

The reapers embraced the condemned and sucked them physically into the ground. The only thing remaining of the men was a slight disturbance of the ground.

The spectator phantoms disappeared, along with all tension in the air. A cool breeze blew, wiping the brow of the sole survivor.

Grundy stopped in front of the weeping man and said, “Your life has been spared. Dedicate your life to magic and to learning the higher ways of God. Only that is the path to true happiness.”

The man nodded, unable to speak.

Grundy zoomed back to his master, changing back into a kitty-cat dragon along the way.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

The gang was back on the bus with people surrounding Annie’s group. Grundy landed on Annie’s shoulder. Annie picked him up and hugged him. ‘I missed you Grundy,’ Annie said.

Grundy shot his tail outwards. It grew and wrapped around Jane’s neck.

‘Can you hear me?’ Grundy asked.

Jane nodded.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you,’ Grundy said sadly. ‘*Everything* was so confusing. I didn’t know what to do.’

“Thank you for protecting all of us. You are most definitely part of the family,” Jane assured and scratched Grundy behind the ears. Grundy purred.

“Okay everyone. It’s time to return,” Gildor called. “Please take your seats.”

The familiar road formed and the bus drove away. Upwards they zoomed into to sky. The road then plunged downwards and into the mile-wide hole.

“Don’t be worried Annie, Grundy,” Jane said. “I’m fine. Look on the bright side. We did bring back two very pretty dresses. And we discovered that Grundy can turn into a Chinese Dragon.”

Jane paused a moment and then added, “We even discovered you can talk. Say something Grundy.”

Grundy opened his mouth and mewed.

Jane laughed. “Well I suppose that’s what kitty-cat dragons sound like.”

Jane leaned back on her seat and watched them zoom through the center of a never-ending tunnel.

Jane wanted to know what happened to the criminals, but was afraid to ask. She knew Grundy would do anything in his power to protect both her and Annie. However, that didn’t change the fact that Grundy was something beyond her imagination, and that scared her.

Lost in her imaginations, Jane barely noticed them emerging from the tunnel. Within moments, they approached the lodge.

As always, the sun was pretty much in the same location in the sky. It was impossible to tell time in the South Pole. Checking her watch, Jane realized that it was 5:40PM, Greenwich Mean Time. That meant her mum and dad had finished their duties for the day and were getting ready for dinner.

Annie and Jane stepped off the bus and their worried parents greeted them.

“Jane, are you all right?” Marjorie asked worriedly. “Grandmaster Gildor told us what those perverted men did to you.”

Both parents looked at Grundy. Feeling obligated to answer, Grundy spiraled out of Annie’s hands and into the sky. As he moved, he elongated and changed color. Fully transformed into a Chinese dragon, Grundy positioned his head five feet in front of the royal family.

Grundy looked at the parents with sad eyes. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect Sister Jane. I knew they were bad guys, but I didn’t expect them to do what they did to her. I just expected them to try to steal some money and leave.”

“It’s okay dear,” Marjorie sympathized. “You did well, based on what Mrs. Margaret said. You couldn’t have acted any sooner, since you didn’t know their intensions.”

“Acting before the right time would be taking the law in your own hands, which is never a good thing,” Ravenswood assured. “What exactly did you do to the men?”

Grundy thought for a moment and began, “The bad guy’s actions were starting to drive me crazy, but I didn’t know what to do. I lost control when the fat wizard attacked Sister Jane. You have no idea how much I wanted to punish them.”

“Trust me son, I do,” Ravenswood nodded. “Remember, I’m Jane and Annie’s father. Continue with the story.”

“I decided to punish them with a little heat. I may have overdone that,” Grundy said sheepishly. “Realizing Annie shouldn’t be watching such things, I left with the criminals.”

Grundy touched his collar. Ravenswood noticed writing on the ring for the first time. It was the same writing as was on the obelisk back at home. The line in the center of the ring he assumed was decoration was in fact text. If only he knew what it said. That was a problem for another time.

“While flying, I remembered my bond I shared with my very own princess. I then realized just how privileged I was to have Annie as my princess,” Grundy continued. He glanced fondly at Annie before continuing. “All my hatred and anger disappeared. I knew then that punishing them would only taint my relationship with my master.

“I gently placed them down and healed their injuries.”

Ravenswood frowned. “Spying on a princess naked is a capital offense. Your kindness wasn’t warranted, since they are going to be punished.”

“You’re right,” Gundry agreed. “I called on the Ancient Law to judge them.” He explained the entire judgment, including how one man was spared.

“That’s strange,” Ravenswood exclaimed. “I was taught only the ruling monarch, or the divinely chosen successor could call forth divine judgment. Grandmaster Rachael, can you please look into it? On second thought, never mind.”

Noting Grundy’s worried face, Ravenswood asked, “Are you okay Grundy? You look worried.”

Grundy nodded. “What will happen to me if I turn into a human boy? I don’t want to die. I don’t want to make Annie cry.”

“I don’t know son,” Ravenswood sighed. “The Law terrifies me. I remember the first time I was forced to call on Divine Law. I couldn’t sleep for a week after that. That’s why I always obey the Law.”

“What’s so scary about Divine Law?” Jane asked.

“Divine Law judges all who have partaken of the forbidden fruit, not just the criminals,” Wally replied from behind Annie, frightening Annie. She didn’t know that he was there until he spoke.

“It is essential that the ruling class be virtuous and obeys all laws, or they too will be punished. Being without original sin, Grundy wasn’t judged. In fact, Grundy only saw a tiny fraction of what happened, just enough to allow him to fulfill his role as a witness.”

“I don’t know what will happen to Grundy, but I don’t want to take a change,” Ravenswood said. “Grandmaster Rachael, please use a binding spell on Grundy to prevent him from ever turning into a human male.”

Rachael bowed. “As you wish, Majesty. Please give me a few days to prepare the spell. I don’t want to make a mistake. Grundy, do you cast any spell to change?”

“No Grandmaster Rachael,” Grundy replied. “I just do it.”

“Forbid spells work best when someone has actually done something before and you want to prevent them from doing it again. This is not an option now, but we could have a work-around,” Rachael explained.

“Grandmaster Gildor, do you think we would have enough information for the spell if Grundy transforms into a human girl?”

“Yes, that should work,” Gildor replied.

“Grundy, choose a girl you know and change into her,” Rachael commanded. “Once you do that, I will lock your three forms, so you can’t get new forms until my spell is complete.”

“Wait a minute,” Marjorie said hastily. “He can’t transform here. He’ll be naked, or be clothed in clothes made from his own flesh.”

“You’re right, Majesty,” Rachael agreed and bowed. “Grundy, change back into your white form. The next step requires a private room where only women are allowed.”

“We’ll wait here,” Ravenswood said.

Grundy spiraled upwards and then down. He then landed on Annie’s shoulder in his white form.

Rachael, Marjorie, Jane and Annie headed for the Washington suites. They entered Annie and Jane’s room and Rachael said, “Okay Grundy, transform into the girl in your mind.”

Into Grundy’s mind popped the image of a girl Annie’s age. Her name was Carol Fortes.

Putting thought to words, Grundy zoomed upwards and then spiraled down. His body elongated and transformed. Moments later, a carbon-copy of nine-year-old Carol Fortes appeared.

She stood naked in front of Marjorie, Annie, Jane and the female grandmaster. “You’re my size,” Annie noted and opened a draw. She grabbed clothes and dumped them on the bed.

“Grundy, what’s the name of the girl you’re imitating?” Marjorie asked.

“Carol Fortes,” Grundy replied in a voice identical to the original Carol. Carol #2 looked in the mirror and found that the eyes were the same as before.

The mother nodded. “From now on, whenever you wear this form, you shall be known as Carol Fortes, Annie’s best friend.”

“Okay,” the new Carol said and looked at her hand. She wiggled her fingers and said, “I am Carol Fortes.”

“Here Carol,” Annie said. “Put this on.” Annie handed Carol some underwear.

Carol tried to step into it, but tipped over and fell. She finally put it on, only to be scolded by Annie. “You put it backwards silly. The tiny ribbon goes in front and the picture of the dragon goes in back,” Annie explained.

Frowning, Carol did as instructed. She got up and Annie dressed her.

Fully dressed, the group returned to greet the others. Upon arriving, Rachael said. “This is Carol Fortes. I have locked her into seven forms. She can turn into kitty-cat dragon, Chinese dragon, winter clothes, summer clothes, sweat-suit, summer dress, and of course this form. Majesty, I can still work on the more generic constraint. However, it is much safer for me to just add forms as the need arises.”

“Isn’t it cool daddy?” Annie said excitedly. “I now have a best friend my own age to do girl stuff with.”

“That’s fine, Grandmaster Rachael. There’s no need to take chances,” Ravenswood assured.

“Carol, do you feel awkward in your new body?” Wally asked.

“Why would I feel awkward?” Carol asked. “This is just another form, like the winter and summer clothes and the Chinese and kitty-cat dragon forms. But I do have to remember the rules about clothes.”

Wally nodded. “Physical appearance is meaningless to you, since you’re a shape-shifter. You’ll soon find out that in this society, being a woman is very different than being a man. Come on everyone, let’s go eat. I’m starving. Discussing the fate of the human race can build up quite an appetite.”

They entered the dining area and Grundy sat beside Annie. The meal went uneventfully as singers entertained the guests.

“I wonder how our entertainers and staff would react if they knew we are currently at the South Pole. They think we are in Alaska,” Wally commented. “It’s kind of sad. They are witnessing history in the making, and yet, they have no clue as to what is in front of them.”

Carol lifted her hand and the salt floated towards Annie. Annie grabbed it and used it without saying a word.

“Grundy – I mean Carol, children your age can’t do magic,” Marjorie scolded.

“Sorry mummy,” Carol and Annie said sheepishly.

Marjorie paused at the reply and turned to Ravenswood. “Dear, how do we explain Carol’s existence? She isn’t human and doesn’t really understand our ways.”

“She is the daughter of a business colleague. Her parents died on a secret mission for the state,” Ravenswood said loud enough so that everyone could hear. “We are raising her as our own, out of a sense of responsibility.”

“Does that mean that I now have a new sister?” Jane asked.

“I suppose it does,” Marjorie replied.

On impulse, Carol waved and said, “Hi mum, hi dad, hi Sister Jane, hi Sister Annie.” Carol then hugged Annie like a baby sister would hug a big sister.

“Hi baby sister,” Annie said and hugged back. “I always wanted to be a big sister.”

“Which is better?” Wally asked again.

“This is better,” Carol replied. “I feel closer to Annie.”

“Wally, you know that line on Grun...Carol’s collar? It’s text. We need to decipher it. Also, Annie should also have it on her ring,” Ravenswood said excitedly. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be talking business now,” he hastily added. Business hours ended.

Meal finished, Annie said, “Come on Carol, let’s study magic.”

“Sister Jane wants to come as well,” Carol said. “She’s feeling lonely.”

Annie turned to Jane and said, “I’m sorry Sister Jane. I didn’t want you to feel left out. All three of us can study magic.”

“It’s bed time children,” Marjorie said.

“But it’s only 1:37PM,” Annie grumbled. “Tomorrow we will be back in Washington, so we don’t need to worry about Greenwich Mean Time.”

“She’s got you there dear,” Ravenswood chuckled. “Only we’ll be staying.”

“Good night mum and dad,” Jane and Annie said. They gave their parents hugs and kisses and ran to a deserted corner of the roof.

They spent the next several hours studying, until Jane declared she had to go to the washroom.

“Do you have to go to the washroom?” Annie asked. “Isn’t that so boring?”

Jane sighed. “I suppose I could try the spell Mark developed. Don’t expect anything. It took him almost two semesters to perfect it.”

Jane closed her eyes, brought out her wand and focused her attention on her bladder as per instructions. She then focused on the nearest washroom as reported by her book of knowledge. Finally, she cast the spell, which was a variation of the teleportation and purification spells. Within seconds, it was done.

Jane opened her eyes in surprise. It was easier than she had expected. Why had she balked for so long? She knew the answer. It wasn’t lady-like to cast such spells. No. That wasn’t true. It was habit that stopped her before.

Annie clapped and said, “I knew you could do it. Now you are a true princess.”

They continued studying to 10:00 PM PST, then headed for bed. Back in their room, Carol switched back to Grundy and cuddled in Annie’s arms as Annie went to sleep.

The next day, Annie found herself back in her bed at home. Grundy was asleep next to her head.

Annie got up and changed for Monday school. That done, Grundy took his usual place on Annie’s shoulder. Grundy was most comfortable in kitty-cat form – there was no need to interact with anyone other than Annie.

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Jane entered the dining-room and saw Annie and Grundy in their usual roles.

“Good morning Annie,” Jane greeted. “Did you sleep well yesterday?”

Annie nodded. “The trip was fun.” She didn’t say more.

The standard spell of silence prevented her from speaking about what happened at the lodge in front of those who had no need to know about the inner workings of the world.

Jane focused on eating her meal. She had a lot of things on her mind. It was obvious that the Illuminati weren’t as wise as they claimed to be. The Grand Poo-bah was a perfect example. His status as an exalted grandmaster was a surprise.

Finishing her meal, Jane hugged Annie and headed for school. While at school, Jane focused more on world events than on the teacher.

School finally ended and she headed for the student council. After a quick search, she found Mark. He was advising lagging students.

“Hi Jane,” Mark called, focusing his familiar green eyes on her.

There was no question. Jane did love him. He was a baby brother she never knew.

“Mark, I need to talk to you about things in private,” Jane blurted out.

“Sure thing,” Mark said. “Meet me at the shack in the swamps. We won’t be disturbed since no one comes there.”

Jane nodded. She did her council duties.

Quitting time came and Mark met Jane in the hall.

“I’m starving,” Mark announced. “Let’s go eat something.”

“I know a nice restaurant,” Jane said.

“No thanks,” Mark replied. “High-class restaurants are boring. They are all about appearance and have no substance. Have you ever been to an all-you-can-eat place?”

“No,” Jane admitted as they left the building.

“What do you want? Chinese, Indian, Thai, Italian, or Pizza?” Mark asked as they headed for the waiting limo.

“How about Indian?” Jane asked and stepped in the limo.

“James, please take us to the ‘*Flavor of India*’,” Mark said and followed Jane in.

“Very good, Master Draco,” James said and they drove off.

Mark looked around the limo and was gripped by a sense of emptiness and loneness. He shivered as tears flowed down his face. He sucked his thumb like a baby.

“Are you okay Mark?” Jane asked worriedly.

“I feel so cold and empty – something is missing,” Mark cried, staring at Annie’s empty seat. “Please stop the car.”

“Shouldn’t we take you to the hospital?” Jane asked worriedly.

“No,” Mark whimpered. “Just stop the car.”

The limo stopped and Mark got out. “See you at the restaurant,” he said and took off.

The door closed itself and the limo drove away. Jane looked out of the window and found Mark running besides the limo. He was easily keeping up. He only stopped at red lights and waited impatiently for the lights to change.

Jane couldn’t understand what happened. She stared at Annie’s empty seat. Why was Mark so freaked out about an empty seat? Was he missing Annie? Impossible. They never met. That was yet another jigsaw puzzle piece to take care of.

The limo stopped at the restaurant entrance. Jane stepped out and the limo pulled away.

Mark stood at the door, waiting impatiently for Jane.

They entered and the waiting staff greeted Mark like he was family.

“Greetings Princess Jane,” the head waiter bowed. “Welcome to our humble abode. I’m sorry we can’t give you a special seat. We never served royalty before.”

Mark took off to the buffet line the moment they arrived at their chairs.

Jane followed the head waiter to the buffet line and asked, “You know Mark?”

“Of course, Highness,” the waiter said and pulled out a plate. “He’s a regular. He comes at least 2-3 times a week. Something has upset him. He will be fine when he eats.”

After an excessive amount of fussing, Jane returned to the table with more food than she knew what to do with. Mark was there, stuffing his face.

“This restaurant serves the best green curry in the region, and their mango ice cream is the best,” Mark said, as he literally swallowed the food. “I tell everyone that.”

Mark got up and headed for the buffet line.

“Do you ever worry that he eats too much?” Jane asked the waiter.

“No, Highness,” the waiter replied. “The restaurant is designed to take into consideration people with big appetites. Also, Mark is a big tipper. Would you care to drink anything?”

Mark returned with a full plate. He sat down and asked, “Does it ever bother you to be fussed about all the time? I don’t think Dracos make for very good subjects. We don’t respect titles.”

“I’m used to being fussed over. That’s one of my duties,” Jane shrugged. “Although I admit I like being treated like an equal.”

“I’ll take that if you’re not eating it,” Mark said and grabbed stuff from Jane’s plate.

“Mark, I have bad news for you,” Jane warned. “Now that you’ve been seen eating with a princess, as well as stealing food from her plate, your social status had risen.”

“Nonsense,” Mark replied. “People aren’t that superficial. Leave the plate and go get some more food. You don’t want to insult this restaurant by not eating, do you?”

Jane was about to say she didn’t want to waste food. However, with Mark around, that wasn’t a possibility. She got up and did as instructed.

Finally desert time arrived and as usual, Mark ate three times more desert than Jane.

Mark paid and then left a generous tip. “Come on Jane, it’s time to go to the shack.”

They stepped out of the restaurant and the limo pulled up. Mark glanced at the limo and saw the same emptiness as before. “Jane, James knows where the shack is. See you later,” Mark said and ran off.

Jane looked worriedly at the receding figure of Mark. That boy had way too many things to deal with.

Jane got into the limo and drove off. The limo returned to the school grounds. Minutes later, they drove down a dirt road in the swamps. Jane spotted the shack off in the distance. Mark waited at the entrance. The shack wasn’t run-down, as Jane had expected, but was a solid looking single story log cabin.

Looking around, Jane realized how dismal the area was and wondered why the school allowed the area to exist.

Jane stepped out of the limo and the limo drove away. Mark opened the door and Jane stepped in.

Jane got a pleasant surprise when she entered. A comfortable living room with a fireplace greeted her. A door opened to a kitchen. Another led to a bedroom.

“My uncle, Arthur, built this for me last year,” Mark said and dragged Jane around the place. “This is the washroom. I don’t need it, of course. This is the bedroom, for when I study late. The most important room in the house is here.”

Not surprisingly, the indicated room was the kitchen. It had two oversized fridges and cupboards packed with food. They went out the back and Jane found a well-maintained hot spring, surrounded by a white picket fence.

“We have a private hot spring just like this one, only bigger,” Jane said.

“I know,” Mark replied. “Here is where I do much of my training.

“My uncle has set up a privacy barrier that activates when I enter the front entrance and stay within the property. It gives anyone spying on us a false sense of what’s happening here. We can do whatever we want and the Secret Service will never find out, unless they employ exalted grandmasters with a wizard level of above 94...

“Your uncle is an exalted grandmaster of 94?” Jane asked in astonishment.

“That’s no big deal,” Mark replied. “I know plenty of people with wizard levels in the 90’s. My aunt Flo has a wizard level of 95. Hell, I know plenty of people who oversee the Wizard Initiation. The Secret Service should be filled with people like that, rendering the barrier ineffective for them. Let’s hope you’re a low priority.”

Mark headed back into the living room and crashed in one of the couches in front of the fireplace. Mark flicked his hand and the fire turned on. Lying on the couch, Mark reminded Jane of Grundy.

“I hadn’t realized Dracos were so amazing,” Jane marveled and sat next to Mark’s head. She absentmindedly scratched Mark behind the ears. Mark closed his eyes and purred in pleasure, his body quivering.

“If the Secret Service had people stronger than your uncle, they certainly wouldn’t waste them babysitting me, especially on school grounds. Hell, our Grand Poo-bah is only 92. Annie thinks he’s an old fart, that’s too stuck in his ways to progress.”

Mark inched his way up and rested his head on Jane’s lap. Jane continued scratching Mark’s head.

“It’s so weird,” Jane said. “For the first time in my life no one is spying on me. I hadn’t realized just how oppressive the Secret Service was, until just now.”

By way of reply Mark said drowsily, “I love you Sister Jane,” and fell asleep.

Mark’s body transformed, turning into a ten-year-old boy. He looked super-cute in his oversized clothes and waste-length hair.

Jane looked down and saw Mark’s baby butt exposed. She reached down and pulled his pants up.

“Oh Mark, you’re more interesting than I ever imagined,” Jane mused and rubbed his back.

Jane felt Mark’s long hair. It was of a quality that could only be maintained using secret magic known only to the royal families and was forbidden to commoners. In other words, he had princely hair.

Did that mean Mark had purpled eyes? That was a real possibility. However, Jane didn’t want to find out just now. There was plenty of time later.

Jane undressed the sleeping ten-year-old-boy and tucked him into bed. She kissed him on the forehead and turned off the lights.

Jane had come here seeking answers to questions that were bugging her. She was leaving with more questions than answers.

As she stepped out of the shack, Jane realized the true purpose of the magical privacy screen. She was now privy to secrets the Draco clan didn’t want anyone to know about.

Jane waited and off in the distance the limo appeared. It stopped in front of Jane and James the chauffeur apologized, “I’m sorry Princess Jane. I hadn’t realized you were ready to leave. Please forgive me.”

“Don’t worry about it James. It was a last second decision to leave,” Jane assured.

Jane rode back home, bubbling with excitement over finding a place she could go where she could be away from the Secret Service. Did a similar zone exist in Mark’s apartment? Probably his bedroom.

Returning home, Jane did her homework quickly. Bath time came. She walked to the hot springs with Annie besides her. Should she feel embarrassed that Grundy was going to see her naked?

After much soul-searching, Jane decided that the answer was ‘No’. Grundy or Mark was no pervert, and never partook of the forbidden fruit. Besides, they weren’t interested in her body, and weren’t the types to judge. More importantly Grundy was only interested in Annie.

Jane felt they expressed the answer to the question that bothered her about the Grand Poo-bah. Unfortunately, the answer still eluded her.

Grundy didn’t bother her but the Secret Service did. They were the real perverts, spying on her from the shadows. Just because only female Secret Service agents spied on her didn’t change anything.

Jane looked at Annie playing with her pet in Carol form. Did the Grand Poo-bah master the genders? Who knew?

On impulse, Jane changed into her second form. Mark would scold her if he knew just how little she trained in her second form.

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The next day at council time, Jane greeted Mark with a sisterly hug and kiss on the cheek. “Hi Mark, did you sleep well?”

“Yes Jane. I haven’t slept like that since my aunt visited me two weeks ago,” Mark greeted. He didn’t comment on the happenings at the shack.

“Mark, is the shack the only place where you can be private?” Jane asked.

“No,” Mark replied. “There’s also my bedroom.”

“Is it okay if I come there?” Jane asked.

“No problem,” Mark said. “See you after school. I’ll ride in the limo with you.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Jane asked, surprised.

“I don’t want to. I have to,” Mark replied. “The only way to advance is to constantly challenge our assumptions and our fears. See you quitting time.”

Quitting time came and Mark met Jane. “Harry,” Mark called to his best friend. “Do you want to ride home in a limo?”

“No thanks,” Harry said. “I don’t want to be a third wheel on your date.”

“We aren’t dating, fool,” Mark frowned. “See you at home.”

They headed to the door and Mark said, “I never asked you out on a date, did I? I know the answer is ‘No’ because we live in different worlds. However, I feel duty bound to ask you. Jane, would you like to be my girlfriend?”

“I can’t be that, because ancient laws forbid it. However, I can be your forever friend,” Jane replied. She wrapped her hand around Mark’s arm and headed for the Limo.

Mark hesitated a moment at the limo door, and then sat on Annie’s chair. They drove off.

“Yes, I feel the emptiness strongest here.” Mark didn’t say anything more but just contemplated the situation. “No one ever said being a wizard was easy.” He held Jane’s hand as they drove.

They arrived at the apartment and the limo drove away. Mark led the way to his room and closed the door.

“Okay Jane, the privacy spell has been activated. It’ll only deactivate when I leave. What’s on your mind?” Mark asked.

“Did you ever wonder why your uncle placed such a powerful barrier around the places you sleep?” Jane asked.

“You know family,” Mark shrugged. “They’re always fussing about you, worrying if you eat too much, or not enough. I’m sure it’s some stupid reason like that. Or maybe Uncle Arthur doesn’t want perverts spying on me while I slept, I assume.”

“I wish I had a room like this,” Jane sighed. “Now I know what privacy is like, I don’t want to go back.”

“Don’t you have complete privacy in your own room?” Mark asked.

“In theory, yes,” Jane said. “But can I be sure?”

“Come on, Jane,” Mark said. “Let’s study. I’ll get Harry to join us when he comes. By the way, thank you for rejecting me for something other than age, or lack thereof. What are the five types of teleportation spells and when are they used?”

Just then Harry entered the apartment. “Harry, get over here,” Mark called. “We are studying for the upcoming test on Thursday. Close the door.”

They continued studying. Following that was mediation.

Finally studying was complete. Mark called aloud, “Uncle Arthur.”

There was a moment’s pause and Uncle Arthur’s booming voice echoed in the room. “Hello Mark. How’s my favorite nephew doing? Do you need something?”

Both Harry and Jane jumped at the voice.

“Sorry guys,” Mark said. “I forgot to mention my uncle has a loud voice.”

“Who said I have a loud voice?” Uncle Arthur asked. “My voice is as gentle as a lamb.” He laughed stridently.

“As gently as a lamb shuffling across a black-board,” Harry mumbled and covered his ears.

That earned him an ear-shattering laugh. “That’s a good one Harry,” Uncle Arthur said. “So Mark, what’s on your mind?”

“My friend Jane doesn’t want to be spied on by her baby-sitters, and has come to me for advice,” Mark explained.

“Is that so?” Uncle Arthur bellowed from behind Jane’s ear.

“Eek,” Jane screamed and jumped out of her chair. Uncle Arthur had materialized behind her.

“That jump was incredible,” Uncle Arthur laughed. “Mark, I highly approve of your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Mark denied. “Although recently, she’s been treating me like her baby brother.”

Uncle Arthur crouched beside Jane and held her hand. “So Jane, do you know Mark’s dirty little secret?”

Mark was about to say, he didn’t have any dirty secrets, but realized that he did.

“Yes Mr. Lucas,” Jane said. “Is he human?”

“Is – he – human?” Uncle Arthur asked, taken aback by that question coming out of left field. Quickly regaining his composure, he turned to Mark and asked, “Mark, are you human?”

“Of course he’s human. Why wouldn’t he be?” Harry asked, confused by the question. He paused and then and said. “You’re right. He’s not human. It’s impossible for a human to be eternally ten years old.”

Mark felt weighed down by the stares. “Okay, I’m not human. I’m a freak of nature. Nothing about me is natural. Are you happy now?” Mark shouted angrily.

“We’re only teasing you Mark,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Jane isn’t joking. She fully believes I’m not human,” Mark whined.

“Being human is overrated,” Jane said. “I’m glad you’re not human. It would be embarrassing otherwise, and possibly fatal.”

“Why would being human be fatal?” Uncle Arthur asked in confusion.

“Because Annie has claimed Mark as her pet,” Jane said.

“That’s impossible,” Mark said abruptly. “We never met.”

“Sorry Mark, but a person’s soul always shines through their eyes,” Jane replied. “When I look into your eyes, I see Grundy. When I look into Grundy’s eyes, I see you. You both have an attribute age of ten. Also, you’re missing 27% of your soul and Grundy only has 27%. Need I say more?”

“I can’t be a cat,” Mark said defensively. “I already have an official second form, that’s acknowledged by the school. As everyone knows, it’s impossible for someone to have more than one second form.”

“By the way Mark, you never did tell me what kind of dragon you are,” Uncle Arthur said.

“He’s a kitty-cat dragon,” Jane declared and looked at Mark fondly.

“That’s impossible,” Harry said. “I saw him transform into a sludge monster at the Temple of Transformations.”

“He is a kitty-cat dragon and that’s final,” Jane said angrily.

“I am a sludge monster,” Mark retorted. “Your comment about our eyes is just your imagination. Besides, what proof do you have? Besides, aren’t you forgetting? We’re here for you. You’re tired of being baby-sat by the secret service.”

“You’re right,” Jane admitted.

“Invite me to your place for a concert and I’ll set up a place of your choice for privacy,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Thank-you Mr. Lucas,” Jane said.

“Call me Uncle Arthur,” Uncle Arthur said. “After all, you will one day be my niece-in-law.”

“I told you, he’s my sister’s pet, not my boyfriend,” Jane objected.

“I heard about Grundy on the news,” Harry said. “Is it true that the little princess takes him everywhere, and takes baths with him? Wouldn’t it be awkward if Mark was Grundy, and dangerous?”

“No, because he’s family,” Jane said. “What more proof is there than the fact that he has perfect hair and skin? Harry, have you ever known Mark to shave or need a haircut?”

“No,” Harry admitted.

“If I am a royal, how come I don’t have purple eyes?” Mark rebuked.

“Have either of you seen his eyes when he’s sleeping?” Jane asked.

“No guy can touch him when he’s asleep. Doing so always wakes him up,” Uncle Arthur said. “You can check. All you need to do his let him sleep on your lap.”

Red-faced, Mark said, “I’m not a royal and that’s final. I’m sure my parents are responsible for my appearance. Besides, if I and Grundy were one, how come we both have separate bodies? Uncle Arthur, can you tell if this body is a fake body?”

Uncle Arthur examined Mark for a moment and said, “No, you look the same as you always do, other than your lack of soul mass. Either Jane is going senile or you’re keeping secrets from us. I trust your judgment, so I won’t pry.”

“Thank-you,” Mark said, feeling relieved. His parent’s creation was good enough to fool his uncle.

“But I would like to see you sleep on Jane’s lap,” Uncle Arthur added with a chuckle. “She did say you were a baby brother to her, so she wouldn’t mind cuddling with you.”

“Come on,” Harry said. “I want to see that too.”

“What will that prove? It’s not as if I’ll change my appearance just by going to sleep – fine, whatever. Just don’t be surprised when nothing happens.”

Jane got up and sat on Mark’s bed.

Mark got in bed and placed his head on Jane’s lap and curled up in a ball. He closed his eyes as Jane scratched him behind the ears. He purred like a kitten and within seconds fell asleep.

As usual, his appearance reverted.

“By nature, only royals have this kind of hair,” Jane said as she held up strands. “My dad has never shaved or cut his hair in his entire life. Up to the age of twelve, he had long hair like this, and then it became short overnight.”

“Check his eyes,” Harry suggested. “Let’s see what color they are.”

“Is this a good idea? Wouldn’t finding out have real consequences?” Jane asked worriedly.

“No greater consequences than finding out that him and Grundy share the same soul,” Uncle Arthur replied.

“All right,” Jane said reluctantly and placed her fingers on Mark eyelids.

“I can’t open his eyes. They seem jammed shut,” Jane said in surprise.

“Here, let me try,” Uncle Arthur said. He concentrated on Mark and said, “I tried several spells, but they have all failed. My magic can’t read his eye color. I think we should stop. I suspect powers that have shaped the world are involved in this.”

“My dad called him a child of destiny,” Jane said and kissed him on the forehead. “I wonder what he would think if he knew the child part was the literal truth. Do you know why he’s like this?”

“No one knows,” Uncle Arthur said. “He reached ten, and then stopped growing. They even prevented him from leaving Eden till after he turned thirteen. After much begging, we brought him to Washington and he made friends with Harry. Harry wanted a baby brother and we needed someone to take care of Mark. After a thorough background check on Harry, we allowed Harry to adopt Mark.”

“Are you saying it wasn’t coincidence we met?” Harry asked, shocked.

“His friend had to be male of his legal age and a non-relative. Of the thousands of people we examined we chose you,” Uncle Arthur said. “Susan and Baldwin chose Washington for whatever reason, and then asked us to find suitable candidates to be his companion. Of course, Mark’s parents made the final decision.”

“What should we do with him?” Jane asked.

“Undress him and put him to bed,” Uncle Arthur said. “He needs the rest. He tends to forget that rest is just as important when growing as exercise and training.”

Jane did as instructed. She had plenty of experience with Annie, although Mark was a year older.

“Carry him a little,” Uncle Arthur advised. “He loves cuddling with cute girls, even when he’s asleep.”

Jane picked Mark up and carried him in her arms. Mark wrapped his legs around her waist and snuggled his head against her neck. “I love you, Sister Jane,” he said and continued sleeping.

Tears streamed down Jane’s face. “Poor little guy. I feel sorry for him. I guess this is what it means to not eat of the forbidden fruit, or as Annie would say, the gift of the Caretaker. The Illuminati want to kill the Forbidden Tree. Correction, the Caretaker. According to prophesy, the Tree of Life is dying. Uncle Arthur, what will happen to humans if the Tree of Life dies?”

“That’s information the Elders have chosen not to share with me,” Uncle Arthur said. “This is the first I have heard that the Tree was in danger. The only advice I can give the both of you is to increase your wizard levels as fast as possible. I recommend using immersive novels. You’re both at a level where they will still help.

“The thing about immersive novels is that they are so packed with experience that you gain from them even years after you have watched them.”

Both Jane and Harry looked at each other. “We’ll do it,” both said in unison.

Uncle Arthur said, “I’ll arrange the logistics and give you detailed information on what’s needed when the time comes. I better be going. I’ve been here longer than I expected. Remember you two, you mustn’t discuss this with anyone. Not even with Annie or Stephaney. This is super-secret information that can affect world history, and will impact Mark’s life.”

With that, he disappeared.

“I better be going too,” Jane said. She pulled back the bed covers and gave Mark one last hug. She put the child to bed and placed the covers back. Jane kissed Mark on the forehead and headed to the door. She exited the bedroom and Harry followed.

“Well I better be going,” Jane said. “It was fun studying with you and Mark.”

Harry nodded. “We have a lot of work to do if we ever hope to catch up to Mark. He studies like a madman.”



It’s easy to become strong,

When you have someone to fight for.

Christmas approached and Mark realized something concerning his two best friends.

“Jane, Harry, I’m impressed with the both of you,” Mark said. “Harry, I remember last year. You had lousy grades. Now you’re at the top of your class. Jane, your grades kick ass as well.

“Now I’m finally able to say, don’t study too hard or your brains might explode.”

All three laughed.

“How would you two like to come for our annual Christmas party at the orphanage?” Mark asked. “It’s this Saturday at noon.”

“I’d love to,” Jane said.

Jane wanted to invite Mark to her own party, but knew she couldn’t. Uncle Arthur said it was best that Mark and Grundy not be seen together, or someone might notice that they both shared the same soul. Of course, Mark still hadn’t acknowledged they were related.

The school party was fun, but uneventful. As usual, Mark ate more than his share of food.

Jane couldn’t help but wonder where Mark put all that food. It was obviously part of his curse that he never gained weight.

Jane finally headed home. There was so much studying to do, that it boggled her mind as to how anyone could finish it in a lifetime.

It was time for her bath. All princesses were expected to spend plenty of time doing such thing, although now she found it just a colossal waste of time.

While bathing, Jane went through all her lessons on her second screen. The Book of Knowledge was an incredible thing. It allowed you to do work, while apparently doing nothing.

Jane walked up to Carol and rubbed her head. “You’re a good girl Carol,” she said. “Annie is very lucky to have you as a pet.”

“Thanks Sister Jane,” Carol said and gave Jane a big smile. “Annie wants to share me with you. She wants you to play with me whenever you want to.”

“Thanks Annie,” Jane said. “You’re a good girl too.”

Mark was definitely getting a diversity of experience. Jane knew she needed to do the same to advance.

Jane finished her bath, ate dinner and went to her room to study. Before she knew it, it was morning.

4. Memory Lane

We can learn from the experiences of others,   
just as we can learn from our own experiences.

*Mark didn’t remember the first time he entered the Garden. He was too young for that. That didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was playing and having fun.*

*The Caretaker introduced new games and Mark and his friends played and ran wild. Occasionally this was interrupted when the Caretaker opened the great doors and let him out. Then he would play with his parents and grownup family members.*

*This was just such an occasion. “Hi Mum, Dad,” Mark called out and gave his parents hugs and kisses.*

*“You’re four years old Mark,”* Baldwin *announced and carried him to the family chariot. They entered and flew off. That was always the case. His parents would always take him away in their chariot.*

*“Can I fly please?” Mark asked and flashed Baldwin a radiant smile.*

*“How can I say ‘No’ when you ask so sweetly?” Baldwin asked.*

*“Yay,” Mark clapped and jumped into the pilot’s chair. Like a good boy, Mark listened attentively to what Baldwin had to teach and soon he was flying.*

*All too soon it was time to return to the Caretaker.*

*“Will you take me flying again?” Mark asked.*

*“Off course son,” Baldwin replied as the doors to Eden closed.*

*Time passed. Baldwin introduced Mark to different types of transportation. It was so much fun, flying through the Sea of Chaos and visiting various worlds.*

*Time passed. Susan and Baldwin came for another visit. Mark was now eight and a half years old.*

*“Come Mark, it’s time I showed you the Corridors,” Baldwin said.*

*“What are the Corridors, Dad?” Mark asked. He held Susan’s hand in his left hand and Baldwin’s hand in his right hand. They walked hand in hand away from the now closed gates of Eden.*

*“The Corridors connect all the different parts of the Tree of Life. They also connect to places Beyond,” Baldwin said.*

*They strolled to a building a thousand feet away from Eden’s gates. As they approached, Mark felt a strange woozy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Stepping in, he felt the space around him distort, making him feel uncomfortable. From the corners of his eyes, he saw things scurry. Panic gripped him. He was in danger of falling into a very scary place. Monsters were coming for him.*

*Screaming hysterically, Mark tried to run away. Baldwin chased him and grabbed him. Arms and legs flying everywhere, he fought Baldwin in order to escape.*

*Thankfully the space around him stabilized. The creepy-crawlies went away and Mark realized he was safe.*

*Mark looked at the faces of his parents. Both were bruised and battered. Baldwin’s face was scratched and bleeding. Mark realized something important. He had injured his parents in his panic.*

*“I’m sorry Mum, Dad for hurting you,” Mark cried as tears streamed from his eyes.*

*“It’s all right dear,” Susan assured and hugged Mark to her. “We’re wizards. We’ll be fine.”*

*Within seconds his parent’s injuries healed.*

*Mark looked around and found himself in a garden, near a large stone building. People milled around. One person Mark recognized approached. It was Aunty Flo.*

*“Susan, Baldwin, why is Mark with you?” Aunty Flo asked with a frown. “The Ceremony will begin in less than an hour.”*

*“We just wanted to play a little with Mark,” Baldwin explained. “Unfortunately, we discovered that Mark is terrified of the Corridors. Can you please take care of him?”*

*Aunty Flo shook her head and picked Mark out of Susan’s arms. She kissed Mark on the cheek and messed his ruby-red hair.*

*“Aunty Flo,” Mark shouted and hugged his favorite aunt. “What ceremony are you talking about?”*

*“It’s not important dear,” Aunty Flo said. “My, aren’t you growing fast? Soon you’ll be leaving Eden and becoming an adult.”*

*“Yup,” Mark replied. “Just three and a half more years to go and I will be a grownup.”*

*Baldwin laughed. “Goodness no, son. Even then, you will still need to grow, and then take the Wizard’s Initiation. Magic is the most incredible thing in the Universe. Even then, you’ll only be an adult when you master magic.”*

*“Come on dear, we have work to do before the students can greet our First Parents,” Susan said.*

*“Who are the First Parents?” Mark asked.*

*“Only the most wonderful people in the world, dear,” Aunty Flo answered. “They are the embodiment of magic and are more loving than you can imagine.”*

*Aunty Flo realized she said too much and added. “Forget about them dear. They’re not important. The only people that are important for you are your parents and loved ones.”*

*“Aunty Flo, can you please return Mark to the Garden?” Baldwin asked.*

*“No, I don’t want to go through those scary Corridors again,” Mark screamed. “The floor almost collapsed and we almost fell into a deep dark pit filled with scary things.”*

*“It’s okay dear,” Aunty Flo soothed and wiped tears from Mark’s eyes. “We won’t go that way if you don’t want to.”*

*“Bye,” Susan and Baldwin said and left.*

*Aunty Flo shook her head and said, “Such irresponsible people. It’s hard to believe they’re both supreme masters.”*

*“Flowing, I need your help,” a flustered man called as he ran to them. “We’re in a bit of a pickle and don’t know what to do.”*

*Aunty Flo rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine. Just don’t have a cow. Sorry Mark, I need to go. I’ll come back as soon as possible. Don’t wander off too far,” she admonished and lowered Mark to the ground.*

*“Okay Aunty Flo, I won’t go too far,” Mark promised with a smile. Mark was always a good boy, just like all children raised in the Garden.*

*“I love you sweetie,” Aunty Flo said and left.*

*Mark waited, not knowing what to do.*

*A couple passed nearby. “I can’t believe it’s finally that time of year when we meet our First Parents,” the woman giggled aloud like a child.*

*“I know,” her companion agreed excitedly. “I wish I could take the Wizard’s Initiation again, just so I can again stand on stage with them.”*

*Mark’s parents always encouraged Mark to be curious and go with his feelings. Also, Aunty Flo gave him permission to wander around. He obeyed his instructions like the good boy he was.*

*He followed the couple into the building. The area was soon packed with people. The atmosphere buzzed with excitement.*

*One part of Mark’s mind noticed that he was the only child. Another part said his parents and Aunty Flo knew what they were doing, leaving him here.*

*Mark walked aimlessly around. He passed through an open door and entered a room filled with stage props. Mark played with the props. Acting, singing and dancing were some of the activities the Caretaker and its animal helpers taught the children.*

*Mark heard clapping coming from an open door. Stepping through, he found himself on stage with an audience filling the room. In the middle of the stage was a stepped platform, filled with teenagers. Also present was an announcer.*

*As is always the case, people don’t see what they don’t expect to see. The announcer and the others ignored Mark as he stood there. Mark walked behind the stepped platform, wondering what was going on.*

*“Now that all the honorees have been assembled, it’s time to call out the heads of our clan,” Hammer yelled. Thunderous applause responded, hurting Mark’s ears.*

*A bearded, white-haired man in his late sixties and a beautiful woman in her early twenties materialized on stage.*

*Mark instantly knew who they were. They were Lord Draco and Lady Lilith, his First Parents.*

*A sense of warmth and closeness Mark never experienced before flooded him. The First Parents looked at Mark with infinite love and sadness and held him in their spiritual embrace. Tears flowed down Mark’s face as he hugged himself.*

Lord Draco and Lady Lilith spoke to Mark in his mind, each fishing the other’s sentence. ‘Beloved Child*,’ ‘y*ou are very precious to us.*’ ‘*We have selected you for a great honor*,’ ‘a*nd a great challenge.’ *‘*We know that you have what it takes to overcome this challenge.*’ ‘*Our love is with you always.*’ ‘*Be strong, my child*,’ both finished in unison. With that, they disappeared from stage.*

*There was more clapping but Mark ignored it. He felt he would explode with euphoria and needed to hug someone.*

*Mark wandered off stage and through the crowds. Everyone ignored him. Minutes later he arrived back at the garden.*

*“Mark, sorry I took so long,” Aunty Flo apologized; unaware that Mark had wandered off.*

*Mark turned around, ran and jumped into Aunty Flo’s arms. He wrapped his legs around his aunt’s slender waste, grabbed her face with both hands and kissed it. “I love you, Aunty Flo,” he said, bubbling with excitement.*

*“Mark, why are you so giddy?” Aunt Flo asked as she held Mark’s trembling body. “You’re acting as if you’ve seen our First Parents.”*

*“I’m going to become a wizard,” Mark declared. “Magic is so cool.” That was the beginning of his love affair with magic.*

*Time passed. Mark’s desire to become a wizard increased daily. He dreamt of the encounter with his First Parents multiple times. That only strengthened his resolve to become a wizard.*

*“Mum, Dad, I want to become a wizard now,” Mark begged impatiently.*

*“I’m sorry dear but the path to being a wizard is very difficult,” Susan warned.*

*“Can you endure incredible hardships and difficulty?” Baldwin asked.*

*“Yes mum, dad,” Mark said emphatically. “With my First Parent’s and your help, I can do anything.”*

*“Do we really have to do this, dear? He’s such a sweet child,” Susan pleaded in a voice only a mother could.*

*“What choice do we have? He’s our only hope. Only he can do it,” Baldwin replied with resignation.*

*Mark had no idea what they were talking about. “Does that mean, ‘Yes’?” Mark asked and twirled his shoulder-long hair with his fingers.*

*Susan sighed and nodded. She sat on an easy chair and placed Mark on her lap. She wrapped her arms around his waist.*

*Baldwin began, “Okay Mark, in order to become a great wizard, you’ll need to read multiple immersive novels. This is needed for what is to come. The first immersive novel you’ll be reading is about a lady named Janet Briers, called ‘Walking with angles’.*

*“For the duration, you will actually become Janet and experience everything that Janet experienced throughout her life. Reading an immersive novel is one of the greatest challenges most people will face in their lives. We are allowing you to do this because we know you are strong enough to bear it. Are you ready Mark?” Baldwin asked.*

*Mark nodded nervously. What was he getting himself into?*

*Baldwin handed Mark a paperback book. “Okay Mark, eat it.”*

*Mark took the book and stared at it in surprise. He ripped the cover off and stuck the cover into his mouth. The page dissolved like cotton candy. Mark ripped more sheets and ate them. The next sheets were even tastier than the first. He finished the book and wished he had more. It was so good going down.*

*Suddenly something happened to him – he didn’t know what. All he knew was that you can’t read an immersive novel inside another immersive novel.*

*Mark woke up, not knowing who he was or where he was. He was feeling sick to his stomach as alien memories claimed they were his true memories. A battle raged and a new identity took over.*

*There was no Marcus Lucas. There was only Janet Briers. Janet looked down and wondered why she had a boy’s body. She attributed it to one of her life’s challenges she had to overcome.*

*Days passed and then weeks. The eight-year-old child’s identity switched back and forth between two personalities. Finally, Mark’s personality prevailed. Unfortunately, Mark’s gender confusion remained.*

*Late October came.*

*“Mark, it’s time for your next immersive novel,” Baldwin said.*

*“Already,” Mark asked as he sat on Susan’s lap. He wasn’t eager for another novel.*

*“Don’t worry son. This will be easier to digest,” Baldwin assured. “You want to be a wizard, don’t you?”*

*Mark sighed and said, “Okay dad. I will do it.”*

*This new novel was about an Italian doll maker named Frederick. He was the best of the best in a field where only men were allowed to be professional doll makers. The women swooned over him and men envied his talent, manliness, and his way with women.*

*Mark was glad for the book, since it corrected his gender identity. He started making dolls as his new hobby.*

*Months passed and his ninth birthday came and went.*

*Mark reflected on Janet’s life. At the age of sixteen she had taken the wizard’s initiation. The process was simple. Twelve supreme masters entered twelve concealed rooms opening from the Temple of Initiation. They then cast the spell and the students got initiated. After that they were able to perform magic. Mark knew the needed spell, since Janet became a supreme master and performed the ceremony multiple times before ascending.*

*Mark formulated a plan. Sneak into the temple and participate in the ceremony, without getting caught. That chance came soon enough in September.*

*“Mark, we’re going to Washington to do some work,” Baldwin said. “Do you want to come?”*

*“Yay,” Mark clapped happily.*

*“Okay Mark, let me get you dressed,” Susan said.*

*Mark impatiently waited as his mother dressed him. Now was his chance.*

*The chariot landed in front of a building Mark knew was the Temple of Initiation.*

*“Okay Mark, don’t wander too far,” Baldwin warned. “We’ll be back.” They left.*

*People entered the temple and Mark followed them. He took his place behind a statue and waited, filled with anticipation.*

*“Young man, you’re not supposed to be here,” a voice called from behind. It was a woman with a kindly but stern face. “Don’t you know it’s forbidden for children under the age of sixteen to take the initiation?”*

*“Why?” Mark asked. “What will happen?”*

*That stumped the woman. Unable to answer, she just said, “It’s just forbidden. Now kindly follow me.”*

*The woman guided Mark to the exit and closed the door.*

*Annoyed at the failure, Mark wandered around and waited for his parents. They picked him up seconds later and headed home.*

*It was ridiculous. They were forbidding him from taking the initiation, just because of a vague warning, claiming something bad might or might not happen. Even Janet Briers didn’t know what the consequences were. She just enforced the rule religiously.*

*How could he bypass that stupid rule? He could use the law of similarities. Instead of having twelve supreme masters, why not use effigies? He knew the spell and, so there should be no problem.*

*Now all he needed was to create twelve voodoo dolls and add the hair of twelve supreme masters.*

*Collecting the first two hair samples proved simple. He cut his parent’s hair when they were sleeping. The other ten proved equally easy. His parents kept inviting supreme masters over.*

*Mark focused all his attention on creating the dolls, spending months on perfecting his creation.*

*By Christmas Mark was getting impatient. He did not know how to improve on the dolls and he didn’t know what else to do.*

*Finally January 6 arrived and the doors of the Garden opened. Mark hugged his parents and Baldwin asked, “Happy birthday son. Mark, do you want to go to Washington?”*

*“Yes please,” Mark replied eagerly.*

*“Happy birthday, Mark” Susan greeted. “How are your doll creations coming?”*

*“Here they are,” Mark said proudly and Baldwin took the doll case from Mark.*

*They walked into the chariot and Baldwin placed the doll box on a table in the living room.*

*Mark went to Baldwin’s study and grabbed the ring of invisibility from the desk drawer.*

*Realizing he had no pockets, Mark ran back to his room and quickly dressed, or at least tried to. His hair was now to his waist, and that got in the way of his dressing. In frustration, Mark went to his mother and got her to dress him. That done, Mark placed the ring into his pocket.*

*Pockets were a cool invention. They allowed you to carry stuff, such as invisibility rings.*

*After a short wait, they arrived in Washington. As before, his parents dropped Mark in front of the Temple of Initiation and left.*

*Mark put the ring on and entered the opened door of the temple. He located the concealed door of the first room and entered.*

*The altar was a simple twelve sided pillar of marble, standing on top of 6 inch legs. He slipped the first doll under the altar, completely concealing it.*

*One by one he entered the remaining rooms and did the same.*

*Preparations complete, Mark headed for the main room.*

*Mark sat cross-legged in the center of the temple and spoke the spell. He felt his invisibility ring humming. He waited. Nothing happened. After multiple attempts, still nothing happened. He finally gave up, realizing that actual supreme masters had to be present and consciously acknowledging you before the ceremony could start.*

*He removed the invisibility ring and left the temple. The door of the temple closed behind him.*

*Moments later, his parents arrived and picked him up. After that, he had no more opportunities to try the initiation ceremony.*

*Life became routine. Mark would play in the Garden and his parents would teach him of magic and let him read immersive novels. He hated those things. They tasted sweet going down, but always left a bitter aftertaste.*

*Time passed.*

*Mark turned twelve. He watched his friends leave one by one, while he remained. After awhile this started bothering him. Not only wasn’t he a wizard. He wasn’t an adult either.*

*Mark had asked the Caretaker multiple times when he would receive the Gift and become an adult. The Caretaker would only reply that the gift wasn’t ready and he should play and have fun.*

*Time passed. Mark’s thirteenth birthday came. He greeted his parents when they came to pick him up.*

*“Happy birthday Mark,” Susan said.*

*“What do you want for your present?” Baldwin asked.*

*“I want to leave the Garden,” Mark replied. “I’m thirteen years old. I’m too old to stay.”*

*“Okay dear,” Susan said sadly. “You don’t have to return if you don’t want to.”*

*“Really?” Mark asked excitedly. All his begging and pleading finally worked. “But the Caretaker never gave me the Gift.”*

*“Don’t worry about that son,” Baldwin said. “You don’t need it.”*

*“But how can I become an adult, get a wife and have children without it?” Mark asked, confused.*

*“I promise you, by the time you take your first class at the wizard’s academy in Washington, you will have met the girl you will spend the rest of eternity with,” Susan promised, whispering in Mark’s ear.*

*“Can I go now?” Mark asked.*

*“I’m sorry dear, but you aren’t allowed to attend Wizard’s Academy until after you turn sixteen,” Susan replied.*

*There was that stupid sixteen again. To be a wizard and an adult, he needed to become sixteen. In other words, he needed to wait three very long years and tedious years. “Okay Mum,” Mark said reluctantly.*

*They got into the family chariot and headed to Washington. “Son, we enrolled you in a school in Olympia, Washington. You will dress like teenagers in the area, study and do things teenagers do.”*

*“Finally,” Mark said with excitement and relief.*

*Mark arrived at school and the teacher introduced him to the class. After class one boy came up to him and said, “Hi, I’m Harry Banks. Pleased to meet you.”*

*“Hi,” Mark replied. “I’m Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan. Call me Mark. Do you like magic?”*

*“Yes, I’m going to be a wizard when I grow up,” Harry declared.*

*That was what Mark wanted to hear. They became best friends. Unfortunately, Harry treated him like his baby brother, despite the fact that Mark was two months older than Harry.*

*Harry was not the only one to treat him like a child. Everyone did, including the teachers.*

*During summer break Mark realized why everyone treated him like a child. His physical appearance hadn’t changed since he was ten, while everyone looked like teenagers. Even Harry was tall and growing taller every day. Second, he was the only boy with long hair. He tried cutting it but it always grew back overnight.*

*Months passed and Mark wished desperately to become a mature teenager with a fine moustache like his father. His wish was granted as he approached his fourteenth year of life.*

*Mark got an overnight growth spurt and with it the most amazing moustache in the universe. His hair got military style short, making him look mature. He was no longer a brat with ridiculously long hair.*

*Time passed. Now all he needed to catch up was a girlfriend like the one fifteen-year-old Harry had and his life would be perfect.*

*Time passed. The first day of Magic Academy came. That was the greatest day of Mark’s life. Unfortunately, Mark didn’t remember the actual initiation, just the events surrounding it.*

*Mark experienced various events at school and finally it was time for the second form ceremony. He stepped on stage and had the worst experience of his life. He didn’t transform into the dragon he expected to be. Instead he transformed into a sludge monster.*

5. New Friends, New Skills

I need to believe in the infinite evolution of Consciousness –   
Otherwise life in this world is meaningless.

The nine year old awoke, completely confused. The child hugged Grundy and looked around. Grundy transformed into a sweat-suit and engulfed his master in warmth.

“Why am I in a girl’s room?” the child asked worriedly.

Now panicking, Grundy did the only thing it could. It called on its other half. The problem with this type of communication was that it felt like internal dialog. He couldn’t be sure if the message went through or if he was imagining things.

Both Grundy and the master drifted to sleep.

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A little girl sat on an oversized garden chair. Dozing on a nearby garden table was a kitten with an extra-long tail. The girl wore a beautiful blue dress and had a tiny princess crown on her head.

A ten-year-old prince with multi-colored clothes and princely hair stood next to a grandfather clock. The pendulum wasn’t moving and the internals had cobwebs.

“Greetings Princess Annie,” the prince said. “My name is Marcus Lucas. Call me Mark. My esteemed colleague said that you are in distress.”

Resting on Mark’s head was a tea platter. He took a tea cup from the platter and placed it on the table in front of Annie. Taking a tea pot from off his head, he poured tea for the princess.

“One lump or two, my dear? Do you want cream with that? How about marmalade? Whipped cream? Honey? Marshmallows? Cinnamon?” Mark rattled off countless tea additives. Eventually he returned everything back to the platter on his head. He took a cup for himself.

Annie blinked and the tea platter on the prince’s head was no longer there. Instead there was a red and green plaid zigzagging hat covered with windows.

“I love tea parties,” the prince announced and sat on a nearby chair.

“So do I,” a bunch of chipmunks said as they stuck their heads out from the windows in the hat. They retreated and closed the windows behind them.

“I don’t know who I am,” the princess confessed.

“You, my dear are a beautiful and intelligent princess,” Mark explained. “You’re suffering from indigestion from reading my life book. It always happens when you read someone’s life book. It will pass in time.

“Would you like some cake?”

The prince took a knife and cut down on his hat. He then placed pieces on plates he took from who knows where? The boy with the cake hat handed cake to the girl and ate some himself.

“Wake up door-cat. It’s time to eat tea and drink cake, or is that the other way around?” the boy asked.

The cat got up groggily and sipped tea from a bowl.

“Okay esteemed colleague, the best way to help the little princess is to hold her tight in your arms – or your tail or whatever. Just love her and everything will be fine,” Prince Marcus promised.

“What’s that thing on your head?” Annie asked, referring to a giant toy top that spun on top of Mark’s head.

“It’s called a top-hat. All gentlemen wear it, or will when I finish with the marketing blitz,” Mark replied. “Now my dear, your job is to extract all the knowledge and wisdom you can from experiencing my life and use it to grow as a wizard.”

“But I’m not a wizard yet,” Annie giggled.

“That’s okay,” Mark assured. “Neither was I when I read my first immersive novel.”

Mark removed his top-hat, revealing a bird’s nest on his head. Baby birds chirped for their mother. He bowed and kissed Annie’s hand. “Remember my dear, this is our little secret. Tell no one.”

“Can I meet you again?” Annie asked.

“But of course,” Mark replied. “However, I can only meet you in your dreams, and only if you call for me when you fall sleep.”

Annie awoke and found herself in her room. She drifted back to sleep in Grundy’s embrace.

Morning came and Annie’s nanny made sure she was fully dressed. She went to the kitchen and greeted her parents and sister. It was Saturday – no school.

It was normally her practice to perform stage magic tricks for her family, but today she was distracted. She had too many things on her mind.

Annie left and went out to play. Wandering around the palace grounds, she wondered what it would be like to be treated like a child forever. She didn’t like that. That meant never becoming a wizard.

Although she loved her sister, she was a little jealous of the fact that Jane could do magic.

Annie found herself in the palace hangers. There in front of her was the *Princess Annie*. That was such an enigma. Where did the Draco chariot with her name on it come from?

Annie entered her secret base where she kept all her treasures. It was the one place where the secret service couldn’t spy on her.

She got into the cockpit and looked around. She remembered what all the controls were and how to operate them.

‘Are you planning on flying?’ Grundy asked. ‘What will your parents say?’

Annie thought for a moment and pressed a button. It caused a tiny device to drop from the chariot. The job of the device was to leave an image of the chariot, so that no one would know that the chariot was moved.

‘Mark’s parents, please help me,’ Annie prayed and pressed the stealth button. She then got the chariot to lift up, and almost crashed it into a wall. She knew the theory of flying from the immersive novel, but flying in real life was a different story altogether.

With the help of Grundy, Annie edged the Chariot out of the hanger. She then headed for the palace gate and out into the open.

For the next several hours Annie just flew around, enjoying the freedom of the sky. Eventually she had to get back. The grownups were used to her being in the chariot for hours at a time, but they would eventually come and check up on her. That was okay. There was always Sunday for more flying.

Annie landed back at the hanger and retrieved the stealth device. It was a fun day.

That night before falling asleep Annie called on Mark.

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Annie found herself on top of a spire on a castle in the clouds. Zooming towards her was Mark, riding on Grundy in Chinese-dragon form. Mark was in child prince form. Both Grundy and Mark had purple eyes. They landed and Mark got off.

“So my dear, what can I do for you?” Mark asked.

“Why are there two of you, and what happened to you after you turned into the sludge monster in the Temple of Transformation?” Annie asked.

“I went to the swamps to train. I then turned into this,” Mark said and Grundy changed into his kitty-cat form. “On impulse I chased a bird and landed in your hot spring. I panicked because I didn’t want to die. That was when my soul split in two. Grundy has my real body. My parents created a substitute body for me.

“Your sister knows Grundy and I share the same soul. I couldn’t hide that from her since she knows both of us. Be careful what you say to Sister Jane. I don’t want the secret service overhearing,” Mark warned.

“They can’t listen while in the chariot,” Annie noted.

“You have a Draco chariot?” Mark asked, surprised. “Grundy and I don’t communicate with each other. I thought it best. Also, he can’t return to me since he has bathed with you and Sister Jane.”

“That’s so sad,” Annie said. “Isn’t there anything I can do?”

Mark shook his head. “Just keep Grundy as your pet forever. So what do you want to do? We can play for at least an hour.”

“Grandmaster Rachael cast a spell on Grundy. It locked her into seven forms. They are kitty-cat dragon, a Chinese dragon, winter clothes, summer clothes, sweat-suit, summer dress, and Carol,” Annie said.

“Carol?” Mark asked.

Grundy responded by turning into Carol.

“Who is Carol?” Annie asked.

“Carol is one of my nieces,” Mark explained. “She is your age and has a crush on me.”

“She can’t have you,” Annie said in a fit of jealousy. “You belong to me and no one else.”

“I think you know that my attribute age is stuck at ten. Carol will lose interest in me and treat me like a child, like all my loved ones do, once her attribute age passes ten,” Mark assured.

“That means that will happen to me. I too will forget you,” Annie said in horror. She hugged Carol and said, “I don’t want to forget about you.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s in the future,” Mark assured Annie. “For now let’s play. What do you want to do?”

“Let’s explore,” Annie said.

Mark looked at Carol and she transformed into the red dragon. Mark got on behind Grundy’s collar and Annie sat in front of Mark. Mark hugged Annie and they took off into the sky.

Far off in the distance storm clouds formed and they entered. Moments later they were in the Sea of Chaos. They spent their time travelling through the Sea.

“Mark, I feel this strange tug,” Annie said.

“That’s your body calling you back,” Mark replied. “That’s the end of our trip for today.”

“But I want to...” Annie began and found herself in her bed. “...stay with you,” Annie finished. It was morning and time to get up.

Grundy turned back into kitty-cat form and Annie dressed. It was the start of another boring day, filled with people who would rather live their lives as muggles.

Annie went to school and as usual, the girls gossiped about fashion and other boring things. The boys were being their usual stupid selves.

The girls always included her in all their conversations. That wasn’t surprising. She was a princess after all, and being friends with a princess was a status symbol. The girls weren’t aware of this but Annie was. She had Mark’s perspective to draw on.

Finally night came and she called on Mark before falling asleep. This continued for weeks, until Annie asked, “How come I can only see you at night?”

“What are you talking about?” Mark asked. “You’re with me all the time.”

“But you and Grundy aren’t the same,” Annie replied. “Why is that?”

“That’s because we are two parallel incarnations of the same soul,” Mark replied. “It is expected that we have different personalities. Also, Grundy only has 27% of our collective soul. It's only natural that Grundy is more passive. That’s perfect for him since he’s your pet.”

“But I want all of you, not just part of you,” Annie insisted. “If it weren’t for that stupid rule about not being able to see me in my birthday suit, I would have all of you as my pet.”

“That’s not true,” Mark replied. “If you were a regular girl, I would have revealed who I was. They would have decided, me seeing you was an accident and...” Mark trailed off, not wanting to state the obvious. “Come on Annie, let’s go play.”

All too soon the night ended. Annie sat in bed, wondering why her dreams were so much brighter and more colorful than real life. Of course her life was still brighter with Grundy around.

Annie felt sorry for the people of the world. None of them knew what it was like to own a magical pet. That wasn’t true. Her sister Jane could play with her pet every day.

Annie felt the urge to talk to Jane about their shared pet. Unfortunately, they couldn’t speak in private until the night. That was the longest day of her life.

Finally evening came and Annie said, “Sister Jane, please follow me. I have something to show you.”

“What is it sweetie? I have plenty of studying to do, if I ever want to catch up to Mark,” Jane said.

“It will be quick,” Annie assured. “Besides, you can study there.”

Annie dragged Jane to the hangers and onto the *Princess Annie*. Jane just looked around in wonder and asked, “How did you get on?”

Annie frowned. “I can get in because it belongs to me. I assume my First Parents gave it to me, or maybe Mark’s parents did. That’s not important...”

“You know Mark’s parents?” Jane asked, surprised.

“Not in person. Okay Sister Jane,” Annie said. “Draco chariots are shielded. The secret service can’t spy on us while we are here. Follow me.”

Annie led the way to the cockpit and started the engines. She turned on the stealth system and took off. “Mark told me that you suspect that he and Grundy share the same soul.”

“How do you know Mark?” Jane asked in surprise.

Annie just rolled her eyes. “He’s my pet. Why wouldn’t I know everything there is to know about him? Almost a month ago I read his life book. I wish I had grown up in Dragonia. Living in the Garden is so much fun. By the way, that’s how I was able to learn to fly the *Princess Annie*. Come. I’ll show you the Sea of Chaos. We’ll be back in two hours. No one will know we are gone.”

Jane looked out of the window and asked nervously, “How much flying experience do you have?”

Annie pointed at a gage. It read, 143 hours. “I fly all the time, especially on weekends. What was I saying? I love having Grundy as my pet. I play all day with him and at night, I get to play with Mark as well. You get to play with Mark as well, don’t you? Isn’t he the bestest pet in the world?”

“I wouldn’t call him a pet, but yes, I love him like a baby brother,” Jane agreed, staring out of the window. “What’s that storm we’re approaching?”

“That’s no storm silly,” Annie corrected. “That’s the Sea of Chaos. It’s a fun place to play in.”

“You shouldn’t play in there,” Jane warned. “That’s too dangerous.”

“Don’t be such a worry-wart, Sister Jane. Mark’s parents would never let anything happen to me,” Annie assured. “We are going to a place filled with pretty stones. Mark’s parents gave me written permission to take any stones I wanted.”

“I didn’t know the Sea of Chaos was so pretty,” Jane marveled.

“No one knows except the few clans that call the Sea home,” Annie replied.

Jane nearly jumped out of her seat when a ghoulish face zoomed towards them from out of nowhere. They entered its mouth and Annie apologized. “Sorry for the scare. There’s no telling what we’ll meet here.

“We will be landing on that square island. The island is almost 25,000 miles in diameter,” Annie pointed.

The square island Annie referred to sat on top of four gigantic elephants. The elephants stood on a column of turtles.

They landed in a field filled with precious jewels. “Come on Sister Jane. You have permission to collect stones. I have already collected plenty,” Annie urged while foraging. Once that was done, she went inside and added the stones to a chest filled with a fortune of precious jewels.

“There are plenty of other places filled with pretty stones I like collecting. I’ll take you there another time, but now we need to get back home or people will start worrying,” Annie said.

“What else do you have?” Jane asked.

“Grundy, please fly us back,” Annie said.

Grundy turned into Carol and said, “Okay Annie.”

Annie gave Jane a tour of the chariot. Included were closets filled with beautiful clothes. Jane took all of it in and just sighed.

“Are you okay Sister Jane?” Annie asked.

“No,” Jane replied. “I have so much work to do to get ready for the future. I don’t know if I can make it. You’re working hard too, aren’t you?” Jane placed her hand on Annie’s shoulder and they walked together to the cockpit. Carol guided them home.

“Sister Jane, would you like to come play with us in our dreams tonight,” Annie asked. “After all, Mark is your pet as well.”

Jane frowned. “Mark isn’t a dog.”

“I know that,” Annie replied. “He’s a baby dragon.”

“Oh all right,” Jane replied. She then said, “Wait a minute. How can he share dreams with you? The castle barrier blocks all non-sanctioned lines of communication when the gate is closed.”

“Carol, can you answer that?” Annie asked.

“No barrier can block inter-soul communication,” Carol explained. “Using me as a conduit, Mark is able to talk to Annie. He can talk to you as well if you wish. For tonight, it’s best that you sleep with Annie and me.”

They landed and Carol turned off the engines. She then turned into Grundy and sat on Annie’s shoulder.

They stepped out of the chariot and headed for home.

Annie and Jane did the usual stuff and finally bedtime came. Annie went to her room and changed into her Grundy sweat-suit.

Jane entered, wearing her nightdress and Annie thought of letting Jane wear Grundy. The moment she thought that she felt a chill in her soul. She then realized that there was no way she could share Grundy with anyone.

“Sister Jane, get in bed and cuddle with me,” Annie said.

Jane did as instructed.

‘Sister Jane, can you hear me?’ Carol asked.

‘Yes carol,’ Jane said.

‘Sister Jane, can you hear me?’ Annie asked.

‘Yes Annie,’ Jane replied.

Jane found herself on a tower of a broken-down castle. Surrounding the castle were two clashing armies filled with soldiers and monsters. The air rang with screams of pain and anger. The scent of blood permeated the air.

The sun shone above. It was pure black and radiated black light. To the right in the sky was a blood-red moon. A cold, chill breeze blew, bringing with it a feeling of desolation and loneliness.

To the left were red and black storm clouds, heralding the annihilation of the human race.

“I’m scared Sister Jane,” Annie whimpered and hugged her sister.

“Please God, make me strong enough to fight this coming storm,” Jane called out with all the feeling she had.

Far in the distance Jane saw a red dot. It weaved around in the sky and then resolved itself into a rapidly approaching Chinese dragon. The dragon zoomed, left and right, up and down, and generally refused to travel in a straight line.

Riding on the dragon was Mark. He waved at the sisters as Grundy landed. Mark got off and Annie hugged Grundy.

“Grundy, I’m scared,” Annie whimpered.

Grundy responded by wrapping Annie in a Grundy suit. Feeling secure once again, Annie greeted Mark, “Hi Mark. How come you changed your appearance?”

“How does he normally appear to you Annie?” Jane asked.

“He always meets me in the form of a ten-year-old prince,” Annie replied.

“You mean with waist length hair and purple eyes?” Jane asked. “That’s too bad. I would have loved to see that.”

“Mark, turn into a prince,” Annie commanded.

“I’m sorry Annie, I don’t know how. I never chose to appear in that other form when I visit,” Mark replied.

“Annie, he can’t change because I’m here,” Jane said. “Last year, I got Mark to sleep on my lap. Both Uncle Arthur and I tried to find his eye color, but couldn’t.”

“Why are we in the middle of Armageddon?” Mark asked.

“I think this is a premonition of the future. I need more training, although I’m not sure how I can be of help to either of you,” Jane replied sadly.

“I’m not worried Jane,” Mark said. “I believe in my First Parents and my biological parents.”

“Me too,” Annie said and hugged Mark.

Annie grabbed Jane and pulled her into a hug. “I’m hugging my favorite sister and my favorite pet,” Annie said. “I know everything will be fine.”

The storm clouds dispersed. The sun turned white and the moon turned to its regular grayish-white color. The fighting came to a stop and the fighters dispersed. The half-destroyed castle repaired itself. Trees and plants bloomed and grew. Happy people frolicked in the sun.

Jane woke up with a start. It was morning. Was that a dream or did it really happen? There was only one way to find out.

“Good morning Sister Jane,” Annie said.

“Good morning Annie,” Jane replied. “Come to my room.”

They entered and Jane closed the door. “Uncle Arthur secured this room. We can talk freely here about anything and the Secret Service won’t hear it.”

“That’s so cool,” Annie said happily. “You have a place, just like me.”

“Did we really talk to Mark in the dream?” Jane asked.

“I want to be with all of him, instead of just half of him, but that’s only possible at night,” Annie said sadly.

Annie then got exited and said, “I know. Why don’t you get Mark to turn into a Mark suit for you to wear? You have no idea how warm and cuddly he is, and how safe and secure you feel.”

“Thank-you for sharing sweetie,” Jane smiled. “Perhaps another time. Right now I need to train. This is a beautiful day and I don’t want to waste it. Don’t forget to change. You know mum and dad don’t like you wearing Grundy in public.”

Annie went to her room and changed. After breakfast she went to the *Princess Annie*. She had at least three hours before lunch. During that time she practiced stage magic tricks.

Finally lunch came and went. Returning to the *Princess Annie*, Annie found a book lying on a nearby table. She picked it up and discovered that it was an immersive novel.

Annie undressed, changed into her Grundy suit and sat on a couch. She looked at the book and said, “So Grundy, it seems like mum and dad want me to read this.”

‘Keep in mind immersive novels aren’t easy to digest,’ Grundy warned.

“But I read your novel without too much trouble,” Annie replied.

‘That’s only because we share a very close bond,’ Grundy assured. ‘It will be very different when reading someone else’s novel.’

Annie contemplated the book and then ripped the front cover off. She ate it. The cover tasted sweater than she expected. She quickly finished the book and lay down and closed her eyes.

Flooding into Annie’s brain were memories of the strong and powerful Queen Jasmine the Great. She experienced the challenges and trials of early life, the trumps and disasters of guiding a country, and the scorn of those who thought her path was wrong. It was most definitely a hard book to swallow.

Annie spent the rest of the day trying to assimilate the memories. Finally Grundy said, ‘Annie, it’s bath time.’

Annie reluctantly got up and headed for home. She didn’t want to leave, but she had no choice. Children had very little freedom. Adults were expecting her.

6. Ten

The opinions and expectations of others   
bind us more than we realize.

Annie woke up bright and early Sunday morning.

‘Grundy, Tomorrow I’ll be ten years old,’ Annie said. ‘Isn’t that great?’

‘Yes Annie. I’m very happy for you,’ Grundy said with a touch of melancholy. The fact that Annie was growing up made him feel lonely.

‘Don’t be sad Grundy,’ Annie said. ‘I’ll always be with you.’

‘It’s all right Annie,’ Grundy said. ‘You’re growing up. You will eventually need to put away things of childhood.’

‘But you’re not a thing of childhood,’ Annie complained.

‘When you grow up and have children of your own, I will babysit them. It’s time for breakfast.’

They went to breakfast. At breakfast, Annie’s father introduced a woman to Annie. “Annie, this is Lady Paula, Dilbert’s aunt.”

“Pleased to meet you, Aunty Paula,” Annie said politely.

“Annie, Dilbert is very sorry about what he did to you last year,” Paula said. “He wants me to look for a present to give to you as a token of apology.”

Grundy growled. Annie translated, “Grundy said, if he were so sorry, why didn’t he come and apologize in person?”

“He will come later and apologize,” Paula assured Annie.

Annie sighed. She smelt a rat, and Grundy agreed with her assessment. Unfortunately, she had no reason to refuse. She and Grundy ate in silence.

Breakfast ended and Annie said goodbye to her parents and sister. They entered a limo and drove off.

Eventually they entered a famous hot spring resort. “Annie, we have booked a private hot spring,” Paula said. “Go change, take a shower and enter the hot spring. I’ll join you shortly.”

Annie entered the indicated door. She undressed in the changing room and then stepped out into the springs.

There, sitting on a stool and showering was Mark. He turned around and looked at Annie. “Annie, what are you doing here?”

“Crap,” Mark exclaimed when he realized he was seeing the princess in her birthday suit. He quickly closed his eyes. At the same time Grundy turned onto clothes and covered Annie.

Seconds later Harimau and Dilbert stepped out into the open. Both wore pink sunglasses. Beside them was Paula.

“Got you,” Dilbert said triumphantly. “I told you Annie, that I would have my revenge, and now your stupid pet is going to die.”

Mark turned off the water and walked to where Annie and the others stood. Paula tossed Mark a towel. Mark held the towel in his hand but did nothing with it.

Nothing was said for a few seconds and then Paula broke the silence. “Do you mind?” She asked, looking embarrassed.

Annie looked at Mark and then at Paula. “What’s the matter with you?” Annie asked, not understanding her embarrassment.

“What’s the matter?” Paula asked, surprised. “He’s naked. That’s what the matter.”

“So he’s naked,” Annie said. “What’s the big deal?”

Paula snapped her fingers. Women appeared and forcefully dressed Mark. They left.

“That’s better,” Paula said with a sigh of relief. “I can’t believe you’re comfortable seeing a man naked. That doesn’t matter. Mark has seen you naked. By law Mark will die.”

Annie ran to Mark and hugged him. Tears flowed down as she said, “But why? Mark isn’t Grundy.”

“Ah, but he is,” Dilbert declared. “Harimau, please explain.”

“It all happened two years ago, when we first received our wands. Everyone had an allegiance to an element but Mark here didn’t. I dug deep and discovered, that meant he also didn’t have an allegiance with a single second form.

“That gave me an idea for the perfect practice joke. I harassed him by telling him he would turn into a sludge monster. At the Second Form ceremony I gave him the willies. He was fooled into thinking I messed with the transformation spell. As a result, his subconscious mind did the rest. You can’t imagine how funny that was.

“That’s not nice,” Annie said, angrily.

“I’m a Tiikeri,” Harimau said with a shrug. “It’s a favorite Tiikeri pastime to torment Dracos.”

“We have a web page dedicated to you,” Dilbert commented. “It’s so funny how many times you’ve been rejected by women for being a brat. Show us the Second Form ceremony video.”

A screen appeared showing the Second Form Initiation Ceremony. On screen, Mark walked up the steps and transformed into a sludge monster. Also on the screen were pictures of students gagging at the sight and smell of Mark’s second form.

Both Harimau and Dilbert fell on the ground laughing. Paula silently laughed. Tears flowed down her face.

“Damn, I should have done my homework,” Mark cursed.

For a moment no one spoke. Finally Dilbert calmed down enough to speak. “That video is by far the funniest prank I’ve ever seen in my life. Once I saw that, I knew I had to meet Harimau. We’ve been best friend ever since. He has a wicked sense of humor.”

“I won world’s best practical joke this June,” Harimau said proudly. “Of all the tricks played on Dracos, none could beat mine.”

“Tiikeri’s really are assholes,” Mark said angrily.

“You know all about assholes, don’t you, being a sludge monster?” Harimau replied.

“That’s a good one,” Dilbert said and hi-fived Harimau. “Anyways, I told Harimau I wanted revenge on Annie, since he’s the best prankster in the world.”

“I found it strange that Mark never refuted being a sludge monster, and confided that with Dilbert,” Harimau said.

“That meant he couldn’t reveal the secret,” Dilbert said. “Putting two and two together, I realized Mark must have seen you naked and was trying to protect himself.”

“That doesn’t prove he saw me,” Annie denied angrily.

“We investigated and discovered Grundy had an attribute age of ten and only had 27% of a soul,” Harimau explained. “Mark also had an attribute age of ten, and 73% of a soul. It was simple to discover what happened. You went to your swamp home to train and turned into a kitty-cat dragon for some unknown reason.

“You chased a bird across the barrier and were captured by the princess. In panic you split your soul in two. The larger part escaped. Using your void element powers, you created a second form for yourself.”

“You saw Annie naked countless times, and even fondled her naked body like the pervert that you are,” Dilbert added. “Just because you turned into a kitty-cat dragon while doing perverted thing, doesn’t change anything. You’re going to die.

“With Harimau’s help, we arranged this little meeting, just to be sure you saw Annie naked. We didn’t want to lose our opportunity, because of a technicality.”

“Grundy, turn into Carol,” Annie commanded. Grundy changed without question.

“Now you have both seen me naked,” Annie said triumphantly. “Now you shall both die.”

“No we won’t,” Dilbert disagreed. “We’re both wearing rose-colored glasses. We can’t see what we’re not allowed to see. To us everyone here is fully clothed.”

“The only boy who can currently see you naked now is Mark,” Harimau said, laughing. “All you did was confirm his guilt.”

Both Tiikeris jerked forward, as if an invisible hand had yanked on their glasses.

In obvious pain, Dilbert screamed, “Don’t bother. Our glasses are magically attached. Forceably removing them would only yank our eyeballs out.”

Annie made a face and said, “Ew. Gross.” Carol turned back into clothes and reformed around Annie.

“Those are rose-colored glasses?” Mark asked. “I thought you two were just expressing your feminine sides.”

The faces of both Tiikeris turned red. “Laugh while you can, for soon you will be dead.”

“That’s murder,” Annie shouted.

“We aren’t going to kill your stupid pet,” Dilbert said. “Your father will. He’s the one that will be calling down divine judgment on Mark. We shall give your dad all the evidence we have and your dad will do the rest. Your dad is so obsessed with following rules that he will sacrifice your happiness over rules.”

“I find it hard to believe a father would do something like that to his daughter, but then again I’m neither royalty nor nobility so I wouldn’t know,” Harimau said.

“That’s not true, my friend,” Dilbert denied. “You have advanced in the hierarchy and have earned the right to marry one of my cousins. You’ll become a noble when you turn twenty-one.”

“I can’t wait. Jamie is cute,” Harimau leered. Jamie frowned at Harimau but said nothing.

“How did they trick you into coming here?” Annie asked Mark.

“Jamie pretended to be a Draco. She even had a Draco chariot,” Mark added.

“How is it possible for a Tiikeri to have a Draco chariot?” Annie asked, ignoring Jamie.

“Believe me it wasn’t easy,” Jamie said. “First we had to kill one spouse and then imprison the other,” Jamie said. “Then we had to…”

“That’s horrible,” Annie exclaimed.

Jamie shrugged and said, “It’s time to go to the palace.”

“See you later, my friend,” Dilbert said. “I’ll tell you everything later. I’ll even share the video of Mark’s execution and Annie’s dad calling forth divine judgment.”

“That’s going to be hysterical,” Harimau laughed. “I bet you’ll win next year’s best practical joke.”

“I’m sure,” Dilbert agreed. “Enjoy yourself. You have the hot spring all day. I even called some feminine companionship for you when we leave. The glasses will come off when we leave.”

Mark, Annie, Jamie and Dilbert left the resort and entered the limo. They drove back to the palace.

Neither Annie nor Mark said anything as doom closed in on them. They were escorted to the king. Dilbert and Jamie presented evidence against Mark.

“Guards, place Mark under arrest,” Ravenswood called. “I shall judge him Monday, 9:00 AM sharp.”

“If Grundy dies, I’ll hate you forever,” Annie shouted. “You will cease being my father.”

“Grundy isn’t an animal. He’s a perverted human who has being doing unspeakable things to you. For his crimes, he cannot be allowed to live,” Ravenswood declared. “Grandmaster Rachael, please come here.”

Moments later the wizard appeared in front of the king. Ravenswood explained the situation to the chief wizard. He then said, “Grandmaster Rachael, please take Annie to her room, dress her in normal clothes and recombine the souls of Mark and Grundy. Make sure Mark is secured until judgment can be made Monday 9:00 AM.”

Guards guided Mark away. Dilbert gloated as Rachael marched Annie to her room.

Unfortunately the amnesia spell didn’t kick in. The king’s decision to judge Mark on Monday prevented it from activating.

In Annie’s room, Rachael magically removed Grundy from Annie and turned him into his kitty-cat form. She made sure Annie dressed in normal clothes and then left with the paralyzed Grundy.

Annie paced the room, wondering what to do. Her pig-headed father was going to kill her pet because of some ridiculous rule formulated thousands of years in the past.

Annie called on Mark’s parents. “Mark’s parents, dad is going to kill my baby. Is there anything you can do to protect him?” Annie begged.

There was no reply.

Annie left her room and wandered aimlessly around the palace grounds. Dinner came and no one spoke. Jane too was depressed and hardly touched her food.

“Don’t tell me you’re mad at me too?” Ravenswood scolded. “He saw you naked.”

“Mark is my best friend. I don’t care if he saw me naked. That’s a retarded rule,” Jane screamed and ran out the room with tear filled eyes.

Seconds later Annie ran off too. She went to her room and sulked. Eventually she fell asleep.

Annie awoke at 6:35 AM and realized she had turned ten years old almost an hour previously. She thought of Mark’s life and the day he turned ten as well. At that time he had gone to the Temple of Initiation and tried to take the initiation. Strangely enough, he had been stuck at that age ever since. Was there a connection?

If she took the initiation, would her age be stuck at ten also? Annie fingered her ring and pondered the consequences of being ten forever.

What was the big deal about being ten forever? It worked fine for Mark, didn’t it? Could she use it as leverage on her dad? After all, if she got stuck at ten, then the only person who could stay with her forever would be Mark. Issuing the Princess Challenge to Mark would strengthen her case.

Clear on what she should do, Annie dressed and headed out.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

Ravenswood tossed and turned in the guestroom. His wife had booted him from the bedroom, citing that stupid rules were more important to him than the happiness of his children.

He tried to explain the importance of law to the stability of the world, but that only got her angrier. As if someone seeing his daughters naked would cause the end of the world.

Looking at the clock, Ravenswood realized that in two hours, he would be calling down divine judgment on someone he knew never intended to spy on his daughters.

“My, my, aren’t we in a pickle?” a strange man appearing out of nowhere said.

Ravenswood nearly jumped out of his skin. For a moment he wondered if the man was real or just a figment of his imagination. How could anyone enter without being invited – unless that someone was Mark’s father?

“Are you here to stop me from calling divine judgment on your son?” Ravenswood asked.

“This is a very nice dog house,” Baldwin marveled, changing the subject. “Did you get into a fight with your wife?”

“He broke the law and has to be judged,” Ravenswood protested, trying to justify himself.

“I wonder what it would be like to live in a doghouse forever. I suppose the doggie treats would be tasty,” Baldwin mused. He nibbled on a dog bone, making loud crunching noises. “I don’t know. This is too crunchy for my taste.” He tossed the bone and it disappeared.

“But what can I do?” Ravenswood pleaded. “As king, I have to uphold all laws.”

Baldwin walked to the side. A recliner appeared and he sat down. “Thou shall spade and neuter your pet. Thou shall walk on the left side of the road on Wednesdays. Thou shall not eat of the flesh of the cow on Thursdays, or is that Fridays?”

“What is my daughter doing?” Ravenswood asked.

A screen appeared with Annie in the center. She walked down a hallway. She stopped at the kitchen, now filled with busy servants.

“Attention everyone,” Annie called out. “This is important. Please listen to what I have to say.”

All eyes turned to her.

“Is she trying to get them to stop me?” Ravenswood asked.

“I don’t know,” Baldwin replied. “Maybe she’s hungry.”

Annie placed her hand on her heart and spoke in a commanding voice, “I, Princess Annie Van Duyn of the house of David, take Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan as my champion, to fight for my honor and win my hand in the field of dreams.”

She turned and left.

For a moment Annie’s words failed to register. Then it hit Ravenswood like a ton of bricks. His daughter spoke the words that could literally destroy his country.

“Why would she issue such a challenge? How does she know about the Princess Challenge? Is their relationship deeper than I know?” Ravenswood asked.

Baldwin held an hourglass in his hand. “Memories are funny things. We remember things we need to forget and forget things we need to remember.” With that Baldwin dropped the hourglass.

It shattered into a million pieces. A moment later the hourglass reformed and returned to his hand.

“Are you saying I commanded my memories to be erased?” Ravenswood asked.

“Memories are like a boat floating in a river. We can fish thing up if we want and throw them away if we want,” Baldwin rambled.

Ravenswood raised his wand. “I, King Ravenswood Van Duyn of the house of David, command that all memories concerning Mark and Annie be restored to me,” Ravenswood commanded.

Memories of going to Dragonia flooded Ravenswood’s mind. He remembered how Annie hugged the elders of the clan and how Arthur Lucas had presented the *Princess Annie* to Annie under the disguise of a bribe. It was planned from then, perhaps even before.

Ravenswood remembered the Christmas party when Mark turned into a child prince. He remembered them meeting countless times, only to have their memories taken away.

“Why didn’t Annie forget?” Ravenswood asked. He knew the answer the moment he said it. Grundy wasn’t one of Mark’s legal forms, which was why their memories were intact. It was part of a loophole Ravenswood hadn’t noticed at the time of the casting.

As for now, Ravenswood’s decision to perform judgment blocked the spell.

Ravenswood watched as Annie walked out the just opened palace gates. He watched mesmerized while Baldwin rambled on about Life, the Universe and nothing in particular.

Annie entered the school grounds and finally approached the Temple of Initiation.

“What’s she doing? She can’t take the initiation now. It’s forbidden,” Ravenswood objected.

“Nothing is forbidden, my boy, as long as you’re willing to accept the consequences of your actions,” Baldwin replied.

*Did he just say, ‘My boy?’* Ravenswood thought, startled. No one calls a king that. He then remembered that Baldwin was hundreds of years older than him and an elder of the Draco clan – a true elder, not the so-called elders of the Illuminati. <>

“What are the consequences for someone who has taken the initiation prematurely?” Ravenswood asked.

“You tell me,” Baldwin replied. “Don’t you know anyone who has taken the initiation prematurely?”

All those indirect replies were getting on Ravenswood’s nerves. Couldn’t the elder just say what he wanted? Wasn’t it the job of elders to command?

“Your son took the initiation at the age of ten, and now he’s stuck at ten forever,” Ravenswood said. “Why are you showing me this? I can stop Annie from making that same mistake.”

“Destiny is a funny thing,” Baldwin intoned. “I act with free will, and yet it is always in accordance with destiny.”

“The prophesy,” Ravenswood exclaimed. “Damn it. Why don’t you tell me what you want me to do?”

“This world is a world of learning and of experience. Some advance faster than others, but we will eventually reach the same place,” Baldwin replied.

Annie approached the twin doors of the temple. “Open the doors,” she commanded. The doors opened at her command. She entered.

“Both Mark, Grundy and Annie are part of the Prophesy of Atlantis. When will the souls of Mark and Grundy combine?” Ravenswood asked.

“That task is beyond the ability of your court wizard. I can combine them at your command,” Baldwin offered. “You can then judge them as you see fit.”

“Or I can allow Mark to take the Princess Challenge,” Ravenswood finished.

Annie went to the first secret room and looked under the altar. The doll was in place. She exited the room.

“If Mark succeeds, he will gain the right to marry Annie and all will be forgiven,” Ravenswood said. “If he fails, he will die and this country will be destroyed.”

“It’s your decision as to what you want to do,” Baldwin said. “That’s my totem. I remember when Mark snuck into my room and cut my hair for the doll while I pretended to sleep. You have no idea how badly I wanted to give him a hug and stop him from going forward with the plan.”

“How did Annie find out about how to bypass the regular ceremony?” Ravenswood asked.

“Annie read Mark’s life book,” Baldwin said. “It was destined to happen, considering how strong their bond was getting.”

Ravenswood sighed, resigning himself to the fact that the Atlantian prophesy required that his daughter take the initiation now and that Mark take the Princess Challenge.

“Why Annie?” Ravenswood asked. “It’s because she’s a direct descendent of King David, isn’t she?”

“It’s far deeper than that,” Baldwin replied.

Annie examined the last doll. She then went to the main chamber and sat in the center of the room. She cast the spell for the initiation.

“It is complete,” Baldwin sighed. “It’s a shame but Annie will not be able to consciously perform magic until after she officially takes the ceremony when she turns sixteen.”

Ravenswood evoked the spell that controlled who remembered and who forgot the relationship between Annie and Mark. “I have to remember everything,” he declared. “I need to take responsibility for what I just did to my daughter. Elder Baldwin, please combine the souls of Mark and Grundy. It’s time to begin the Princess Challenge. No one will know what has happened and what will happen except for us.”

Baldwin nodded sadly. “As you wish, Majesty. I wish I could take the place of my son. Unfortunately, neither of us has the innocence needed for what is to come.”

Baldwin got up and bowed to the king. “It was a pleasure talking to you. It’s a shame we couldn’t have met under better circumstances,” Baldwin said and disappeared.

Ravenswood pondered the conversation with the elder. Baldwin had come and offered him the chance to stop the Princess Challenge. That was necessary so that Ravenswood could take full responsibility. That was as it should be since he was king and the father of Annie.

Ravenswood got out of bed, feeling one of his hairs turn gray. The next eleven years were going to be very long indeed.

Part III -   
The Princess  
and the  
Sludge Monster



1. The Wizard’s Initiation

I seek the edge of this mortal world –   
the place where wonder begins.

The Goth girl walked into the Temple of Initiation, acting as if she owned the world. She had jet-black hair with purple highlights, black eyeliner and lipstick, black contact lenses, and a nose-ring. She wore skin-tight black leather pants, black tank-top, a navel ring, black stiletto shoes, and black nails.

Students stepped out of her way as they saw the scorn in her eyes. Her associates grouped around her but none could pull off the Goth look as well as her.

The headmaster stepped onstage and began her boring speech. The Goth girl blew bubbles with her chewing gum as she waited for the initiation.

“Normally Princess Annie would have been the Student Council President,” the headmaster droned. “However, certain circumstances have prevented her from taking that role. As a result, James Socks is now our president. Mr. Socks, please say something to our new first year students.

“I wonder what happened to the princess?” a new gang member asked. She joined *The Dragon’s Bitches* just a few days previously.

“Who cares?” the Goth girl replied with scorn. “She’s probably in the hospital after living too long with that idiot of a king.”

“The king isn’t an idiot,” a nearby student said angrily.

“You’re right,” the Goth girl said menacingly. “He’s also an asshole.”

“The king is a great man,” someone else berated.

The Goth girl just shook her head and sighed. “You’re all so delusional. I refuse to argue with fools. However, I’m willing to fight with you if you insist.” She looked menacingly around and the others backed down. No one wanted trouble.

The headmaster just looked at the Goth girl and sighed.

The initiation ceremony began.

The Goth girl felt herself leave her body. She floated up and away. Below her, people struggled and strove for temporary pleasures, while heading for a finality called Death. She saw beautiful, happy babies being born, then watched as they too were struck down by disease, infirmity and eventually death. Nothing anyone did had meaning, since all would be lost when civilization ended.

The universe expanded below her. It was an accident formed out of nothingness and at its core had no meaning. Eventually the universe would die from heat death and no one would be there to notice.

The Goth girl returned to her body. Tears flowed down her eyes, ruining her mascara.

“Are you okay Carol?” gang leader Jasmine asked, concerned.

“I was right,” Carol the Goth girl affirmed. “Life has no meaning. This universe shouldn’t exist. It’s an abomination. The only things we can do in life are train and make life interesting for others by shaking up their worlds.”

Jasmine hugged Carol and said nothing. The other sisters huddled around Carol.

“Come on, let’s eat,” Jasmine suggested.

“What’s the point?” Carol asked. “Life is meaningless and this world is just a giant toilet bowl.” Nevertheless, she allowed Jasmine to guide her out of the building.

The gang went to the parking lot and got on their motorbikes. The driving age for riding motorbikes in Washington was fifteen. More importantly, motorcycles were bad ass.

They went to an all-you-can-eat Chinese restaurant. As usual, people stepped out of their way. Jasmine filled a plate with food and placed it in front of Carol. She placed food in her mouth. Moments later Carol’s mood improved. She fed herself.

The plate emptied and Carol headed for seconds, thirds, and fourths.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting fat?” the new girl, Aileen, asked. Her original name was Alexandria. However, the names of dragon bitches could only have two syllables, and so she changed her name.

“Carol is the number one bitch of the Dragon,” Jasmine answered. “She can’t get fat, no matter how much she eats.”

“The Dragon is the devourer of worlds,” Carol explained between mouthfuls. “He devours everything because he has nothing inside. He travels from world to world, seeking to fill the eternal emptiness inside of him. We are his bitches.”

“We are thinking of changing our logo,” Jasmine said. “Carol has a design we’re considering.”

“I’m also thinking of changing my name to Lilith,” Carol said. “The name Carol is too bright and cheerful.”

“Isn’t Lilith the name of a demon in the bible?” Aileen asked.

Carol nodded. “That’s why it’s the perfect name. I should have a dark and evil name if I’m going to be one of the dragon’s bitches.”

“If that’s what you want, I can make it happen,” Jasmine offered.

“Thanks Jasmine, you’re always so good to me, even though I don’t deserve it,” the newly renamed Lilith said.

Jasmine just smiled and said, “I know.”

They paid and headed out to their hangout.

The hangout resided in the swamps behind the school. It was an old abandoned hotel and hot-spring resort that Jasmine found several years ago. It was perfect, since no one visited and the place was in excellent repair. More importantly, it didn’t leak. The gang had crashed there ever since.

Everyone had a room to themselves since there were only eight members and the hotel had 42 rooms.

They entered a room Lilith currently used as an art studio. Jasmine approached a covered painting and exposed it to the newest member.

The painting showed a ferocious black dragon holding a princess in his hand. She wore a beautiful wedding dress and held a bouquet of flowers.

Her head was missing. Instead of a head, there was a blood-squirting hole.

Blood covered the dragon’s grinning face.

“Yikes,” Aileen exclaimed, flinching at the image.

“It gives you the chills, doesn’t it?” gang member Sadie asked.

Lilith tenderly touched the painting. “It’s so romantic. I wish I were the one whose soul was being devoured.”

“Our Lilith really is a dragon bitch,” gang member Helga mused.

“Okay everyone, does anyone have an alternative logo for our gang?” Jasmine asked.

No one replied.

“Okay, all in favor of adopting this as our new logo?” Jasmine asked.

Everyone raised their hands.

“All opposed?” Jasmine asked.

No one replied.

“The ayes have it,” Jasmine said. “I’ll submit the order now for new jackets. We’ll meet here at 7:00 PM to go to *Darkest Desires*.”

Lilith covered the picture. Even though she had painted it, she couldn’t look at it for more than a minute before getting overwhelmed with emotion.

She retrieved a new canvas and placed it on an easel. Last week the sludge monster ate a packed church. No one escaped except a fluffy white kitten. It made for a great subject.

Hours passed and Lilith completed the church and surrounding area. People streamed from the church, screaming, and pointing in horror at the church roof. It was time to paint Sludgie, the sludge monster.

“It’s time to go,” Zelda said.

“Already?” Lilith asked. “I was just about to paint Sludgie.” She put her paint brushes away.

Both girls left the studio and met the others at the front. They headed out and arrived at *Darkest Desires* at around 7:35 PM.

Onstage a Goth boy gave a soliloquy on the meaninglessness of existence. Lilith nodded with approval. She liked the boy, whoever he was. However, something prevented her from approaching. He sat down without looking at her.

“Damn,” the Goth boy cursed and dematerialized, demonstrating his junior-level wizard status.

Lilith nodded with approval. If you’re going to live in hell, you might as well be strong.

Noting the empty stage, Lilith stepped up to the mike. She sat on the stool, closed her eyes, and got in touch with her inner darkness. She spoke:

Life is filled with dreariness and despondency.  
I see a light of hope far off in the distance.  
I chase after it.  
I catch it in my hands.  
It disappears.  
All I’m left with is greater darkness and despair than before.

“It’s surprising how dark Carol’s lyrics always are,” one Goth girl in the audience whispered to another. The other Goth girl replied, “It always gives me the shivers.”

“I’ve changed my name to Lilith, the demon lover of Draco, the Dragon Lord of Darkness,” Lilith announced and sat down.

Lilith sipped on a coke in a wine glass and watched people dancing to techno music.

“Did you hear?” someone at the next table asked his companion. “The sludge monster rampaged again today.”

“What did Sludgie do?” Lilith asked, curious.

“It dropped turds on the heads of countless people throughout the country, including the king,” the man replied.

Lilith fell on the ground, rolling with laughter. “Did it do that on everyone, or just the high and mighty?” she asked after she calmed down.

“Mostly upper-class people were pooped on,” the man replied, “although some lower-class people needed showers as well.”

Lilith nodded. “They probably needed pooping on too.”

The other patrons agreed with Lilith’s assessment, probably because none of them got pooped on.

Midnight came and they headed home. Lilith stayed up for a few more hours and painted Sludgie sitting on top of the church. Ooze flowed down the side of the building. The blob had two sad green eyes. It reached out with one dripping hand to the people.

Painting done, Lilith headed for bed. She brushed her teeth, removed her makeup, undressed, and entered her bed. She then cuddled with a stuff cat and fell asleep.

2. Another Day on the Job

If it weren’t for the brown stuff,   
the green stuff wouldn’t grow

Mark sat on the couch and closed his eyes. His best friend Harry was watching the news. Mark didn’t know why Harry watched the news. All news was depressing.

The announcer described how the sludge monster pooped on people’s heads. Harry glanced at Mark, but didn’t say anything.

“Why doesn’t the government do something about that disgusting sludge monster?” a man in an expensive suit complained to the announcer. “What’s the point of us paying taxes if they don’t do anything?” A brown spot clearly showed on his bright green hair.

“How was your day?” Harry asked.

“Same old, same old,” Mark replied. “I unclogged the king’s toilet. It seems a copycat pulled a prank on him.”

Mark was the president and owner of *The Sludginator*. The company theme was, ‘We get dirty so you can stay clean’.

“I also had a big job in Washington, DC,” Mark continued. “For some reason they can really churn out the poop, and their pipes are always getting clogged.

“Tomorrow I’m going to Europe. There’s no shortage of work for a poop master.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m sorry I asked. I meant, how was your visit to *Darkest Desires*?”

“It was good,” Mark said, smiling. “I saw the super cute Goth girl again. Unfortunately I was called for an emergency unclogging.”

“Why don’t you ask her out?” Harry asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mark replied. “She’s only sixteen. They’d arrest me for being a pedophile.”

“Wouldn’t it be fun if you married her?” Harry asked. “Then we could get married together.”

Mark frowned. “My existence is poop. There’s no way in hell anyone would want to associate with me.”

“I associate with you,” Harry noted. “And so does Jane.”

“That’s because there’s something seriously wrong with the both of you,” Mark replied. “Or maybe you two are just blind to what lies just below the surface.

“Never mind that,” Mark said, changing the subject. “When are you going to marry Stephaney? You’re 24 years old, and that Stephaney is a cutie in both forms. What’s stopping you?”

“I can’t,” Harry replied. “You need me.”

“What I need is a beer,” Mark grumbled and stared at his empty coke glass. For some reason the probation spell that prevented underage people from drinking was still preventing him from drinking, even though he had lived 24 years. All alcohol turned non-alcoholic when an underage person touched it.

Harry took a sip of coke. He could drink beer, but reframed from doing so in front of Mark.

“I can’t believe I’m going to be teaching earth magic at school,” Harry said. “And be a guidance counselor.”

Mark snuggled up to Harry and said in a girlie voice, “Oh Harry, you’re my hero, shaping all those young minds into the next generation of Wizards.”

Harry kissed Mark on the brow. Mark blinked. That wasn’t what he expected.

“You still view me as a cute child, don’t you?” Mark asked. That no longer bothered Mark. Being an eternal child was better than being a living turd.

“Well you are an eternal ten-year-old boy,” Harry replied fondly.

“Just because my attribute is stuck, doesn’t make me that age. Such a thing is impossible,” Mark said and leaned back. He sighed. “There’s no point arguing.”

Mark was secretly happy to be with someone who didn’t feel repulsed by him, but that was only because both Harry and Jane were insane.

“I have a ton of work to do tomorrow,” Mark said and got up. “Then I have to figure out how to level up. I’ve been stuck at my current level for over two years.” He went to his room.

3. School Days

Only those who walk their own path,   
regardless of the opinions of others   
deserve respect.

The Goth girl strolled into class blowing bubbles. She went to the back of the class and sat in an empty chair. Leaning back with feet on the desk, she watched the bright and cheery students.

In a way she envied them. It’s better to live a delusional life than to know that existence had no meaning.

The homeroom teacher didn’t appreciate her laidback attitude. “Young lady, kindly put you feet down. People can see up your dress, and please stop chewing.”

Lilith lowered her legs and swollowed her gum. “Relax old guy,” she said. “Seeing my panties won’t get you killed.”

Half the class laughed. The others tried to hide their mirth.

The professor looked angrily at Lilith. “Ms. Lucas, with that attitude, you will never advance far in wizardry.”

Lilith just shrugged. “Whatever,” she said and stuck more gum into her mouth.

The professor gave up and addressed the class. “Greetings class. My name is Professor Wiggins. Congratulations on your initiation. You are now full-fledged wizards...”

Wiggins outlined the events and challenges that would face the students over the next three years.

Lunch came and Lilith was bored. The only thing she learned was that Wiggins was a windbag. However, she knew the session after lunch was essential to her advancement as a wizard. That was when the Book of Knowledge would be unlocked and she would get her wand. She wondered what kind of wand she would receive. A dark and evil part of her said that she would receive nothing.

After a tediously long lunch, school finally resumed. Lilith took her seat and waited for her cool toys.

“Welcome back students,” Wiggins began. “Let’s begin with a tool that all wizards have. That is the Book of Knowledge. I shall now enable that for you,” Wiggins said.

Lilith saw a second window appear in her mind. It was like having a second pair of eyes, looking at an entirely different scenery. She knew what to expect, but still felt intense excitement. Magic was the only thing in life that made life bearable.

Wiggins continued the lecture, explaining how to use the Book of Knowledge. Lilith listened raptly, even though she knew everything Wiggins had to say.

“Okay everyone,” Wiggins said. “Please follow me and you shall obtain your wands, the symbol and most important tool of a wizard.”

Lilith followed the class out, pretending she didn’t care. She didn’t want to spoil her reputation.

Everyone entered the temple and huddled around Wiggins. “Students, allow me to introduce Mr. Bladder, our wands expert,” Wiggins said.

*Wiggins? Bladder? Why do these teachers have such weird names?* Lilith wondered. *They can’t be making a statement, can they? No. They’re too lame for that.*

The students lined up at the base of the stage containing the altar. Lilith was near the beginning of the line, pretending she was there only because the line formed around her, and not because she was eager for a new wand.

The first student walked up the steps and knelt in front of the altar. A wand appeared in front of the teenage girl. It looked like a paint brush. Eagerly the teenage girl accepted it and stepped down.

The next boy also accepted a wand.

It was Lilith’s turn. She knelt, did the needful and waited. Nothing happened. She prayed again with the same result. With growing frustration and dread, she tried it a third time and then a fourth time.

Finally Lilith got up, realizing a worthless person such as herself probably didn’t deserve a wand. She opened her mouth and a stream of profanity spewed forth, cursing God, the elders, and everyone on the planet.

With overwhelming hatred, Lilith wished for the world to drown in poo. She stepped down the steps and stood in a corner and waited for the others to get wands as well. She hated them all, because they could get wands and she couldn’t.

Lilith’s gang hovered around her, but didn’t know what to do. They discretely hid their wands and tried to comfort her as best they could.

Wiggins spoke to the class, “Students, it’s time to discover your primary element.” He led them to an isolated garden.

In the center of the garden was a granite pedestal. On the top was a compass with six areas, like the slices of a pie. The slices of pie displayed the symbols for Earth, Darkness, Water, Air, Light, and Fire inscribed on them. Outside the pie was a featureless gray area.

Wiggins gave a basic lecture on the theory of elements. “Please form a line,” he instructed.

Lilith joined the line, surrounded by her gang. One by one the gang discovered their primary element. Lilith placed her hands on the sides of the pedestal.

The hand swung lazily around but refused to stop. Lilith stared at the dial in surprise. That was unexpected. Everyone had a primary element, and that had nothing to do with entitlement or personal worth.

“This is very strange,” Wiggins mused. “In the history of the world, there was only one person who didn’t receive a wand and who didn’t have a primary element.”

“That was Marcus Lucas, wasn’t it?” someone called out.

Wiggins nodded. “He graduated with the highest wizard level in the history of the school.”

Hearing that, Lilith decided to top his score. That shouldn’t be difficult. From her research of top wizards, she found he wasted at least half an hour a day trying to find a girlfriend, only to be rejected for being too young.

Lilith had no interest in boys. In her opinion, they were all idiots. Girls were no better. If Marcus hadn’t wasted so much time, he would have received a higher passing grade. She felt a little sad for all that wasted potential and wondered what he was doing now – probably training to be the youngest supreme master in the history of the world.

“Okay Marcus, you have a new rival. I will beat your score,” Lilith challenged Marcus softly.

“Okay class, your homework assignment is to get comfortable with your Book of Knowledge and your wand. Tomorrow you shall begin training,” Wiggins said. “Class dismissed.”

The class dispersed.

Lilith’s gang approached and the leader spoke. “Let’s eat dinner and then train,” Jasmine said. “We have a lot of work to do if we are to be worthy of the Dragon.”

Lilith nodded. “I think the Dragon will be happy if we strive to exceed Marcus. Remember, he never had a wand, so it should be easy to surpass him.”

“Maybe he excelled because he didn’t have a wand. Maybe not having a wand is better,” Jasmine suggested. She paused and then said, “I think I’ll give my wand to my uncle for safe keeping, and then train without it.”

“But wands are necessary, since they maintain the stability of the world,” Zelda argued, frightened.

“I think that’s the problem with the world,” Lilith said. “It’s too stable. People are forgetting magic. Without magic, this world will go to hell. It’s already going to hell.”

The gang nodded and headed for their bikes.

They arrived at the all-you-can-eat restaurant twenty minutes later. As usual it was busy. The gang found spots and ate. Lilith ate mechanically, focusing on customizing her Book of Knowledge. Nine empty plates stacked up next to her when she finished.

The Book of Knowledge was a marvelous thing. It was like the perfect computer with infinite memory and speed. However, the extent you could use it depended on your wizard level. Of course, that applied to regular computers and everything in life. Mastery only came through knowledge, experience and hard work.

Lilith woke from her reverie when someone commented, “Mod, I just heard on the news. It’s raining poo throughout the world. It’s a fine mist of really stinky liquid and it’s covering everything with grime.”

Lilith looked out the window. Everything was fine.

“I have further news,” Mod replied. “The only place in the world not being affected by the sludge monster is here. We are in the calm center of the storm.”

People throughout the restaurant pulled out their smart phones, tablets, and other electronic devices.

Someone exclaimed, “She’s right. The eye of the storm is centered on us and is around twenty miles in diameter.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Gretchen, another member of the gang said. “Unless the Dragon is protecting us.”

“That’s true,” Sadie agreed. “The sludge monster has never come near us.”

Lilith’s only reply was, “Where did these plates come from? I don’t remember eating so much.”

“Lilith, do you think the Dragon is protecting us?” Helga asked.

“Of course,” Lilith replied. “He will always protest us, as long as we dedicate our lives to strength.”

“What’s the name of the Dragon?” Aileen asked.

“His name is Draco, the evil dragon of the bible,” Dara, the eight member said.

“He represents personal power,” Zelda said. “In this evil world of ours, that’s the only thing we can rely on.”

“And that’s why we shall be the strongest in this world,” Jasmine said. “Come on girls, it’s time to return to our clubhouse to train.”

Lilith called the waiter over and got the check. It was $128.95. She rounded it up to $200.00 and they left.

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The rest of the week went uneventfully. Lilith would lie back and pretend she wasn’t interested while the teachers would look at her in disappointment.

After three days and three nights of downpour, the deluge of poo ended. Some said it heralded the end of the world. However, its end-result was to improve the fertility of the land throughout the world. As a result, no one could decide what to make of it.

Friday evening came and classes ended for the week. “Everyone, my uncle wants me to go home to my family estate for the weekend. He didn’t say for what. Sorry,” Jasmine apologized.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lilith shrugged. “Just remember to train.”

“I leave tomorrow morning,” Jasmine said.

The gang headed for their usual Friday Night Girl’s Night at *Darkest Desires*.

The Goth boy was there as usual. He drank like a fish. Empty glasses surrounded him. Something was bugging Lilith and she was determined to find out.

The waiter came to them and Lilith asked, “What kind of beer is he drinking? It looks like coke.”

“It is coke,” the waiter replied. “That boy is underage.”

That was strange. Lilith was certain he was at least twenty-five. He certainly looked mature enough.

“How old is he?” Lilith asked.

“I don’t know, miss,” the waiter replied. “My reader only says that he’s underage.”

Lilith ordered a coke and watched people doing their monologues onstage.

The Goth boy got on stage and sang *the 6th gate* by the *D-Devils*.

He sang with a deep demonic voice, accompanying himself on an electric bass guitar:

Six centuries ago,

The last visitor from earth entered my world.  
Now, it's your turn to *feel - that - pain*!

The gates are open!  
Pain, anger, hate, fear, chaos, darkness, evil, hell!

Mark screamed, as if in pain.

The gates are open!

Gate 1:  
Darkness, the world of demons.  
Look around you,  
They're everywhere.

Gate 2:  
My guards are watching you.

Gate 3:  
Only evil lives here.

Gate 4:  
There's no way out!

Gate 5:  
Feel the fire...

Gate 6:  
Pick up your weapons and FIGHT!

Fight... Fight...

And dance with the devil!!!

The gates are open!

Gate 1, gate 2, gate 3, gate 4, gate 5, gate **6... 6... 6..**.

Now fight me again!

Fight... Fight...

And dance with the devil

Damn, that was scary, Lilith thought to herself as she felt a shiver pass down her spine. The song was well sung.

The Goth boy returned to his seat and resumed drinking coke.

In due course, Lilith got up and sang. From the corner of her eye, she saw that the Goth boy liked it. Feeling happy, Lilith sat down.

All good things must come to an end, and so *Darkest Desires* closed for the night. Lilith reluctantly got up. It would be a very long week before she could enjoy the Goth boy’s company again.

The Goth boy sighed and disappeared.

Lilith got up and headed for home. Now that her one indulgence was over, it was time to train.

4. Monster Spawn

A monster is the embodiment  
of our primal fears and malicious intent

“Daddy, daddy, I have horrible news,” Jane said by way of greeting. Her dad had to clear some time from his busy schedule, since Jane told his secretary that there was an emergency.

“What’s the matter dear?” Ravenswood asked.

“This information is for your ears only,” Jane said in an agitated voice.

Ravenswood gave the signal and the room cleared. “What’s the matter dear?” Ravenswood asked. He knew this was important, or Jane wouldn’t have interrupted his court.

“You know the three days of poo we experienced? That was more than just the sludge monster losing control of himself,” Jane said. She paused a moment, realizing that she had made a disgusting pun.

“Go on,” Ravenswood said.

“This afternoon, he revealed to me that he had spawned the Antichrist sometime during that deluge. He doesn’t know exactly when. He also said he used 23% of the accumulated negative energy of the earth to spawn the monster,” Jane reported. “That energy has combined with 12% of his soul to create the Antichrist and he has no control over it.”

That was bad news. With only 12% of a soul, there was no way that the Antichrist would be rational. With 23% of the accumulated evil energy of the world, it was extremely dangerous. That was enough energy to destroy the planet a dozen times over.

The news sent chills down Ravenswood’s spine. Knowing that this was prophesized and having it actually happen were completely different.

For a few seconds Ravenswood was paralyzed with fear. Getting a grip of himself, he nodded. “Thanks Jane. I’ll take it from here.”

“Okay dad, I’ll go train,” Jane said and left.

Ravenswood called his friend Wally and explained the situation. Wally in turn said he would contact King Robert Bloomberg, the Grand Poo-bah of the council. It was time to prepare for war.

In the meantime, Jane went to see her best friends Harry and Mark. Jane chose not to marry since she wanted to train full time for the coming Armageddon. The world couldn’t understand her decision not to marry, since no one outside of select members of the hidden clans knew of the approaching calamity.

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A year passed. It was the first Friday of Lilith’s second year of school. The world continued doing its thing, unaware of the hidden truths that shaped the world.

“In breaking news, Israel has announced that it will rebuild its holy temple that was destroyed by the Romans in ancient times,” the announcer said.

“I’m interviewing a representative of the Israel government, a Mr. Chai Moshe. Mr. Moshe, how was it possible to bring about this historical event?”

“It’s all thanks to the hard work of a certain person, whose name we are not at liberty to disclose just yet,” Mr. Moshe said. “He appeared on stage almost a year ago. He is a miracle worker. Somehow he was able to work an agreement with us, the Christians, the Palestinians, the Muslims, and other factions in order to bring about this miracle.

“Other countries have offered their full support of the plan, notably King Robert Bloomberg of Morocco.”

“I thought that the plans for the Great Temple were lost forever,” the announcer asked.

“Everyone thought so too,” Mr. Moshe said. “Then our miracle worker found the plans in an ancient Vatican vault. After months of research, we have confirmed that the plans are genuine.”

“I’ve noted that the number of conflicts in the Middle East has substantially decreased,” the announcer said.

Mr. Moshe nodded. “That’s right. Our benefactor has an unbelievable power to make people see reason. We are on the verge of having true piece in the Middle East.”

Interviews with locals followed. Each person expressed their desire for peace.

“The Antichrist really is active, isn’t he?” Jane asked. She sat beside Harry and Mark.

Mark nodded. “With the amount of power he has at his command, it’s easy to make people do his bidding. Even your Grand Poo-bah is ensnared by his glamour.”

“That’s not surprising,” Jane said. “That guy is an old fart, just like most of the people in the hidden clans.”

“I visited Dragonia from afar recently,” Mark said. “It’s not as healthy as it used to be, although I don’t think the people there have noticed. The heart of the sacred Tree has been poisoned. It’s only a matter of time before it dies.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do about it?” Jane asked.

“Like what?” Mark asked. “I’m a sludge monster, the incarnation of pure evil. You are both just junior level wizards.”

“You’re not evil,” both Harry and Jane said together.

“Then how do you explain the fact that I spawned the Antichrist?” Mark asked, and then flinched.

“Are you okay Mark?” Jane asked worriedly.

“I think I just spawned a huge swarm of locusts throughout the world,” Mark said.

Neither Harry not Jane said anything, knowing that Mark had no control over his monster powers.

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It was the first Friday of Lilith’s second year of school. Lilith sat in class and waited impatiently.

“Class, the time to receive your second forms has arrived,” second year homeroom professor Meagan announced. “Everyone, please follow me to the Temple of Transformations.”

Everyone whispered excitedly about what their second forms would be. Lilith fancied herself to be a dark dragon. It didn’t matter, just as long as it wasn’t cute and fluffy.

The class entered an area filled with statues of the most common beings students drew their second forms from.

A concrete stage 800 feet in diameter stone stage dominated the statue garden.

“As you can see,” Meagan said. “The stage is big enough for even the largest second forms. Now please form a line and we shall begin.

“Hanna-belle, walk up the steps and to the center of the stage. Your transformation will be automatic. The rest of the day is free so that you may get to know your second form.”

Hanna-belle walked up the steps and transformed into a fifty-foot giant. She walked around the stage with booming footsteps and turned back into human form. She got off the stage.

The next person stepped onto the stage. Finally it was Lilith’s turn. She stepped on the stage and felt herself changing. Her vision altered and the world became brighter and more colorful. Colors she never knew possible came into existence. Her sense of smell and hearing equally increased.

“Oh my gosh, she’s so cute,” someone called.

Turning around, Lilith found everyone staring at her in awe. She floated towards her classmates, who were enraptured with her appearance.

Wondering what they were seeing, Lilith looked at herself using her Book of Knowledge and got a fright of her life. She was a cute and fluffy cherub. The sight of herself triggered a memory within her. She had seen cherubs before with someone she held dear. No. That was her mind playing tricks on her. Never the less, a tear flowed down her face and she changed back to human form.

Lilith walked down the steps and watched others achieve their second forms.

While brooding, Lilith overheard some talking. “Hey look, I have a second form that’s cooler than my brother Mark.”

Lilith marched up to the boy and grabbed him by the scruff of his collar. Her face was beet-red. “You have a brother named Mark? I HATE Mark. I hate anyone who associates with Mark. I wish every city that Mark resides in be invaded by locusts.”

“What’s wrong with the name Mark? I think it’s a great name,” an assistant teacher asked.

“You’re a Mark sympathizer,” Lilith accused with an outstretched hand. “No, your name is Mark.” Lilith looked at the assistant teacher with hatred. The air around Lilith shimmered with power. A ball of fire appeared in her hand. She raised her hand, intent on incinerating the hapless teacher.

The teacher looked at Lilith in terror.

Before anyone could react, Harry appeared behind Lilith and touched her. She disappeared.

“Sorry about that,” Harry said and bowed to everyone. “We knew that Lilith had an extreme aversion to the name Mark, but we didn’t think she would use violence.”

“Are you going to punish her?” someone asked.

“That’s none of your business,” Harry said sternly. “From now on, I recommend you never use the ‘M’ word in her presence, if you know what’s good for you.”

Harry disappeared and reappeared next to Lilith. They were in the swamps behind the clubhouse of the Dragon’s Bitches.

“Hi Ms. Lucas,” Harry greeted happily. “You lost control when someone said the ‘M’ word.”

“I know, Professor Banks,” Lilith sighed. “I don’t know why I lose control when I hear the ‘M’ word.”

“You should talk to your sister,” Harry said gently. “She worries about you a great deal.”

“By the way, you were best friends with Marcus Lucas, weren’t you?” Lilith asked. “According to the school records, he graduated with the highest grades in school history.”

Harry found Lilith’s comment strange. She could say ‘Marcus’ but not ‘Mark’.

“Yes Mar – Mar – M – M – Lucas, Marcus Lucas is my best friend,” Harry stuttered. He didn’t want Lilith to wig out again.

“I resolved to beat his grade when I graduate,” Lilith said.

“I know you’ll do it,” Harry replied.

“Thanks professor,” Lilith replied. “How come adults are so lame?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Most people don’t bother learning magic and even those who practice take forever to advance to higher levels,” Lilith said. “You on the other hand are a level 53 junior wizard, and you’re only 25. That’s crazy compared to the rest of the world.”

“Thanks dear,” Harry said, feeling flattered. “Your sister is level 54.”

“I know,” Lilith nodded. “Our Grand Poo-bah is over 1300 years old and he still hasn’t ascended. Why is that?”

“It’s because they have strayed from the true path of God, and think that their way is right,” Harry explained. “For one thing, they think the human body is evil.

“Why do you think it’s forbidden for men to see princesses naked? It’s because a princess is considered to be the idealized woman. They don’t have womanly parts.”

“I have a vagina, just like all women,” Lilith insisted. “Do you want to see?”

“No thanks,” Harry declined. “I don’t want to die.

“The hidden clans teach that we are inherently sinful, and that we are bad. The problem with that teaching is that it limits our ability to grow spiritually.

“Regret, Shame, Guilt, Helplessness, Social Isolation, and Fear are some of the chains that bind us and prevent us from gaining true mastery. That is what the hidden clans force upon us, and that is why King Robert Bloomberg will never go beyond his currently level, regardless of how long he lives. Hope, Self-Worth, Forgiveness, Personal-Power, Human Warmth, and Courage is what we need.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t be lecturing to you. You’re not in class.”

“I don’t mind,” Lilith said. “Is that why you and Sister were able to level up so fast?”

“No,” Harry said. “Your sister and I are training in preparation for Armageddon. However you cut it, leveling up is incredibly difficult, as you well know. Most people aren’t willing to make the effort, which is why it takes so long.”

“Say, I hadn’t realized just how cute you are,” Lilith said.

“Thanks Ms. Lucas,” Harry said. “However, I think your dad would kick my ass if I were to date you.”

Lilith grimaced and a tear rolled down her face. “I hate my dad for stealing my most precious treasure.”

“What did he steal?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” Lilith cried.

Just then the sound of motorcycles interrupted them.

“Your friends are here,” Harry noted. “I’m sure they’re worried about you. I better be going. Call me if you need me. Remember to talk to your sister. She loves you.”

“Okay professor,” Lilith said and Harry disappeared.

Lilith walked to the front and greeted her friends.

“We were so worried about you. Were you punished?” Jasmine asked.

“No,” Lilith said. “We just talked about magic. He said he’s been training for Armageddon. I’m glad my sister is dating him. I think he’s cool.”

“I thought all men are bad,” Aileen asked, confused.

“I don’t think he’s a normal man,” Lilith said. “Anyone who can achieve level 53 by the age of 25 deserves respect. Let’s go eat. I’m hungry. Then we can go train.”

Off to the restaurant they went. After that came training and then *Darkest Desires*.

As always, the Goth boy, Lilith’s secret crush, sat in his usual seat. A thought entered her brain. What if his name was M... She couldn’t say the name, even in her own mind. Should she dare check his name?

Lilith’s heart skipped a beat. She was terrified that he had the forbidden name, and yet attracted to it at the same time.

After an hour of vacillating, she finally took the plunge, arguing that one must face the truth, no matter how painful.

Nervously Lilith checked her Book of Knowledge for the Goth boy’s legal name. Above his head appeared *Marcus Lucas of the Draco Clan.*

Lilith was both relieved and disappointed. She knew there was a short form of Marcus, and that was M... She considered checking, but her courage failed.

While watching Marcus, a thought came to her. This must be the famous Marcus Lucas. However that was impossible. The Marcus from school was around 26 years old and this boy was too young to drink. That was a little disappointing.

Another thought came to Lilith. She checked Marcus’ wizard level and was shocked to discover it was 57 – greater than her sister’s. How was that possible for an underage boy?

The overwhelming desire to snuggle in the Goth boy’s arms flooded Lilith, but she couldn’t. A cruel force she didn’t understand kept them separate. She couldn’t even say ‘Hi’ to him. The only thing she could do was look at him from the corner of her eye and know he was doing likewise.

*Darkest Desires* closed for the night and Lilith headed home with her gang. While riding home, Lilith realized that she was only torturing herself by coming every week. However, she couldn’t help herself. Even those in hell occasionally stole glances at heaven, knowing the sight was torturous.

The gang went home and Lilith staggered to her room. She wearily undressed and then toppled onto her bed, exhausted. Today was stressful.

In another room, Jasmine paid close attention to Lilith on her second screen. Jasmine worried about her. This was the first time she tried to kill someone when she heard the name Mark. If Harry hadn’t stepped in, who knows what would have happened?

Jasmine undressed for the night, did her girl stuff and went to bed. Her Book of Knowledge was set up so she would be alerted should anything happen to her charge.

In due course Lilith fell asleep. As she dropped into dream land, her body transformed. Her body shrank into that of a ten-year-old girl and her hair changed into waste-length pink hair. Lilith’s true nature revealed itself as Princess Annie in disguise.

Tears flowed copiously from Annie’s eyes as she cried while asleep. Jasmine got up and headed for Annie’s room. She opened the locked door and stepped to the bed.

Annie whimpered in her sleep. “I hate you Mark. I hate you so much. Why did you abandon be?”

Jasmine leaned down and held little Annie in her arms. Annie quieted down and resumed a more peaceful sleep.

“Sweet Annie, Uncle Mark didn’t abandon you. He’s trying his best to win the Princess Challenge you issued seven years ago. Please don’t blame your dad for the curse you two are under. He had to do it in order to fulfill the requirements of the Princess Challenge. I can see how he suffers when I give him my reports. He’s even losing hair, something that’s normally impossible.” Royals always have perfect hair.

The reason Jasmine knew about the Princess Challenge, the amnesia spell, and the spell that prevented them from seeking each other out was because Mark’s dad, Elder Baldwin Lucas, spoke to the king and suggested Jasmine for the job.

As for why Jasmine was selected, that was simple. She was Carol Fortes of the Draco Clan, the favorite niece of Mark. Annie was already using the pseudonym Carol Lucas when they met, and so she was forced to change her name to Jasmine.

Jasmine picked Annie up and the bed covers rolled themselves back. Jasmine then placed Annie down and kissed her on the forehead. Tucking Annie in, Jasmine headed back to her room.

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The next day, Lilith woke up, not knowing that she changed during the night or what her best friend’s true identity was. The weekend passed without incident and Monday morning came.

Lilith dressed for school, brushed her teeth and put makeup on. Never needing to go to the washroom, she reviewed her lessons while waiting for her gang to get ready.

They arrived at school and Lilith took her usual place at the back of the class. The room filled up and the bell rang.

“Did you try the food made by Paradise? It’s so addicting,” a classmate exclaimed.

“World leaders are saying Paradise food will eliminate all famine in the world,” another classmate said. “And it’s non-fattening.”

Lilith got up and shouted, “Don’t eat that poop. It will rot your soul.”

“How would you know, you Goth chick?” a boy shouted angrily.

“I can smell the poison inside of it,” Lilith retorted. “The pollution that fills the world is thousands of times more concentrated in that so-called food.”

The room burst into chaos as everyone argued for and against Paradise food.

“Prophesy said that this is the end times,” a religious girl said. “Do you think that’s true?”

“Of course, it’s true,” Lilith retorted. “It’s obvious to anyone with eyes.”

“Of course you would say that,” another person shouted, waving a banana produced by Paradise. “You’re just a nihilist and can only see the bad in everything.”

“Fine,” Lilith replied. “Do whatever you want. Don’t blame me when you go to hell.”

“Settle down class,” Professor Hicks called. “It is true that Paradise food is highly controversial. However, there is no scientific evidence it is bad for the health.”

“I didn’t say it was bad for the health,” Lilith replied angrily. “I said it will rot your soul.”

“There is no scientific evidence for the existence of the soul,” Hicks denied.

“Then what is the source of magic?” Lilith asked scornfully.

“Magic is the result of purely physical processes within the brain. Basically the brain is a quantum computer that causes resonating effects on the physical substances of the world,” Hicks explained.

“Paradise has already demonstrated a prototype device that can reproduce the effects of magic. Very soon, anyone will be able to have the benefits of magic without having to go through the wizard’s initiation, or having to study magic. I guess I will be out of a job then.”

“Whatever,” Lilith mumbled. She kicked her legs up and chewed gum, no longer wanting to argue with idiots.

At lunch Lilith called her gang together and they headed for Harry’s office.

Harry looked up and greeted them. “Please come in ladies. What can I do for you?”

“Professor Banks, what do you think of Paradise food?” Lilith asked.

“It is soul poison,” Harry replied. “It will rot your soul. The Antichrist has already appeared. Unfortunately, most people have yet to recognize the signs.”

“When did the Antichrist arrive?” Dara asked.

“Do you remember the Three Days of Poo? That was when the Sludge Monster spawned him.”

“Professor Hicks said that magic is just the product of quantum processes within the brain, and some sort of physical resonance thingy. Is that true?” Helga asked.

“That’s a lie,” Harry assured. “Just as it’s a lie that the Sea of Chaos is just a magnetic storm that interferes with the synapses of your brain, causing hallucinations.”

“Can you please help us train?” Lilith begged. “None of the teachers here are worth their salt and you’re the only teacher I have respect for.”

“Yes please,” Jasmine said. “It’s incredible how knowledgeable you are.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the other gang members.

“It will be my pleasure to teach you fine young ladies the mysteries of magic,” Harry replied with a smile. “I only wish we had more students like you. Come here after school ends and we’ll begin. The first thing I’ll teach you is how to purify Paradise food.”

“Why can’t we just avoid eating it?” Sadie asked.

“That’s impossible,” Harry replied. “In the days to come, it will be everywhere and impossible to avoid it. Only people who grow their own food are safe. You better be going or you will miss lunch.”

The gang bowed to Harry and left.

Lunch came and went. Afternoon classes were just as boring as morning classes. Lilith had plenty of space to lounge around, since the classrooms were half empty. She found that depressing. There were so many more people last year.

Finally classes ended and they visited their favorite professor.

“Okay ladies,” Harry began. “In order to cast a proper purification spell, you need to know what is and what isn’t contamination. Let’s go to the nearest grocery store. We’ll go by bike, since people tend to freak out when I teleport.”

“You bike?” Sadie asked, surprised.

They got on their bikes and headed out, following Harry down the road. People stopped to look at them as they headed for the store.

At the store they parked and entered.

“Okay ladies, you will use your Books of Knowledge to see beyond deception,” Harry instructed. “Keep in mind contamination will dull your senses.” He gave instructions on how to perceive contamination.

“Oh my God, all the food is contaminated,” Gretchen exclaimed.

“Yes ladies,” Harry replied. “The whole world is tainted. Now look at that.”

They stared at a new display, showcasing Paradise food.

“Oh my God. That’s disgusting,” Aileen exclaimed.

“All you ladies have a certain defense against everyday contamination,” Harry lectured. “However, only an idiot would put that much pollution into their own bodies. Now for the steps needed to decontaminate that food. I shall buy some and we shall practice near the skateboard park.”

They headed for checkout and Dara asked, “Why would they sell something so polluted? Why does the government allow it?”

“Because the king is an idiot,” Lilith replied.

“Ms. Lucas is correct,” Harry said. “He knows that the food is contaminated. However, he allows it because the law doesn’t forbid it.”

They exited the store and rode to the park.

Harry resumed the lecture when they parked. “To give the king credit, he did fund several studies on the dangers associated with the food. Unfortunately all of the studies said that Paradise is safe. Because of that, he has been unable to do anything.”

With magic, it’s possible to do long term studies in only a few days.

They found a picnic table and Harry instructed the gang to sit. He then placed chocolate bars in front of everyone, and demonstrated the process of purification. The others followed his instructions.

“Those studies must have been tampered with,” Gretchen guessed.

“Of course,” Harry replied. “Any Academy graduate should be able to see the truth for themselves. However, people are overly influenced by the opinions of others and forget their own truths. Only people like you, who refuse to follow the majority, can survive.

“Damn. I was having so much fun with you that I forgot the time. I won’t keep you longer since you have a ton of homework. Remember to practice the purification spell. It isn’t strong enough to purify the world, but it will keep you safe.

“One last thing. Please cast the spell on yourselves daily. This will counteract the ever-increasing levels of contamination.

See you tomorrow.”

“Thank-you professor,” the students said, bowed and left.

Harry felt good. He found quality students he could dedicate his time to training.

5. The Antichrist

The Darkness strives to devour the Light,   
even if it means its own destruction.

“Congratulations students for graduating,” Emerson said. “Unfortunately, you will be the last to graduate, since this school will be closing down,” she added sadly.

Attendance had been waning for the last several years. Add to that, dropouts who no longer considered magic useful. The introduction of the Pocket Genie by Paradise was the last nail in the coffin.

“I shall now invite the eight students that have the highest grades to come up. Lilith, Jasmine, Aileen, Sadie, Helga, Zelda, Gretchen, Dara,” Emerson called.

Lilith stood with her friends, feeling embarrassed. She scanned the audience and spotted her parents and sister. She hadn’t seen her parents in over a year and was shocked by what she saw. Her dad looked old and was graying. In contrast, her mother was as beautiful as ever, but sad.

Each gave a speech and then the students came up one at a time to receive their diplomas.

Ceremony complete, the graduates and guests adjourned to the hall where hour d'oeuvres were served.

Harry and the Goth boy stood next to Jane. The Goth boy ate from a cheese plate.

“Congratulations,” Jane said and hugger Lilith.

“Thanks Jane,” Lilith said. She turned and hugged her mother. She ignored her father.

Lilith wished the Goth boy would congratulate her, but he only paid attention to his plate.

“Professor, now that the school is closing down, what will you do?” Lilith asked.

“Your dad wants me to join the army as an officer,” Harry said.

“He’s not my dad,” Lilith said angrily. “I don’t have a dad.”

Ravenswood flinched but said nothing.

“Why the hell would you want to join his army?” Lilith asked.

“Because war will soon be upon us,” Harry said. “According to intelligence, the Antichrist has immigrated to the southern part of...”

“Let’s discuss this in private,” Ravenswood interrupted.

Mark ran to the hors d'oeuvre table and loaded up. A minute later he was back. Four cheese plates filled with food hovered around him. That was in addition to the one in his hand.

The group headed for a private room.

“How much have you told them?” Ravenswood asked Harry.

“I told them about the existence of the Antichrist and the dangers of Paradise food and how to protect themselves. For almost two years, for one hour a day, I’ve been training them in preparation for the war of Armageddon,” Harry replied.

“Ladies, as you know, three months ago, the world crowned Prince Jacob Astor as emperor of the world. It was a no-brainer for most people,” Ravenswood explained.

“He was after all responsible for rebuilding the Great Temple. Additionally, he has fostered peace in the Middle East, and his food promises to eliminate all hunger from the world. War and crime no longer exists in most parts of the world.”

Ravenswood paused and then said, “The only countries to object to him being crowned are the countries in North America.”

The ladies nodded. They knew about the election. It was headline news for months. Commercials still talked of the brave new world everyone would soon experience.

“But there’s plenty of crime in Washington,” Dara objected.

“That’s thanks to the Sludge Monster,” Ravenswood explained. “He has been busy destroying most Paradise shipments within North America. Unfortunately plenty still comes through.”

“He’s our hero, protecting our souls from a fate worse than death,” Jasmine beamed, smiling at Mark.

“I think so too,” Ravenswood admitted. “Unfortunately he is public enemy number one, so I can’t acknowledge him.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” Gretchen asked.

“Impossible,” Ravenswood replied. “I and the other kings have conducted multiple studies on the food, but we could never prove that it is dangerous. The studies have only proven that Paradise is good for body, mind and soul.”

“How come you haven’t tried to stop Sludgie from destroying the Paradise warehouses and shipments, you being such a stickler for rules?” Lilith asked.

“That’s because the Sludge Monster can’t be confined and can’t be destroyed,” Mark answered.

*Damn*, Jasmine swore. Lilith and Mark just interacted. That meant that everyone would soon forget that they ever met, including the times at *Darkest Desires*.

“How come Sludgie doesn’t destroy the Paradise food in Europe and other parts of the world?” Zelda asked.

“That’s impossible,” Mark answered between bites of food. “The Sludge Monster can only act freely here since the power of the Antichrist is weak here. In the rest of the world, the grip of the Antichrist is too strong.

“The Antichrist has a far greater command of the evil energy of the world than the Sludge Monster, and uses that command to protect the Paradise food. As a result, the only thing the Sludge Monster can do is cause natural disasters.

“The Sludge Monster tries to be helpful, but in the end, he is evil,” Mark finished. He conjured several huge platters of chicken wings. He attacked the wings like a starving man, and accidently bit off his own finger.

Mark paused to look at his amputated finger. A moment later it was whole again. He continued eating. That was a disturbing sight for everyone.

“Holy crap,” Helga exclaimed, freaking out. “Did he just bite his own finger off? Didn’t he feel pain?”

Harry grabbed a chicken wing from a plate and said, “You have to watch your fingers when you’re with him. He eats like a pig.”

Harry placed two fingers on his nostrils and pulled upwards, imitating a pig. He made grunting sounds and sniffed the chicken wing.

Mark choked and then laughed like a ten-year-old boy. “Thanks Harry, I needed that,” Mark said. “Everyone, you can have some. I can order anything else you want.”

Lilith took the invitation and helped herself to chicken wings.

“I can’t tell people what to do. The only thing I can do is say that I don’t eat Paradise food,” Ravenswood continued.

“Of the countries that objected to the ascension of Emperor Jacob Astor, 50 North American countries recently got together to form a coalition, for the purpose of protecting us from the threat of the Antichrist. He knows we have our free will, thanks to the hard work of the Sludge Monster. We expect he will take drastic action to remedy that. As a result, we are beefing up our militaries in preparation for war.

“The reason I’m telling you this is because we have a major shortage of wizards who can take officer roles in our military. Please help me protect our country and the world when war breaks.”

“How come there is a shortage?” Sadie asked.

“Because Paradise food has the effect of reversing the Wizard’s Initiation, something once considered impossible,” Ravenswood explained. “Everyone who has eaten Paradise food has now become muggles. They now live in a world different from our own. The good news is that the power can be regained by retaking the Wizard’s Initiation. Unfortunately, none of them have an interest in doing so.”

“Are you joining the military?” Sadie asked Mark.

“Yes,” Mark replied. “It’s my duty.”

Lilith looked at Mark and said, “You’re right. It’s my duty to protect my mother.”

The gang laughed, knowing Lilith’s true motivation. They agreed to join as well.

Ravenswood bowed in gratitude to the ladies. “Thank you for doing this,” Ravenswood said. “All the people of Washington and the coalition of countries of North America are indebted.”

“I told you she likes you,” Harry said and nudged Mark.

“Shut up Harry,” Mark said in embarrassment as his face turned red.

“His face is turning red,” Aileen said. “I knew he liked you.”

“Shut up Aileen,” Lilith retorted as her face turned red as well.

“Wouldn’t it be fun if Mr. M. and Lilith were to date?” Dara asked. The others nodded.

“A princess may not have a romantic relationship with a commoner,” Ravenswood said sternly, and instantly regretted his words. He knew his curse would wipe everyone’s memory of them ever meeting, and so no words were needed.

“That’s why I hate you,” Lilith said angrily. “You never let me do anything.”

“But these are the laws the world has chosen to follow,” Ravenswood pleaded.

“In that case, I hope the world is destroyed by the Armageddon,” Lilith snarled venomously. “It deserves it.”

Mark spasmed as if being electrocuted and collapsed to the floor. The plates surrounding him fell to the floor as well.

“Are you all right?” Jane asked worriedly as she bent down and held Mark.

His breath ragged, Mark stuttered, “T-the F-four Horse m-men of the Ap-po-ko-ypse have just been spawned. They only have around four percent each of the total evil energy of the earth, but that is plenty.”

Ravenswood cursed himself for accidently causing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to be summoned.

Lilith didn’t seem to have noticed her role in the affair. Ravenswood didn’t say anything and neither did Mark, Harry or Jane.

“So will we be under the flag of Washington, or will we be under the flag of this new United Countries of America?” Jasmine asked, trying to break the tension.

“United Countries of America,” Ravenswood murmured. “I like that. I will suggest that name when we meet. You’ll be under the command of the United Countries of America. We can’t create our own empire since that goes against the mandate of the emperor. Instead we have elected my uncle Prince George to be our first president. That is confidential. We will make the official announcement in two weeks.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting with kings Sylvester Bundy and John Rockefeller.”

Ravenswood bowed and left.

“Please come home dear,” Marjorie said and hugged Lilith.

“I’m sorry mum but I can’t,” Lilith replied. “I will enter the army in order to protect you, and if something happens to me, you can always blame your husband.”

“Come mum,” Marjorie’s butler said. “You have meetings to attend to.”

Marjorie left with her butler, clearly heart-broken.

In the meantime, Mark had cleaned up the mess and ordered Chinese food. The food was arranged on a table Mark brought in.

Lilith grabbed a plate from a stack of plates and helped herself. Both Mark and Lilith stood next to each other and ate like machines. They both looked at peace with the world.

“Lilith, you two look like an old married couple,” Jasmine said. She laughed when Lilith stuck her tongue out.

“I thought that it was part of your mandate to never date,” Harry said.

“That’s not true,” Jasmine denied. “We just refuse to date muggles and muggle-wannabes. The Dragon demands that we become strong and that we only make friends with strong people. Unfortunately, you and Uncle M. are the only strong men we know. Lilith has Uncle M., leaving just you.”

Mark’s and Lilith’s faces turned red but neither said anything.

“Aren’t you dating that Chinese Fox girl?” Sadie asked.

Harry sighed. “She dumped me and married a muggle. She is now living a muggle life with a white picket fence, a son, a dog, and a daughter on the way.”

“How depressing,” Lilith grimaced, echoing the sentiment of everyone in the room.

“Then that means that Professor Banks is available,” Zelda said excitedly.

“Sorry ladies,” Jasmine said between bites. “Jane is dating the Professor.”

“We aren’t dating,” both Jane and Harry said defensively.

“We just work well together,” Jane continued.

“Then why are your faces red?” Jasmine asked and laughed when their faces turned redder.

They had nothing to say and the ladies looked at them in amusement.

“Damn, our superior officer just summoned us,” Harry said.

Mark and Lilith turned and faced each other. For a few moments they just stared into each other’s eyes, not speaking. They put their plates away.

Jasmine stepped forward and pushed the two together. On impulse, they hugged each other.

“I love you, Annie,” Mark said.

“I love you too, Mark,” Lilith replied.

For a timeless moment they held each other.

Mark released the hug and just faced Lilith. “I wish I was brave enough to talk to you sooner.”

“Me too,” Lilith replied.

“I have to go,” Mark said. “General Loco is getting ants in his pants.”

“At least give her a good-bye kiss,” Jasmine scolded.

Mark cupped Lilith’s face in his hands and kissed her on the lips. Lilith closed her eyes, held Mark’s hands, and wept silent tears.

Mark gradually faded, leaving Lilith holding nothing.

All memories of Mark and Lilith ever meeting faded.

Jane looked at Lilith and her friends and wondered why she felt like crying. The other ladies cried as well, not knowing why they were crying. Only Jasmine knew.

Feeling chocked up as well and not knowing why, both Jane and Harry heeded General Loco’s call and teleported to their rooms to change.

6. Armageddon

‘Fear is weakness, but it can also become a powerful weapon.

Control someone’s fears and you control them.’

-- Dragon Booster (Anime), Episode 17 --

Harry, Jane and Mark appeared in front of General Loco in full dress uniform.

Mark’s evil heart was hurting more than usual, and he didn’t know why. He remembered going to the school with Harry, since it was Harry’s last day there. He ordered takeout and left it for Harry’s favorite students to enjoy. He then responded to the emergency call from the general, changed and arrived in front of the general.

Mark gave up trying to understand why the hole in his chest was hurting, and instead focused on suppressing his evil feelings.

They waited as, one by one, officers the general summoned arrived. Eventually the hall filled with hundreds of officers. Harry looked around and realized that every officer assemble was much older than him. However, some of the men looked like people his favorite students would be willing to date.

“Thank-you for assembling on such short notice,” General Loco said. “All of you know of the existence of the Antichrist. Less than half an hour ago, King Ravenswood of Washington informed us that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have arrived. That means that the Antichrist will attack the countries of North America within the month.

“You should have all finished reading the immersive novel we gave, depicting the military wisdom of the centuries. If you haven’t, please do so tonight.

“I have just sent you the information on your assignment and the troops you will be leading.

“Unfortunately, our troops consist entirely of muggles. They might fear the power you yield, so please be careful in how you use your abilities around them.

“Tonight, Prince George of Washington will address us. Please get to know your fellow officers. Dismissed.”

Mark walked around and greeted people. Like him, they loved magic and hated Paradise food for stealing people’s love of magic. Mark spent quality time discussing favorite spells with new people. Finally it was time for Prince George’s speech.

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“We are interrupting regularly scheduled programming for this important news announcement,” a voice spoke.

News anchor Savannah appeared on the screen.

“Welcome everyone,” Savannah greeted. “For the last several months rumors have been circulating that many of the countries of North America will be joining in an economic alliance. These rumors have proven correct.

“The kings and queens of these our countries have indeed done so. They have also elected Prince George of Washington as the president of the alliance. In five minutes the newly elected president will speak.”

Savannah spoke with several people, speculating on the meaning of the alliance.

“Prince George will now speak,” Savannah announced.

The scene changed to that of a large white building. In front of the building was Prince George. Behind him was an unknown flag filled with stars and stripes.

“Greetings people of North America,” the prince began. “Fifty countries of North America have decided to form an economic alliance. We have named this alliance the United Countries of America and behind me is the flag of our alliance. The purpose of this alliance is to help bring about greater prosperity and happiness.

“Please note that this alliance is in no ways in opposition with the emperor. In fact, we believe this alliance will help Emperor Jacob Astor bring about greater prosperity.”

In the end, there was nothing surprising about the speech. The speech continued for an hour, filling the airways with flowery words that had no value. After all, the only purpose of the speech was for President George of Washington to introduce himself to the world and to make the world know that the political environment had shifted.

The video ended.

“There was much the president didn’t say,” General Loco began. “The last two weeks have revealed a disturbing trend throughout the world.

“Crime global is skyrocketing. We believe this is because Paradise food is corroding people’s moral fiber and unleashing their base desires.

“Love of art, music, magic and other qualities of the soul, such as the bond we have with our fellow man is in danger of disappearing. Many great institutions of the world have already been destroyed by vandals for momentary pleasure.

“The antichrist is blocking the spread of this knowledge, so most people think this problem is just local to them. None know how close they are to losing their souls to a fate worse than death.

“The president is working on officially banning Paradise food from our alliance. That, we believe, will signal the beginning of Armageddon.

“Your tasks here are two-fold. One: You will help prepare a defense against a possible attack. Two: You will help secure the greatest treasures of the world from the vandals. Any questions?”

“Why are people destroying works of art?” someone asked.

“No reason,” General Loco replied. “They see a statue and on impulse throw a beer bottle at it. Someone sees the picture of the Mona Lisa and rips it with a pocket knife. The guard doesn’t care because he’s on the floor, drunk.

“The cops don’t bother trying to stop crime, unless the victim can pay. In many cases the cops are worse than criminals, and this is only the beginning.”

“Where is the Antichrist?” another person asked.

“Unfortunately we don’t know,” General Loco said. “We also don’t know where the four horsemen are or when they will ride, but we suspect it will be soon after President George Washington announces the ban on Paradise food.”

“Isn’t Emperor Astor the Antichrist?” another person asked.

“Emperor Astor is just a puppet, controlled by the Antichrist from the shadows,” the general answered.

Further questions only clarified what was already known. General Loco dismissed everyone and Mark, Harry and Jane headed for their rooms in the officer’s barracks.

Mark sat in a chair near his bunk and reviewed his instructions and the information given to him about his assignment. There was plenty to review. He needed to prepare the troops for war. Another assignment was to visit Europe and Asia and help secure natural treasures before they were destroyed.

“Good night, Mark,” Harry said and turned off the lights.

“Good Night,” Mark replied and rested his foot against the bunk, while still sitting in the chair. He didn’t bother to go to sleep, but spent the time training.

Day broke.

Harry woke and said by way of greeting, “People will think you’re weird if you don’t sleep.”

*Well I am a freak of nature.* Mark didn’t say that. That would have upset Harry. Instead he just shrugged. “I’ll pretend to sleep when others are present.”

Harry and Mark met up with Jane and the three went to the officer’s mess hall. Mark ate mechanically, indulging in his only pleasure.

“See you later,” Mark said and headed for his assignment. He was to meet the troops at 9:00 AM sharp. Mark stepped out from behind a sign post just as the drill sergeant assembled the troops.

“AT-TEEEEN-TION,” the staff sergeant called out. The soldiers snapped to attention.

“At easy,” Mark bellowed in a voice that carried to everyone. “Hi everyone,” Mark said. “I’m going to tell you a story.

“When I turned sixteen, I enrolled in the Magic Academy in Olympia, Washington. That was the happiest day of my life. At that time, there were billions of wizards throughout the world and beyond.

“Then science and technology came out of nowhere. Everyone loved it because it was convenient. You didn’t need to put in thousands of hours of training to use it. As technology took dominance, the desire to learn magic faded. After all, why bother learning magic when a machine can do the job without you having to spend countless years training?

“Eventually enrollment went so low that they had to shut down the school. That was tragic.

“Soon after that something horrible started happening. Wizards started disappearing. Can anyone tell me how a wizard is born?”

No one answered.

“A wizard is born when a person, sixteen years of age or older takes the wizard’s initiation,” Mark said, continuing his story. “It is a simple ceremony that only takes five minutes at most, but it makes an indelible mark on your soul that stays with you for the rest of your incarnation. It can’t be removed. Once a wizard, always a wizard.

“So why were wizards disappearing? The answer is Paradise food. It was discovered that Paradise food can wipe out a person’s initiation and turn them into muggles, something considered impossible.”

None of the soldiers understood what Mark was talking about and some thought he was crazy.

“Bear with me people and then I will give you a demonstration,” Mark said. “Paradise food however does something worse. It rots your soul, and makes you into something worse than animals. Please observe this to see what I’m talking about.”

A giant screen appeared for everyone to see. On it images of countless crimes in Europe and Asia appeared. Mark explained what they saw and how Paradise food affected everyone. Mark’s comments didn’t move them but the images did.

“As you know, it’s very difficult to buy Paradise food in North America, since the Sludge Monster destroys most shipments,” Mark continued. “That’s the only reason North America hasn’t degraded to the level of the world.

“As you have heard yesterday, Prince George of Washington has been elected president of the newly formed United Countries of America. The real reason it was formed was to protect our citizens against Paradise food and the mastermind behind Paradise food.”

“But, Colonel Draco, the Paradise food the Emperor has given the world has brought a new era of peace and prosperity,” someone complained. Her voice sounded throughout the assembled troops, thanks to Mark’s magic.

Mark pointed at the screen and said, “Those crimes are happening now. All order is breaking down throughout the world. These images prove it. As I was saying, the United Countries were formed to fight against Paradise food. President George Washington is working on banning Paradise food from entering our alliance.”

The soldiers broke into argument, finding it hard to believe what they were hearing. The staff sergeant shouted for silence and finally order was restored.

“As you can guess, the Emperor will not tolerate us banning Paradise food,” Mark said. “This shall signal the beginning of Armageddon when he attacks with his armies.”

Again the ranks broke into arguing. The staff sergeant tried to quiet everyone down, but he failed.

“That’s okay, Staff Sergeant Reynolds,” Mark said. “I want them to discuss this amongst themselves. What I’m revealing is earth shattering.”

“Does that mean the Emperor is the Antichrist?” Staff Sergeant Reynolds asked.

Mark ignored the question and said in a voice that drowned everyone out. “I am a senior wizard. By the grace of God, a senior wizard can live over a thousand years. They can perform seeming miracles. For instance I can teleport.”

Mark teleported to another location and continued his speech. “I can heal people and do transformations.” He performed a few more demonstrations.

Mark returned to the front and said, “When a person becomes a second year student, they gain the power to transform into another creature. I shall now demonstrate the power of a wizard. Please don’t be afraid.”

Mark’s head seemed to split open. A Chinese dragon emerged and shot into the air, while Mark’s body crumpled to nothing. The dragon circled the troops and returned to the front, transforming back into Mark.

“The reason I’m showing you this power is because you will face hostile wizards in the near future,” Mark said. “I assure you I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Mark continued his demonstrations, entertaining everyone.

“Finally,” Mark said. “I said Paradise food took wizardry away from you. The good news is that it can be restored by the initiation. Many of you used to be high-level wizards. You can regain that power. More importantly, it will help you keep your families safe. How important is the safety of your families?” Mark asked and pointed at the overhead screen.

“Please take the initiation, if only for your loved ones. For those who wish for it, just call my name and request it and instructions will be given. Dismissed.”

“Why can’t you force everyone to take the initiation?” the staff sergeant asked.

“Unfortunately, it has to be voluntary or the initiation won’t take,” Mark replied. “Please consider the initiation. Who knows, you could become an officer, perhaps even senior to me?”

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“How was your first day as an officer?” Harry asked.

“Not bad,” Mark replied. “I explained the situation to them and asked people to take the initiation. So far, a few people have responded. I wish everyone would take the initiation, but I guess that’s just wishful thinking.”

“I know,” Jane agreed. “I too got some responses. I hope the government runs ads, urging people to take the initiation.”

“I have to go,” Mark said. “General Loco just called me.”

Mark teleported to the general’s location and saluted the general. General Loco said, “Colonel Draco, I have an important assignment for you. There is a top secret meeting the higher ups will be conducting in Israel in a few days. King Ravenswood has specifically requested that you help with the security.”

“As you wish, General Loco,” Mark said. A moment later, Mark received the assignment. It told him where to go. Mark saluted and disappeared.

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It was early afternoon at Mark’s destination. Mark looked over the ancient city of Jerusalem. He found it hard to believe the number of wars fought in the area. Why were people so obsessed with fighting over scraps, when they could have everything they wanted if only they followed the original teachings?

“Colonel Draco, welcome to Jerusalem,” Ravenswood greeted.

Mark turned and saluted the king. “Thank you, Majesty.”

“The war of Armageddon will soon begin” Ravenswood said sadly. “So many people are going to die.”

“Yes Majesty,” Mark agreed, wondering why Ravenswood was in such a sharing mood. “However, it’s better – corrections, not as bad as the complete destruction of the planet. Too much bad energy has accumulated from ancient times.”

“The Antichrist will try to stop this meeting with overwhelming force if necessary,” Ravenswood said. “I’m counting on you.”

“What’s that?” someone asked in Arabic.

“That’s a humongous air force coming at us,” Mark replied in Arabic. “There are over fifty thousand planes and helicopters. I’m guessing they don’t know where the meeting will be held so they intend on carpet bombing the entire city, just in case.”

“Why don’t they use a nuclear bomb?” Ravenswood asked.

“Probably because fifty thousand planes, raining down destruction is more terrifying, Majesty,” Mark replied.

The sky darkened as attack helicopters blocked out the sun.

“You’re right, that is scary,” Ravenswood agreed. “Can you handle them?”

“I’m working on it, Majesty. Unfortunately, the Antichrist is fighting me, tooth and nail,” Mark responded. “The people in the planes are in horrible shape, spiritually speaking. They can’t think about anything but destruction. The antichrist is in the area. I’m attempting to pinpoint his location. Damn. He got away.”

A second later every plane and helicopter in the sky exploded. For a good ten minutes the sky was alight with flames.

“Please God, take them in your arms and heal them,” Mark prayed.

People nearby said, “Amen” in their respective languages.

“Thank you, Mark,” Ravenswood said softly.

Mark sighed sadly. “I’m only doing what must be done to ensure the safety of the world.”

“Come Mark, I know you like to eat,” Ravenswood said. “I know an incredible restaurant. I’m paying.”

“Thanks, Annie’s dad,” Mark said. He then did a double-take. He bowed and said, “I’m sorry, Majesty. I don’t know why I said that.”

Ravenswood patted Mark on the back and said, “It’s okay Mark. I’m not offended.”

Mark looked at the king. He looked both sad and guilty.

The hand on his back felt good and Mark quietly let the king lead.

They arrived at the restaurant and Ravenswood greeted the waiter in his native language. They were seated and Ravenswood ordered.

“You recently joined the army, didn’t you?” Ravenswood asked. “How are the troops?”

“They are all good people who don’t understand what’s going on,” Mark said. “I tried to explain the situation to them, but that wasn’t easy. They lack so much basic knowledge. At the beginning some thought I was crazy, until I gave them a demonstration. Fortunately, a few expressed an interest in taking the initiation. Hopefully we will have a few more officers to work with.”

“Did you show them your second form?” Ravenswood asked.

“Yes,” Mark replied. “I transformed into a Chinese dragon.”

The food arrived and the two waited for the waiter to finish serving. Ravenswood and Mark then cast the spell to purify the food. Grace before meal complete, they began eating.

“This food is good,” Mark said.

“I know,” Ravenswood said. “I eat here all the time when I visit.”

A fight broke out in another part of the restaurant. A police officer sat at a nearby table and ignored the fight. One fighter crashed into the officer, knocking the officer’s food on the ground. The officer then beat the crap out of both fighters and then arrested them for ruining his lunch.

“What is this world coming to?” Ravenswood asked sadly.

They ate quietly and returned to base.

“I have to go now,” Ravenswood said. “I have plenty of meetings.”

“I shall patrol the area and make sure no one interrupts your meetings,” Mark promised.

“Good man,” Ravenswood said and walked away.

Mark watched the king walk away and wondered why the king was being so chummy with him.

The next day at breakfast Ravenswood approached Mark and pinned medals on him. He was now a one-star brigadier general.

“I don’t know whether to congratulate you or apologize for this promotion,” Ravenswood said. “President Washington gave me permission to invite you as an advisor to the meetings. Unfortunately, since you’re so young, they may not take you as seriously as they should. Even I don’t get much respect. I’m considered a youngster, despite being almost two hundred years old.”

That reminded Mark that people tended to get stuck at the master wizard level on their way to supreme master. That wasn’t surprising. Once you gain an unlimited lifespan and the power to live comfortably and with great enjoyment throughout your life, what more was there?

Also, people tended to take forever to leave the senior wizard level and become master wizards. Only when they approached the 1000 year mark did they realize that they need to do something to get to the next level if they wanted to continue living and enjoying life.

They entered the main room, filled with hundreds of people. Mark sat with Ravenswood and waited for the room to settle down. In due course the meeting was called to order. Like all meetings, this meeting was boring. All they did was talk and give reports no one paid attention to. Of course, there were people who insisted on questioning everything.

Lunch came and Ravenswood asked, “What did you think of the meeting?”

“It was boring as expected,” Mark replied. “The only reason I didn’t fall asleep was because 90% of my consciousness was engaged in managing security. There were a few minor incidents but nothing to worry about.”

“That is the life of a monarch,” Ravenswood said. “All we do is sign papers and attend meetings.”

“I’m glad I’ll never be a king,” Mark admitted.

*Don’t be so sure,* Ravenswood thought. *At the rate you’re going, it’s only a matter of time till you fulfill the requirements and the world acknowledges you as a national hero, my successor.*

Aloud, Ravenswood said, “You’re right. Being a king can be a pain, but there are rewards as well.”

The meeting resumed and the endless debates continued.

President Washington called on Mark and asked, “Brigadier General Draco, you are in charge of finding and capturing the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, as well as the Antichrist, are you not?”

Mark got up and replied, “Yes, Mr. President.”

“How is the hunt going?” President Washington asked.

“I have sensors spread throughout the world looking for them,” Mark replied. “I’m also taping into the secret service networks throughout the world.” He had to ask Uncle Arthur for help, since the task wasn’t easy. However it was necessary since it was his fault the five were roaming free.

“Yesterday, I felt the Antichrist’s presence at the time of the air raid. I tried to capture him but he escaped. Other than that, I have no leads,” Mark finished and waited.

“What are these sensors you referred to?” the president asked.

“I have the ability to break off tiny pieces of my soul,” Mark explained. “I can program the fragments to perform simple tasks. They will mindless follow the instructions I give them until they complete their assignment or I recall them. The smallest piece I can use is a little less than 0.1% of my soul mass. I have programmed 127 sensors. They are aimless drifting around the world, sniffing out centers of negative energy. So far they have reported nothing useful.”

“Unbelievable,” the president exclaimed. “I didn’t know that something like that was possible. Isn’t that dangerous?” The other people in the room nodded in agreement.

“Majesty, all souls have the infinite ability to divide,” Mark replied. “I just honed that ability to the extreme over the last ten years, because circumstances forced me to do so.”

The king of Iran asked, “Why are you trying to capture him? Why don’t you just kill him?”

“Majesty, monsters are immortal and can’t be killed. They can only be captured,” Mark replied.

“Are you saying that the Antichrist isn’t human?” Shiba, the queen of India asked.

“Yes, Majesty,” Mark responded. “There are currently six monsters in this world: the four horsemen, the Antichrist, and finally the Sludge Monster who spawned them. Unfortunately, I can’t guess how long it will take to neutralize these monsters.”

“But it was the Sludge Monster who protected North America form Paradise food,” Hazel, Queen of Missouri argued.

“But Brigadier General Draco said it was the Sludge Monster that spawned the Antichrist,” King James of Arkansas refuted.

“That was in accordance with the prophesy described in the Atlantis Stone,” Ravenswood defended.

Everyone argued, trying to decide if the Sludge Monster was good or evil. Mark sat down.

“King Ravenswood, you know more about the prophesy than anyone else here,” the president stated. “In your opinion, is the Sludge Monster good or evil?”

“I believe Sludgie is good,” Ravenswood replied. “However, he is obligated to fulfill his destiny, which is to test the world.”

Mark looked at Ravenswood in surprise. He never viewed himself as having such a purpose. Ravenswood smiled back at him.

The meeting ended and Ravenswood beckoned, “Come, let’s go eat.”

“Why do you like me so much?” Mark blurted out. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

They headed for the restaurant.

“I know everything about you, including your secret identity,” Ravenswood confided. “Please don’t judge yourself. You have a destiny, and you bear a burden no one can possibly imagine. One thing is certain. You are a better man than me.”

Mark looked at Ravenswood in surprise and then laughed. He couldn’t stop himself. He laughed so heartily that he collapsed to the floor. People turned to look. He couldn’t remember ever laughing like this before. After almost a minute he finally stopped laughing.

‘You think I’m a better person than you? That’s the funniest thing I ever heard in my life’, Mark snickered, speaking directly to Ravenswood’s mind. ‘Boy, laughing like that felt good. I think that has strengthened my emotional barriers. Thank you. I can’t believe you would say that, even though you know I’m the Sludge Monster, the evilest creature in the universe.’ The barriers quivered.

‘You’re not evil’, Ravenswood insisted. ‘You’re just under the control of powers you can’t understand. Please don’t judge yourself. You don’t have all the facts.’

They walked in silence and then Ravenswood asked, ‘How can you handle all that negative energy? It doesn’t seem humanly possible.’

‘I have all that stuff held in check behind an indestructible emotional barrier. It helps that I don’t need to sleep’, Mark replied. ‘If that barrier were to break, then say goodbye to the planet.’

Ravenswood nodded, already knowing what the answer would be. No one could handle the accumulated hatred, fear, despair and other evils of the world without going mad. In addition to that, Mark also had to deal with the fact that he had spawned the Antichrist and the Four Horsemen, as well as killing thousands of airplane pilots. Suppression was the only option.

Aloud, Ravenswood said, “Come. It’s time to eat and then sleep. Tomorrow, we have more meetings.”

The next several days were the same old routine of meetings, punctuated only by a failed terrorist attack. On the plus side, the delegates had finally agreed on banning Paradise food in their respective countries in a week. They would then use that time to make last minute preparations for war.

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Mark returned to base and greeted Harry and Jane.

“I can’t believe you got promoted,” Harry exclaimed. “Now I have to start saluting you.”

“I guess I have to salute you too,” Jane added.

“That’s funny,” Mark chuckled. “A princess has to salute me.”

“How did that happen?” Harry asked.

Mark shrugged. “I blew up a few enemy planes. The brass got impressed and gave me a star. For reasons I don’t understand, Annie’s dad – Why do I keep saying Annie’s dad?

“Anyways, King Ravenswood has taken me under his wing. He knows about my secret. I guess that’s not surprising. What’s surprising is that, for some unknown reason, he appears to care deeply for me.”

“What’s there not to love?” Harry asked.

“I know that you and Jane are crazy, but I didn’t think he was crazy as well,” Mark remarked. “They have finally decided to make the announcement in a week. The respective governments are using this time to prepare for war. How are things here?”

“Better than expected,” Harry replied. “The militaries from all the countries are integrating well and the number of officers is increasing. Of course, there’s still a major lack of officers. In fact, my favorite students have all been given the rank of Major because of their incredible graduating grades. Finally, there are a few captains from the graduating students just because their grades are passing. There are no officers below that.”

“It’s so strange,” Mark mused. “If it weren’t that stupid Paradise food, we would be just captains at most. Very soon they’ll have to start filling the officer ranks with muggles.”

“The world of wizards is about to end,” Harry said forebodingly.

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Lilith looked around the army base. She wasn’t sure why she joined, although it might have been to anger her dad. No. She joined to because of her friends. There was a nation-wide draft that forced all able-bodied wizards to join.

Every now and then, enlisted personal would pass and salute. They would then salute back. All that saluting was annoying.

“I hear war will break the moment the president makes his announcement,” Sadie commented.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Aileen replied.

They headed for the officer’s mess hall and claimed a table. After bringing back food, they waited as the announcer on TV made meaningless comments.

Finally, it was time for the president to speak.

“Good day fellow Americans,” President George Washington greeted. “Ever since the Emperor introduced Paradise food, people have been wondering if it was safe.

“Countless studies have been conducted trying to answer these questions. The answer has always been, yes.

“Now we have definite proof that the results of many of these studies have been tampered with.

“First, it is true that Paradise food is nutritionally complete. However, someone once said that man cannot live by bread alone.

“The new studies have shown that it really does corrode our very souls. Consuming Paradise food is a sure ticket to hell.”

Technically, it was a sure ticket to becoming a muggle. The president didn’t say that, since muggles can’t understand what they are missing.

Images of the real state of the world appeared in the living rooms throughout the Unites Countries, now renamed the United States.

“This is what Paradise food is doing to the people of the world. It is destroying lives and killing happiness.

“You might be saying, ‘I’ve eaten Paradise food, and nothing has happened to me.’

“Please note that the amount of Paradise you have consumed is nothing compared to what people in the rest of the world consume.

“We still rely on traditional farming, thanks to the fact that the Sludge Monster has been destroying most shipments of Paradise food.

The president paused a moment to let everyone contemplate his words.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? We hated Sludgie because he was destroying Paradise food, which people say is delicious and improves health.

“Now we discover he has in fact been protecting us from a fate worse than death.

“As of today, the United States of America, the Coalition of Canada to the north, Mexico to the south, and other world states, have officially banned the import, use of or possession of Paradise food.

“Wizards throughout our countries will be dispatched to destroy all the Paradise food they find.

“Only this can protect our children from harm.”

The broadcast ended.

“He didn’t mention that Paradise food has stolen magic from them,” Zelda noted.

“That would have diluted his message,” Harry said as he, Mark and Jane approached. “Those people would have abandoned magic eventually. Remember, the desire for magic was declining even before Paradise food came.”

“Hi professor,” the girls called.

“Hi ladies,” Harry replied.

“The first horseman has begun to move,” Mark announced. “The engines of war are turning. I just sent a message to the brass, explaining the situation.”

The ladies looked frightened. They were just teenagers, and they were about to go to war.

Jasmine hugged Mark and asked, “What’s going to happen, Uncle?”

With a pained expression, Mark replied, “War is an ugly thing. Cities will be destroyed, causing famine, disease, and death. Those are the other three horsemen of the Apocalypse. We will try our best to find the first horseman and stop him. Unfortunately, that might take months or years.”

“Armageddon has begun,” Jane agreed.

7. Light and Darkness

Some people spend their entire lives   
not knowing the Darkness within them,   
while others never know the Light.

War was in full swing throughout the world. Emperor Jacob Astor couldn’t tolerate that people would oppose him, so he ordered a full-scale assault on all countries that banning Paradise food. He justified it as maintaining social order and protecting the poor downtrodden people of the world. <>

Many traditional factory farms still existed, producing non-Paradise type foods. However, those foods were strictly for export to America, which was stockpiling it in huge underground warehouses. The emperor used the billions of dollars generated from the export of those foods to fund his war.

People not wanting to eat Paradise food sometimes tried to break into those farms, but they were shot down on sight. The emperor would not allow citizens eating non-sanctioned food nor interfering with his profit.

Month after month the fighting continued as each side bombed the hell out of the other. Rations became scarce as supply lines were cut and people had to tighten their belts. That only intensified the fighting as people fought for their lives and pride.

Colonel Lilith Lucas walked the streets of downtown Olympia, Washington in her civilian clothes. She was given a day off since it was her 20th birthday and because she was a princess.

She had gotten into a fight with her dad again that morning and she was furious. She rarely got into fights with him, but only because she almost never saw or spoke to him.

Lilith didn’t remember exactly what the fight was about, but she knew he placed more importance on the welfare of the city than her own happiness.

“I wish Sludgie would eat all the people in this city,” Lilith screamed, startling nearby people with her hostility. Of course, she knew that would never happen. There was no way the Sludge Monster would obey her.

Lilith wandered the streets, passing restaurant after restaurant where people peacefully ate lunch.

A gang of people passed by. They were armed for a fight. One shouted, “I knew that damn Sludgie was no hero. Now he’s showing his true colors.”

Looking around, she saw other gangs heading in the same direction.

“What are you talking about?” Lilith asked.

“That stupid Sludge Monster is attacking the city and eating everyone,” an officer in a military uniform shouted. “I’ve been working on a spell I know can kill him. It’s his fault for everything.”

Lilith stopped in horror as understanding crashed into her like a sledgehammer. It was all her fault. She wished for the city to be eaten and Sludgie obeyed.

Thinking back, Lilith realized this had happened before. Every time she had a fight with her father, she would curse the world. Every time Sludgie would obey and make the curse a reality.

She remembered the three days of poo. She had asked for it. They said Sludgie spawned the Antichrist and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. That was her doing as well. She had asked for it and Sludgie obeyed.

Lilith’s legs turned to jelly, and she collapsed to the ground. She was flooded with an overwhelming sense of guilt. So many people had died and suffered because of her.

The guilt turned to anger. Why did that stupid creature have to obey her?

Lilith knew she had to confront that thing and make it stop. She also had to make him stop obeying her and get lost.

Lilith got to her feet and followed the gangs.

In five minutes, she found the creature. It was as big as a shopping mall. Tentacles of ooze shot from its body and grabbed people. Kicking and screaming, it pulled people into its body. There was no escaping its speed.

The gangs attacked Sludgie with a vengeance, but the creature ignored them.

The man who claimed he could kill Sludgie started casting a major spell.

Lilith took a deep breath and steeled herself. “I order you to stop and release all the people you ate,” she commanded.

Sludgie stopped and shrank. It left dazed and confused people in its wake.

In moments the creature shrank down to the size of a humanoid blob. It looked like the creature from the black lagoon with hollow eyes, nose, and mouth.

The wizard waited until all civilians were free and then attacked. A pentagram formed under Sludgie. A moment later flames engulfed the creature. It writhed in agony as the flames burned it to ashes.

As it burned, gas pressure increased. The confining spell gave way and Sludgie exploded upwards. A caustic cloud hung overhead. It reformed into the humanoid form everyone recognized as the Sludge Monster.

“Damn, that was painful,” Sludgie said in a soft voice without anger. “I must congratulate you. For a few seconds I really thought I was going to die.

“Unfortunately, it’s not possible to destroy evil monsters. Believe me, I tried multiple times and every time I failed. Other more powerful wizards have also tried and failed, but you did a good job. For that I’m grateful.”

The wizard looked at Sludgie in confusion. He didn’t expect that response. “Are you saying you don’t like hurting people?” he asked in surprise.

“I am an evil monster and am ruled by my evil heart. I can’t change that, no matter how much I try,” Sludgie replied as he dissolved into the ground.

“Why do you obey me?” Lilith asked.

The face of the blobby figure turned towards Lilith. “Are you, my master?” it asked in surprise.

The creature advanced towards Lilith, looking as if it wanted to devour her. Lilith felt overwhelming revulsion and disgust for the creature. The look, smell and flies circling around only increase her disgust. “Stay away from me, you disgusting creature,” She screamed and backed away.

The expression of self-loathing, shame, loneliness, and rejection showed clearly on its face to everyone in the area. In moments it dissolved into the ground and was gone.

“Ow,” the wizard who incinerated Sludgie exclaimed. “I thought I put a serious hurt on Sludgie, but that was nothing compared to what you just did. Damn! That’s what I call a mega kick to the nuts.”

Everyone, including the released people looked at Lilith in disapproval. Everyone expressed pity for Sludgie.

Lilith felt overwhelmed by guilt and shame. She turned around and ran away. She had to use her second screen to see since she was blinded by tears.

What was the Sludge Monster, where did it come from, and why was it connected to her? Those were questions she suspected her dad could answer. However, there was no way she would voluntarily speak to him.

Feeling completely spent, Lilith went to her old clubhouse, undressed, and went to bed. She cuddled her stuffed toy cat Grundy and fell asleep.

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Mark found himself overwhelmed by the desire to rampage. The voice called him, and he had to obey.

He teleported to Olympia and then transformed into the Sludge Monster. People stared at him in terror. He reached out, grabbed, and ate them. They weren’t satisfying, so he ate more people.

Townspeople attacked him, but that had no effect on a sludge monster. He continued his rampage, eating hundreds of people.

Suddenly he heard a command to stop and the compulsion to eat people disappeared. Gradually his body diminished as he released the people trapped in his body.

The force of expectation of the people around him prevented him from taking human form. Instead, he took the shape of a humanoid blob. Just as he was about to leave, a wizard cast a confining circle around him and tried to incinerate him with fire. The pain was unbearable, and he felt he was really going to die.

The fire vaporized his body and the pressure put a strain on the confining circle. Then the circle gave way, and he allowed his essence to rush upwards, protecting nearby people.

“Damn, that was painful,” Sludgie said in a soft voice without anger. “I must congratulate you. For a few seconds I really thought I was going to die.

“Unfortunately, it’s not possible to destroy evil monsters. Believe me, I tried multiple times and every time I failed. Other more powerful wizards have also tried and failed, but you did a good job. For that I’m grateful.”

The wizard looked at Sludgie in confusion. He didn’t expect that response. “Are you saying you don’t like hurting people?” he asked in surprise.

“I am an evil monster and am ruled by my evil heart. I can’t change that, no matter how much I try,” Sludgie replied as he dissolved into the ground.

“Why do you obey me?” a voice called.

Sludgie turned its head towards the voice. “Are you, my master?” he asked in surprise.

She was painfully beautiful and alluring. He had the overwhelming urge take her in his arms and kiss her, hug her, fondle her, and then eat her. She looked so delicious.

Sludgie advanced towards her. The look of disgust, hatred and revulsion for him showed clearly on her face.

“Stay away from me, you disgusting creature,” the angel screamed and backed away from him.

The barrier around Sludgie’s heart cracked and the feelings of self-loathing, shame, loneliness, and rejection flooded him. He hated himself and wanted to die. Unfortunately, he was immortal and so the path out of hell was barred to him.

He wanted to jump into a volcano somewhere, but he had responsibilities. He sent a message to the five-star generals of both armies and asked for a ceasefire for a day. Not surprisingly neither side agreed.

Getting pissed off, Sludgie pantsed the soldiers on both sides. That put a hamper on the fighting, as soldiers dropped their weapons and covered their privates.

Sludgie then moved up the ranks. The general of the alliance army agreed to a ceasefire if the general of the emperor’s army agreed.

Sludgie focused his attention on the office of the general of the emperor’s army. She watched in horror as the pants of her officers were pulled down, exposing their privates. She then felt hands pulling on her own panties. She screamed in panic, “Okay, stop. I agree to a 24-hour cease fire.” A moment later the tugging stopped.

Free of obligations for a few hours, Sludgie went to Mount Kilauea in Hawaii. He jumped into the volcano and slowly sank to the bottom. The searing pain of the volcano distracted him from the pain in his heart.

He settled down and waited. Gradually the crack in his armor healed and the negative emotions were once again locked away. Hours later he was ready to leave.

Mark sent a message to Ravenswood, saying in the message, “Sorry I had to pants the world, Majesty, but I had issues I needed to deal with and needed time to recover.”

Ravenswood replied, “Your prank upset a lot of people Mark. Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle the fallout.”

Feeling grateful to the king, Mark returned to his assignment.

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Lilith woke up two hours after the pantsing incident and returned to her assignment. She laughed when she heard that a temporary ceasefire was called when soldiers throughout the world dropping their pants.

Her feeling for Sludgie change and she had the overwhelming desire to make amends with him. She closed her eyes and prayed. “Please forgive me for hurting your feelings, Sludgie. I promise never to make you do bad things again.”

Feeling better, Lilith went to dinner with her friends.

Months passed and Lilith was called in for a special assignment.

“Colonel Lucas, I would like you to meet Brigadier General Draco,” Lilith’s commanding officer, General Peterson introduced.

“Pleased to meet you, Brigadier General Draco,” Lilith said and saluted.

“According to Brigadier General Draco, the first of the four Horsemen has revealed himself at last,” General Peterson explained. “Your assignment is to accompany Brigadier General Draco and help him in any way you can. Any questions?”

“Yes,” Lilith said. “I’m just a journeyman wizard. How can I possibly help?”

“I can’t answer that,” General Peterson apologized. “My superiors just said you were the only person who could be of assistance. Brigadier General Draco, can you shed some light?”

“No General Peterson,” Mark replied. “Two hours ago, I discovered the location of the Horseman of War. I immediately informed my superior officer General Lee and told him I would be heading to Saudi Arabia to handle him. General Lee told me that I needed to come here first before proceeding. I don’t understand how anyone can possibly help me. However, I’m aware that I’m not privy to countless secrets.”

General Peterson nodded. “That’s always the case. Dismissed.”

Both Mark and Lilith saluted and exited the office.

“Are you okay with working with me?” Mark asked nervously. He still remembered the look of disgust she gave him when he was in his sludge form.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay with you?” Lilith asked, surprised. “You’re famous for having stopped the attack on Israel last year. Everyone has the greatest of respect for you.”

“I need to speak to you in private,” Mark warned. “I’ll understand if you say ‘no’. I have top-secret information I need to share with you. Normally I wouldn’t tell anyone, but we are going to face the First of the Four, and so it is imperative.”

Confused by Mark’s uncertainty, Lilith only said, “Okay Brigadier General Draco.”

Mark nodded and said, “Please follow me.”

They entered a private office and Mark closed the door. He paced back and forth, debating whether he should reveal his secret. Finally, he spoke. “Colonel Lucas, what do you think of the Sludge Monster?”

“I don’t understand him, but I think that he’s a good person,” Lilith said.

“A good person, you say?” Mark asked in surprise. “Why would you think he’s good?”

“I don’t know,” Lilith replied. “I feel sorry for him. I think he suffers a great deal.”

That sympathy stabbed through Mark’s heart, and he clutched his chest and grimaced.

“Are you okay?” Lilith asked worriedly. “Are we having an earthquake?”

Mark turned his back to Lilith and struggled to regain his composure. The slight ground tremors stopped.

Turning back, he said, “I’m going to reveal to you the secret identity of the Sludge Monster. This is necessary since we will be confronting the first horseman, who is one of the Sludge Monster’s spawns.”

Mark paced again and finally said, “There’s no point delaying. Colonel Lucas, I am the Sludge Monster. The Sludge Monster is my second form.”

“Impossible,” Lilith denied. “The Sludge Monster is immortal.”

There are two kinds of immortal. The first type can never be killed. Master wizards and above are the second kind. They can be killed, but not by old age.

Mark sighed. “I am immortal. I can’t be killed. Unlike normal people, Paradise food has no effect on me, possibly because I’m the ultimate evil.”

“That’s impossible,” Lilith objected. “According to your official file, your second form is that of a Chinese dragon and no one can have two second forms.”

“When I started my second year at school, I stepped on the platform and my second form revealed itself to be that of the Sludge Monster. I later discovered I can change into other forms,” Mark explained.

“I then petitioned the school, claiming that a classmate pulled a practical joke on me. I hate Tiikeris.”

“So do I,” Lilith agreed.

“At first they didn’t believe me, until I turned into a Chinese Dragon. They were forced to admit Harimau Tiikeri did the seeming impossible.”

“I know Harimau,” Lilith added, sounding disgusted. “He became Dilbert’s best friend after winning one of their stupid competitions. Every time Dilbert saw me, he would comment on the incident and then laugh like an idiot.”

“Can you work with me, even though I disgust you?” Mark asked softly.

Lilith found the revelation confusing. “I find it hard to believe that you are evil. Everyone says you’re the nicest guy in the world.”

Mark sighed. “Do you remember in Olympia when the Sludge Monster went on a rampage and tried to eat everyone? I then heard the voice of an angle telling me to stop. I stopped and released the people. I remember how a wizard tried to incinerate me and failed. Then you looked at me in disgust and I ran away.”

Lilith covered her mouth and looked at Mark in shock. “You really are him. I recognize your eyes,” she exclaimed. “I’m very sorry for reacting like that. You asked me if I’m your master. I think the answer is yes.”

Lilith explained the anger she felt for her dad and how she would take it out on the world. “I’m the one who made you do bad things without realizing it. I’m sorry.” Lilith wept.

“Then we are bonded together, and you are my master,” Mark agreed with a sigh. “If you can accept me, then we will have no problem facing the First Horseman. I don’t know what to expect since he’s acting independently of me. Are you ready?”

Lilith nodded. A moment later she found herself in another room.

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“Okay Colonel Lucas, he is in that room,” Mark said, pointing at a set of doors.

Steeling himself, Mark walked towards the doors and pushed through.

There standing in front of him was the spitting image of Hitler. Beside him was a red horse, decked in the plumage of a conqueror. Hitler looked at Mark with intense loathing. He looked like he wanted to rip Mark’s heart out with his bare hands.

Mark felt overwhelmed with hatred for the creature that had caused so much harm in the world. It was impossible for war to exist unless the rider of the red horse starts and sustains that war.

Mark approached and, in his hand, a sword appeared. His only thought was punishing that stinking pile for all the harm he did to the world. Hitler took out his sword as well.

Both fighters clashed, each trying to cut the other’s heart out. Back and forth they went as the clash of metal rang through the hall.

Blood ran down the bodies of both men as the fighting continued.

“I’ll kill you, you disgusting pile,” Mark spat in rage.

“No, I’ll kill you, you sissy boy,” Hitler sneered. “Your hatred is too weak to overcome me. Let me see more hatred, more anger.”

“You want more anger? How about this, you dung beetle?” Mark shot back. The anger within Mark seemed to have no limits.

“That’s not bad, but I suppose that’s the extent of your power, you coward,” Hitler spat at Mark.

The anger within Mark doubled. Now he didn’t want to kill Hitler. Instead, he wanted to slowly dissect Hitler and show Hitler an unexplored world of pain.

“That’s better, but you can do more,” Hitler called. There was a glint of madness in Hitler’s bloodshot eyes.

Mark looked into Hitler’s eyes and saw war in all its glory. He saw husbands and wives fighting, siblings quarreling, friends turning on each other. He saw gang-fights, the clash of cultures and idealities, and civil wars. Nation fought against nation for the glory of king and the suffering of surfs. Religious fanatics fought for their god, while the so-called sane fought in the name of peace. To Hitler, it didn’t matter why people fought, only that they fought.

Mark forgot the reason why he fought, but nevertheless he fought like a mad man.

“Please Marcus, you’re a good person,” Lilith shouted. She was a little horse. She had been trying to get Mark’s attention for some time, but he had ignored her.

“He is war,” Lilith screamed. “You can’t fight fire with fire. There must be another way.”

Mark realized that Lilith was right. He was losing the battle and Hitler was taking him over. Hitler had almost completely enslaved him.

“How?” Mark asked.

“He is the incarnation of war. You will never win by fighting with him,” Lilith reasoned, shouting over the clang of metal.

“Somehow I don’t think negotiations will work and running away isn’t an option,” Mark called back breathlessly.

“Then you must surrender,” Lilith declared.

“I’ll die,” Mark replied.

“I thought you were immortal,” Lilith called back.

“His sword is different. Only it has the power to kill me. Perhaps that’s for the best. Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Mark intoned.

“No, you mustn’t,” Lilith screamed. It was too late. Mark tossed his sword away and opened his arms out in peace to Hitler.

Hitler ran his sword through Mark’s heart. Mark staggered to the floor and Lilith ran to him just before he hit the ground.

In intense pain, Mark looked at the sword running through him. He looked at Hitler and whispered, “I hope your anger has been appeased.”

A moment later Mark lay still and unmoving. Lilith checked his vital signs. He was dead. Lilith broke down and bawled like a baby.

Lilith looked up at Hitler standing there. He was no longer angry and seemed at peace.

“I’m sorry but a sacrifice had to be made. It was the only way,” Hitler said and gave Lilith a sad smile.

A moment later he dissolved into red smoke, along with his horse and both swords. All four flowed into the sword wound in Mark’s chest.

The wound closed and Mark gasped. He opened his eyes and looked at Lilith. “Thank you for your help. Without you, I would have failed this test.”

“You idiot, I thought you were going to die,” Lilith yelled angrily and hit his chest. “As a matter of fact, you did.”

Lilith wrapped her arms around Mark and kissed his head.

“There are three more horsemen out there and finally the Antichrist,” Mark said and closed his eyes. He enjoyed being held by Lilith. “I have no idea how I will handle them.”

*In another part of the world, Ravenswood watched the drama. He debated what he should do. Finally, he decided to let them keep the memories they shared over the last few hours.*

*He wasn’t being generous but pragmatic.*

*Ravenswood decided that those memories would be necessary when the two faced the remaining monsters.*

*Ravenswood spoke the command. “Let the two remember what they need to remember to fulfill their assignments, but only until their tasks are fulfilled.”*

Back in Saudi Arabia, Mark said, “I wish I could lie on your lap forever. Unfortunately, we have jobs to do.”

“I don’t want to leave,” Lilith begged. “I’m afraid I’ll forget you if I leave.”

“Same here,” Mark agreed. “Unfortunately, we can’t stay like this forever. The brass will get mad and might start making ugly faces at us.” He stuck out his tongue to demonstrate.

Lilith laughed.

After an endless moment Mark got up and looked at Lilith. “You may not be a real princess, but to me that’s what you are. You are my master, and I am your servant.”

The room dissolved around her. A moment later everything reformed, and she found herself in the officer’s mess hall.

Lilith looked at Mark, standing next to her. She considered mentioning that she was a real princess, and she was just using a pseudonym, contact lenses and a disguise spell.

A large group of people entered and both Mark and Lilith got separated by the rush of the crowd.

Moments later unknown forces blotted Mark, along with the adventure she had with him, from Lilith’s memory. The world no longer had a need for her to remember Mark; for now anyway.

Nevertheless Lilith’s heart hurt as she went to the serving line and waited for dinner.

Lilith took her food and sat in an empty chair. An overhead monitor clamored for attention. The news anchor interrupted the regular broadcast for late breaking news.

News anchor Simone Wilson announced, “We have breaking news from Emperor Jacob Astor – Taking you there live.”

“Attention citizens of the world,” Astor said. “We have decided to end the war with the countries that have rejected Paradise food. In addition, we have decided to stop production of Paradise food.”

Celebrations echoed through the mess hall, but Lilith wasn’t sure that was such good news. If Paradise food production were to stop completely, then there would be widespread famine. Countless local farms were lost, and the major farms were in lockdown, since all that food was slated for America.

A thought occurred to Lilith. The Second Horseman was Famine, and he was about to ride.

“Quiet,” Lilith shouted, and the room quieted down. She stood up and continued. “This isn’t over. In the next few months there will be major food shortages throughout the world, because the emperor has cut production of Paradise food.

“Our job will then be to distribute food to all parts of the world and that’s not going to be easy.”

“Why would distributing food be difficult?” a Major Dickenson asked. “Our food reserves are sufficient to feed the world several times over. They need it and we have it.”

“That’s because the Second Horseman will start to ride soon,” Lilith replied. “What that means is that we will have stiff opposition when we try to bring food into places that need food the most. Control food and you control people.”

General Loco got up and spoke. “Colonel Lucas is correct. This war is far from over, even though the emperor has declared a ceasefire. Sometime tomorrow we will give you new orders.”

The general took his tray and sat down next to Lilith.

“You have a very good grasp of the situation,” General Loco praised. “I’m going to rely on you to help alleviate the famines that will soon plague the world.”

“Yes sir,” Lilith replied, flattered.

“How good are you at logistics?” General Loco asked.

“I read General George S. Patton’s immersive novel, although I never met him,” Lilith replied.

“How did you do that? You’re not 21 yet. Don’t worry. I won’t inquire.” General Loco changed the subject and said, “I’ll introduce General Patton to you.”

The general made small talk with Lilith and then said goodnight.

Lilith went to her room and lay down.

War was such a pain and finally it was over. She couldn’t blame the others for being happy. She felt a little guilty for ruining their enjoyment. After all, there was still tomorrow for them to discover the truth. The enlisted personal had tonight to celebrate.

Lilith drifted to sleep, wondering what the future held.

The next day Lilith got a promotion for performing a task she didn’t remember.

8. Famine

The hungry know not of religion

But only what’s not in their bellies

It was January the 6th and Mark celebrated his 28th birthday with his two closest friends. All three were at a local all-you-can-eat Chinese restaurant.

“It’s so sad,” Jane said. “Half the world is starving and we have more food than we can eat.”

“That can’t be helped,” Mark replied. “All those stupid countries have banned imports, afraid that we are giving them Paradise food. Others are afraid we will undermine their authority.”

“And last year’s crops intended for America were destroyed by locusts,” Harry added.

Mark got up and shouted, “Got him.”

“Got who?” Jane asked.

“The second horseman,” Mark said excitedly. “I know exactly where he is. I just sent a message to General Loco, explaining the situation.”

The three ate quietly as Mark waited for the call.

Finally, Mark got up and said, “I got to go. Wish me luck.”

Mark teleported to General Loco’s office and found Lilith there. Memories of his encounter with her rushed into his mind. She had helped him defeat the first horseman, but he didn’t remember the details. All he remembered was that he got a promotion because of it.

Lilith saluted Mark and said, “Good evening, Major General Draco.”

“Good evening, Brigadier General Lucas,” Mark replied.

“You have worked together before to take down the first horseman,” General Loco said. “You shall do so again. The faster this is done, the faster we can save those poor starving people.”

“Yes sir,” both Lilith and Mark said and saluted the general.

Mark teleported Lilith and himself to a building in Egypt. The building was run down and dingy.

“The second horseman is beyond those doors,” Mark said.

“Do you remember how we took down the last horseman?” Lilith asked. “For some reason, I can’t remember.”

“Me neither,” Mark replied. “I’m guessing that is part of our challenge. Shall we go?”

Lilith nodded.

They passed through the doors and found themselves in a private enclosed garden. The withered plants were covered with rotting fruit. Nothing in the garden was edible.

A skeleton of a woman crouched in the center of the garden. Beside her stood a black shriveled up horse. The corpse-like creature nuzzled a patch of cracked, dried earth.

The naked woman didn’t see them and instead focused on a gray, dingy sack she rummaged through.

“How do we handle her?” Lilith asked.

Mark shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“She’s skin and bones,” Lilith suggested. “Maybe we should offer her some food.”

Mark nodded and conjured a basket of fruit, pizza, chicken, and other snacks. He approached the horseman, or was it horsewoman?

As he approached, the food aged and rotted. The apples became moldy. The chicken turned green and gave a nasty stink. Nothing was edible.

Mark turned around and showed Lilith.

“Try Paradise food,” Lilith suggested. She then added, “Never mind. All the Paradise food is gone.”

“No. I can conjure Paradise food,” Mark replied. He got rid of the gross basket and produced a second basket filled with Paradise food.

Mark took the basket to the woman. The Paradise food also rotted before he got to her. “That’s freaky,” Mark remarked. “Paradise food is imperishable. What should we do now?”

“Try taking a glass of water to her,” Lilith suggested, running out of suggestions.

Mark did as instructed, and the water turned green and gross. It smelled like swamp water with weird things swimming inside. Mark tossed it and returned to Lilith. “No good. I can’t get any kind of food near her.”

“What’s in that bag she’s holding?” Lilith asked. She approached the woman and looked in.

The bag contained human body parts. There were hands, feet with dirty toenails, eyeballs, hearts, ears, and certain male body parts better left unmentioned.

The woman grabbed a hand and bit the fingers off. In seconds the hand was eaten. A moment later she pooped something black. The black thing scurried away.

Feeling nauseous, Lilith backed away to the entrance. “That’s just gross,” she exclaimed.

The woman continued ignoring them while rummaging through the bag.

“I guess you should ask what she wants,” Lilith suggested.

“I think I know what she wants,” Mark replied uneasily.

Nevertheless, he approached and asked, “Woman, what do you want?”

She turned and said, “You look tasty.”

A chill ran down Mark’s spine and he quickly retreated. The woman returned to her rummaging.

Mark looked at Lilith and Lilith objected, “No way.”

Lilith nervously walked up to the skin-clad skeleton and asked, “What do you want?”

She turned to Mark and pointed. “He looks tasty,” she replied.

Lilith retreated and again the woman once again rummaged through the bag looking for something to eat.

“What should we do?” Lilith asked. “If we don’t stop her, she’ll eat the entire human race.”

“I think you know what must be done,” Mark stated. His voice trembled with fear.

“No, you mustn’t,” Lilith screamed. “You’re too valuable to the world.”

“Me, valuable to the world? That’s ridiculous,” Mark laughed without humor. “It was me who caused this mess in the first place.”

“No,” Lilith denied. “I’m responsible too.”

“Nevertheless, you are more valuable to the world than me,” Mark said. “It doesn’t matter. Only my flesh can satisfy her hunger since she is my child.”

Mark knew what he needed to do but was terrified. He timidly walked up to the horsewoman and presented his hand. The skeleton woman sniffed it. Mark had the overwhelming urge to withdraw his hand. Instead, he braced himself and grimaced.

Lilith ran up to the two and the skeleton woman shoved Lilith. Lilith staggered back five feet and fell to the ground. The horse then sat on her.

Lilith couldn’t move, even though the black horse was just a skeleton covered with skin.

Lilith screamed in horror as the woman bit Mark’s hand and removed fingers. Lilith was unable to look away as the man she loved more than life was eaten.

Mark wasn’t having fun either. He hadn’t realized until now how painful being eaten alive would be. He wanted to run away. He wanted to search for another option. He didn’t want Lilith to see him suffer.

From deep down, the strength to endure surged up. He had to endure. That strength allowed him to brace himself and endure the pain.

The more of Mark she ate, the faster she ate.

Then the transformation began. The woman’s flesh filled out. The twin flaps of skin on her chest became breasts. Her cheeks became chubby and rosy.

The same thing happened to the horse. It too gained weight. Its flesh became glossy and healthy. Its mane became shiny and healthy.

In moments the only thing remaining of Mark was an eyeball. It blinked at Lilith. A moment later it was eaten. The horsewoman had eaten Mark, clothes and all.

The prize-winning black stallion got up from Lilith and approached the beautiful naked woman standing in the center of the garden. She shook her waist-length glossy black hair and mounted the horse.

The woman looked sadly at Lilith and explained, “He willingly gave his flesh to satisfy my hunger. It was necessary.”

Woman and horse dissolved into black smoke. A moment later the smoke condensed into the form of a man. It was Mark, restored.

Lilith jumped up and ran to Mark. She wrapped her arms around Mark and said, “I was so worried about you.”

Mark hugged her back.

For an endless moment they remained together as the early morning sun shone down upon them.

The two sat down upon a nearby bench and looked at the enclosed garden. The garden had expanded to hundreds of acres. All types of fruit bearing plants filled the garden. Looking around, Mark saw tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons, grapes, and avocadoes, to name a few. They were ripe for the plucking. There were also vegetables like cabbage, and spinach.

“What was it like being eaten?” Lilith asked.

“In addition to being super painful, it was the scariest thing that ever happened to me. I don’t think anyone really wants to die. But I knew that she was my child and that she came from deep within me,” Mark said and touched his stomach. “That gave me the strength to endure what I knew I had to endure.”

“Mothers are incredible creatures,” Lilith proclaimed. “They can endure things no one can imagine.”

Mark laughed heartily. “If I’m the mummy, then you must be the daddy.”

Lilith laughed as well, fully appreciating the strange change in traditional roles.

The two leaned back and enjoyed the sun and the abundance surrounding them.

“This is a strange birthday,” Mark mused. “For my party, I become the main course.”

“Happy birthday. How old are you?” Lilith asked.

“Thanks. I just turned twenty-nine,” Mark replied.

“On August 20, I turn twenty-one,” Lilith said. “Will you come to my party?”

“Of course,” Mark said. “Hopefully by then I can give you a happy world as a gift.”

“I’m happy right now,” Lilith sighed.

“We better get back to General Loco before he gets ants in his pants,” Mark said.

“Ants in his pants,” Lilith chuckled. “That’s funny.”

Mark got up and Lilith followed. A moment later they were in front of General Loco’s office.

“Come in,” the general said before Mark could knock.

They entered and closed the door.

“Congratulations for doing such an incredible job,” General Loco applauded. “There’s no way I could have done what you did. As a reward for completing a monumental task, the higher-ups have decided you both deserve stars.”

General Loco pinned stars on both Lilith and Draco. Lilith was now a Major General and Mark was now a Lieutenant General.

“Congratulations Lilith,” Mark said and hugged Lilith.

“You too Marcus,” Lilith replied and hugged him back.

“Now that the second horseman is out of the way, we can finally deliver the much-needed food to the world, without having to worry about political or social opposition. We can also start helping the world rebuild their farming infrastructure,” General Loco explained. He added, “Because of your greater ranks, you will be much more involved in these tasks. I’m counting on you too.”

“Yes sir,” the two said together.

“Dismissed,” the general said.

Lilith and Mark saluted and exited the office.

“Come, let’s eat dinner,” Mark said. “I know this great restaurant in Italy that makes the best lasagna in the world.

“Okay Marcus,” Lilith replied.

They popped to Italy and landed in front of the restaurant. People freaked out when they appeared out of nowhere.

“That’s annoying,” Mark grumbled. “I tend to forget we need to be careful around muggles.”

They entered the restaurant and Mark ordered, “Table for two.”

They were escorted to a table and given menus.

The waiter handed them wine menus and Mark said, “I can’t drink wine.”

“Neither can I,” Lilith echoed.

Looking surprised, the waiter gave them a list of soft drinks. Both ordered cokes.

The waiter brought bread rolls and other stuff, and then left. Ten minutes later he came back and took their orders.

The two made small talk until the waiter came and served dinner.

“You’re right,” Lilith agreed. “This is good.”

“The world is filled with incredible restaurants,” Mark said. “I used to travel a lot when I was a kid, but then I got caught up in events and forgot the good things in life.”

“Me too,” Lilith replied. “Next time we should go to France. The French have boring food, but the view from the Eiffel Tower makes it worth it.”

“If you like good views, you should come to my clan’s island,” Mark said. “It’s the most beautiful place in the Sea of Chaos.”

“Too bad the Sea is shrinking,” Lilith sighed. “I hear that it’s almost gone.”

“That’s horrible,” Mark exclaimed. “That means that only junior wizards and up can enter.”

“I’m still a journeyman wizard,” Lilith said sadly.

“Don’t be sad,” Mark replied. “Being a journeyman at the age of just twenty is incredible. It’s only a matter of time before you gain the power to teleport, and then you’ll have the keys to the universe.”

The waiter came with dissert and the bill. “If you don’t mind me asking but, were you born in Italy before moving to America?”

“No,” Lilith replied. “I was born in America, in Washington State.”

“I was born on the island of Dragonia and then immigrated,” Mark added.

“Your accents are amazing,” the waiter marveled. “It’s as if you’ve lived here all your life.”

Mark looked at Lilith, then back at the waiter in surprise. “That’s because we are wizards. All wizards have the power to speak all tongues and be understood by all. To us there’s only one language,” Mark replied.

“You can speak in tongues like the apostles?” a woman next table over asked. “That’s amazing.”

Her partner replied, “That’s impossible dear. He’s just pulling your leg.”

Mark rolled his eyes and said, “I can prove it. Bring people here who have different mother tongues and then compare notes.”

People in the area got excited and congregated.

“Hi everyone,” Mark began. “I am Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan. This is Lilith Lucas, my best friend. We have been working around the world, to try to deal with various incidents that interfere with global peace.”

“You two are so sweet,” an old woman cooed. “I love seeing loving young married couples.”

“Married?” Mark asked, looking at Lilith in surprise.

“If we are married, then I’m the husband and you’re the wife,” Lilith laughed. She then added, “Sorry, inside joke.”

Mark then looked at the audience and asked, “What language were we speaking in?”

“Italian,” the waiter said.

“Russian,” a customer said.

“No, British English,” an English woman denied.

Everyone argued. That was a bit of a problem, since the language barrier prevented proper understanding.

“Does anyone know about the world war and the famine that followed?” Mark asked.

“Of course, dear,” the old woman replied. “Everyone knows about that and how Sludgie almost singlehandedly ended the conflict and stopped the famine.”

A man spoke in a different language and said, “Of course. Everyone knows about that and how Lieutenant General Draco almost singlehandedly ended the conflict and stopped the famine.”

That was weird. They didn’t believe in magic, but they believed in the Sludge Monster. Stranger still, they knew about something that happened less than an hour previously. Stranger still both Sludgie and Mark got credit, depending on who was asked. Mark shoved that mystery into the back of his mind. It was obviously some strange end-times manifestation.

Eventually the crowd dispersed, and Mark and Lilith headed out. Mark cast an unnoticability spell and teleported them back to the barracks.

“It was fun hang out with you,” Mark said.

“I felt as if I was ten years old again,” Lilith added.

“If my friend was here, he would say to me, ‘The reason you feel like a ten-year-old is because you are ten,’” Mark commented.

“Two more horsemen left,” Lilith sighed. “The world is losing magic. It’s so sad.”

“When I was a child, I went to a parallel world where magic didn’t exist,” Mark mused. “It seems like that reality is taking dominance and our reality is fading. We’re like dinosaurs.”

“Very sad,” Lilith agreed. She looked so sad that Mark just had to hug her.

Mark let go of Lilith and headed for his room. Their memories faded as they parted.

Mark stepped into his room and Harry looked at him in surprise. He asked, “Another promotion? When will it stop?”

Mark shrugged. “I don’t know. The second horseman has been taken care of. Just two more left.” There was one rank left. He didn’t say that.

9. Disease

Disease comes about when the  
natural order of things breaks down

With the second horseman gone, shipments of food to all parts of the world began in earnest. Neglected farms were replanted, ensuring sufficient food come harvest time.

Unfortunately, because of the famine, people’s health became compromised. Add to that the still lingering damage of the global war and you had a recipe for pandemics.

It started with a cold, but then it became worse. In the United States, where magic was still strong, people went to wizards for help. In other parts of the world, where magic was almost completely forgotten (thanks to Paradise food), the sick turned to medicine. Unfortunately, since the plagues were of a magical nature, doctors were almost completely useless.

In other news the military began accepting non-wizard officers since the military was desperate. The command structure was compromised.

Months passed and Mark waited in frustration.

April came with beautiful flowers and good news. The third horseman had revealed himself.

Mark stood in front of General Loco and smiled at Lilith. It was fun working with her on capturing the previous horsemen, although he found it strange that he had forgotten her till now. “Are you ready?” Mark asked.

Lilith nodded and Mark teleported them to a cutting-edge hospital in Germany.

“Okay Lilith, the third horseman is in that ward,” Mark reported.

An orderly approached and said, “I’m sorry but you’re not allowed in there.”

Mark waved his hand in front of the orderly’s face and intoned, “We are doctors and have permission.”

“I’m sorry doctors,” the orderly apologized. “Please put on protective clothing. These patients are very infectious.”

Having established a new localized reality, Mark and Lilith did as instructed, if only to please the orderly and not to bother others.

They entered a large room filled with chronically ill people. The far corner held a white horse sitting on a bed. On its back sat Typhoid Mary. Neither the horse nor the woman was sick. However, she had the power to make people sick by her very presence.

“How do we deal with her?” Lilith asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark replied.

“The problem is that she isn’t sick, so we can’t cure her,” Lilith noted. “Let’s try curing the people in this room.”

Lilith and Mark combined their powers and cast the healing spell. It failed. That wasn’t surprising.

“Now what?” Mark asked.

“How did we defeat the other horsemen?” Lilith asked.

“I don’t remember,” Mark replied.

“I guess we have no choice but to ask her,” Lilith replied.

Mark nodded and approached Typhoid Mary. “How do we…,” Mark began and then stopped. His throat swelled and he couldn’t speak.

Mark backed away and the swelling disappeared. He reported to Lilith.

Lilith approached Typhoid Mary, but nothing happened. What did that mean?

“Damn,” Mark cursed. “We can’t heal her. We can’t isolate her because that is her power, and that’s not a cure. We can’t heal infected people. The only power I have is to get sick.”

“No way,” Lilith objected and shook her head.

“She’s part of me,” Mark objected. “She came from me. How can I accept her if I don’t accept her?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Lilith warned worriedly.

Mark nervously approached Typhoid Mary and sat on the bed. In moments the symptoms began. His throat became swollen and sore. Sores spread across his body and oozed yellow liquid.

Mark removed the protective garments the orderly gave him. They were useless and just suffocating. Lilith removed her PPE.

Mark shivered as fever racked his body. He coughed like a madman, ready to cough up a lung. Instead, blood came out.

Lilith held Mark in her arms, unable to do anything and hating herself for being powerless. The stench from the open sores made Lilith feel like barfing.

The fever became worse, and Lilith considered removing Mark from the bed. She knew separation would stop the disease and restore Mark. Nevertheless, she endured since that was her duty.

Mark rolled his head back and stopped moving. Lilith checked his vitals and discovered he was dead.

Lilith bawled like a baby and cradled Mark’s lifeless body.

Typhoid Mary looked sadly at Lilith and said, “He had to bear my disease. It was necessary.”

Both Typhoid Mary and her white horse dissolved and turned into a white vapor cloud. The cloud entered Mark’s eyes, mouth, nose, and ears and disappeared. All external signs of disease vanished, and Mark opened his eyes.

Lilith hugged Mark and bawled harder than before. After a minute she calmed down and let go of him.

The door of the ward opened, and doctors entered. “Good news everyone,” one doctor announced. “The eminent Dr. Markus Lucas, with the help of Sludgie, has discovered the cure for this pandemic.”

The doctors approached each patient and injected them with a serum. Within moments the patients became better.

One patient said, “Thank you doctor for curing me.”

The doctor replied, “Don’t thank me. Thank Dr. Markus Lucas and Sludgie. They did it.”

“Our job here is done,” Mark noted. “It’s time to get our stars.”

They walked out of the ward and Lilith complained, “But I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s not true,” Mark replied. “With your love, you gave me the strength to endure. I love you more than anything in the world, my little princess.”

Mark hugged Lilith and she hugged him back.

Finally, they released each other and Mark said, “I guess it’s time to go.”

Lilith nodded and the world dissolved around them. The world reformed and Lilith found herself in front of General Loco.

“Congratulations both of you,” General Loco praised. “You have stopped the third horseman.” The general looked at Mark and gave him a sideways smile. “Dr. Markus Lucas,” he added with a snicker in his voice.

Mark shrugged and said, “I don’t know how that happened.”

“I do,” Lilith said. “You cast that spell to change our identities. I guess that spell was more powerful than you intended.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the general said. “The only thing that matters, Lieutenant General Draco is that you succeeded. Now for the reward.”

The general pinned a star on Lilith. “Congratulations Lieutenant General Lucas. Sorry Lieutenant General Draco. No star today.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lilith said and saluted the general.

“That’s okay sir,” Mark said and saluted as well. “My shoulders were getting sore from the weight.”

The general laughed.

“It’s only 11:00AM,” the general noted. “I want you to take the day off and have fun together. That’s an order. Just remember to invite me to the wedding, you love birds.”

They saluted the general, thanked him and left the office.

“I think someone was spying on us,” Lilith said.

Mark nodded. “That’s not surprising. We were on an important mission, so it’s expected. No one should be watching now since we are on personal time.”

*Unless my dad is watching*, Lilith thought. She hadn’t revealed her royal identity to Mark and was reluctant to do so.

“Have you ever considered getting married?” Lilith asked.

“No,” Mark replied. “Although in high school I was desperate to get a girlfriend, since my best friend had a girl and that made him seem mature. Looking back, I think it was just a waste of time. I guess I was just a kid then. Where do you want to go for lunch?”

“Going to Europe at this time will be a pain since it will be night,” Mark considered.

“Let’s go to New York and eat some pizza.”

“Okay,” Lilith replied.

Mark searched the net and found a popular place. A moment later, they materialized in a side alley beside the restaurant. They stepped out and into the pizza place.

The waiter took them to a booth, and they ordered multiple pizzas. The waiter looked at them in surprise before leaving.

“I guess no one eats like that,” Mark mused.

“I have a monster appetite and it’s impossible for me to gain weight,” Lilith admitted.

“Me too,” Mark added.

They made small talk until the pizza arrived, and then ate.

“I just thought of something,” Lilith mused. “Paris at night is beautiful.”

“Okay,” Mark agreed and helped Lilith finish the last of the pizza. They paid and Mark teleported the two to the top of the Eiffel tower.

“You’re right,” Mark agreed. “It is pretty.”

Next stop was Niagara Falls. Stop after stop they travelled the world until night came.

“That was fun,” Mark said. “We need to do this again.”

“Yup,” Lilith agreed, and they parted ways.

A thought came to Mark as he turned away. Lilith never went to the washroom, no matter how much she ate or drank. A second later that thought disappeared, along with the memory that they ever met.

10. Death

Waiting on Death can be a drag

It was early June and Mark sat in his chair beside the sleeping Harry.

Mark got distracted from his train of thoughts when a book fell on his head. Harry jumped out of bed and screamed, “What’s going on?”

“Earthquake,” Mark replied calmly.

“Why is there an earthquake?” Harry asked in a panicked voice.

“Calm yourself and examine the situation with your Book of Knowledge,” Mark advised.

“Right,” Harry said, feeling embarrassed.

The shaking stopped and Harry found a news broadcast and watched it.

“Breaking news,” news anchor Simone Wilson said. “Scientists believe the Earth has entered a period of intense internal activity. As a result, we are expected to experience major global earthquakes, volcanic activity, and tsunamis. Some say the last of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse is the cause. If that’s true, then please Sludgie, take care of the horseman of Death.”

Harry turned it off and said, “They believe in magic, monsters and everything that happened so far in the world, but they don’t believe it’s possible for them to perform magic.”

Mark nodded. “I went to Rome for lunch a few months ago and spoke to the people there. They didn’t seem to believe in magic and appeared to be forgetting everything. However, they knew about the Sludge Monster and the war, which surprised me.

“You’re right. They don’t believe in their own ability to be wizards. Wizardry performed by Sludge Monsters, Antichrists and evil horsemen is a different story.

“For them there are two kinds of people: Regular people who do ordinary things, and wizards who live in a world beyond their understanding and who can be very scary.”

“Maybe it’s best for wizards to withdraw from this world,” Harry remarked. “We are like aliens that don’t belong.”

“That would be horrible,” Mark refuted. “If we are there, at least some of them might aspire to greater things and seek out the Wizard’s Initiation. But if we are gone, then all they will have will be stories.”

“Stories of God and his angels,” Harry agreed. “I guess you’re right.”

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It was June 21, the first day of summer. It had been almost two weeks since the beginning of the season of natural disasters and the world was in a panic. Countless people had died, and the property damage was rising. Was the world going to end, after so many near misses, and where was Sludgie? Wasn’t it his job to save the world?

Mark entered General Loco’s office and saluted. Lilith stood beside the general.

“The last horseman is in Siberia sir,” Mark said.

“That’s a nasty place,” General Loco noted. “I’m glad I’m not going. Good luck.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mark said and saluted the general. Lilith saluted as well.

“Are you ready to go?” Mark asks.

Lilith nodded.

Moments later, Lilith found herself in a northern forest. It was night and winter cold, even though it was June. Then again this was Siberia.

She looked down and discovered that she was wearing a Tiikeri jacket. She didn’t like the clan, but she knew their equipment was quality.

Mark cast a spell to illuminate the area, but the light only illuminated twenty feet in all directions and refused to go further.

“The last one is over there,” Mark said, pointing at a darkened area. “He’s giving off a scary aura.”

Feeling it too, Lilith nodded and said, “We should get it over with.”

Mark took a step and then stopped. “Damn. Why does he have to be in the wilderness in the middle of the night?”

Mark took another step and panic gripped him. He grabbed Lilith’s arm in terror. Were there things moving out there in the darkness?

Mark checked his second screen, but something interfered with its operation. That only made the situation scarier.

“I finally know something in the muggle world that’s better than the wizard world,” Mark muttered.

“In the muggle world, there are no terrors of a spiritual nature. Everything is physical and creatures from hell can’t drag you down.”

“Stop that,” Lilith screeched. “You’re scaring me.”

Mark considered running away and coming back again in the morning. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option.

He knew that when day came, the creature would just relocate to a scarier place. If he ran now, there was no way he would get the courage to come back again.

*‘Mum, dad, give me strength,’* Mark prayed. He took a deep breath and slowly inched forward. Lilith was the only safe thing in his world and he was afraid of losing her forever.

Step after step they moved forward until a shadowy figure came into view.

Lilith was just as scared as Mark, but she knew her job was to support Mark. “It’s all right. I’m right here with you and will never abandon you.” Her arm was hurting, held too tightly by Mark.

They stopped just out of arms reach from the creature. The pale horse stood like a ghost next to him, with eyes glowing red in the magic light.

Strangely, the light refused to illuminate the shadowed creature, no matter how hard Mark tried.

This was the face of the Unknown. Those who ventured too close would surely die. In muggle lore, this was where dragons dwelled, along with other things that went bump in the night.

“We need to face the unknown and death,” Lilith whispered. “We can’t run away.”

That was easier said than done. “I know,” Mark whimpered.

Mark knew that he was at the point of no return. If he took one more step closer, there would be no turning back.

“It’s okay Mark, I will always be there by your side to protect you,” Lilith whispered, using the name ‘Mark’ for the first time.

Mark nodded. “Okay, if it’s you.”

Sweating profusely, Mark took the fatal step forward into the frigid Siberian air and towards Death.

The dark creature extended an arm. Mark felt Death approaching, and he wanted to flee. Lilith’s touch gave him strength and he stood his ground.

The Lord of Death touched Mark’s heart and his heart stopped beating. The magic light disappeared, leaving only the illumination from the full moon overhead.

Mark collapsed to the ground and Lilith hugged him to her bosom. Again, she was powerless to help the one person she cared most about. Her best friend was dead.

Through tear-bleared eyes, she stared at Death. He spoke in a voice without sound.

“Death is a natural part of life, something you wizards have forgotten. It was necessary that you both know death.”

With that the fourth horseman and steed dissolved into a pale glowing mist and entered Mark’s eyes, mouth, nose, and ears.

Mark opened his eyes and looked at Lilith. “I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you.”

Lilith wiped her eyes and promised, “I will never abandon you. I love you.”

Mark closed his eyes and enjoyed resting on the pillow that was Lilith’s lap.

After a few moments, Lilith noted that day had broken. It was still dark, but there was a shift in the air, indicating dawn.

“I could lie on your lap forever,” Mark murmured.

“Unfortunately, General Loco is waiting,” Lilith sighed.

Mark reluctantly got up. A moment later they were in General Loco’s office, minus the jackets.

They saluted the general and the general exclaimed, “Damn. You two are the bravest people I know. I think I wet myself just watching. You two most definitely deserve a star for this.”

With that, the general pinned stars on the two. Both Lilith and Mark saluted the general and said, “Thank you sir.”

“You no longer need to salute me,” General Loco objected. “You are both generals now, just like me.”

11. Sludge No Longer

Monsters can’t be killed.

They can only be redeemed.

The unusual weather and seismic activity throughout the world died down and a sense of security came to the world.

There is a funny thing about natural disasters. They tend to disperse negative energy. Survivors of natural disasters are usually filled with a renewed vitality and the desire to rebuild. This spirit of renewal filled the world, thanks to Sludgie and General Draco.

Mark wasn’t aware of his rising fame throughout the world. He had his own problems. He still hadn’t found the Antichrist and it was driving him crazy.

July 1 dawned and a feeling deep within him told him that being in the military was a waste of time. Besides, they didn’t need him and all he did was paperwork.

Mark went to the office and submitted a request to resign. Strangely enough, there was no problem resigning. That was probably because the United States army had the option of recalling him should the need arise.

Unknown to Mark, Lilith also resigned. Military life was boring, and they didn’t need her. She had better things to do in her life than spend endless days doing paperwork. Of course, she didn’t know what that something was and so went back to Washington.

Lilith’s friends found boyfriends and husbands they could be with and remained in the army. No longer having anything in common with then, they drifted apart.

Nursing an emptiness in her heart that grew every day, Lilith sulked in her room in her old gang house and trained as a form of distraction.

Mark was in the same boat as Lilith. He too fought with an emptiness he couldn’t fill with food and study.

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Finally, on July 7, Mark felt a calling. The Antichrist was in Transylvania, in an abandoned castle. He recalled all his sensors and soul fragments scattered throughout the world, since they were no longer needed.

Mark popped to the castle and found himself in the throne room. In front of him was a full-length freestanding mirror. He walked up to it and stared at his own refection.

For moments nothing happened. Then the reflection moved, and Mark almost jumped out of his skin.

“I am you,” the reflection said. “You have come seeking for the Antichrist. You have found him. He is you. Your test shall begin now.”

The mirror dissolved and entered Mark’s chest.

Mark was flooded with overwhelming guilt. He had been the cause of all the suffering of the world and would be its eventual downfall. There was never any Antichrist, just him. He was the source of all things bad. He was the source of all evil.

He had confronted the Antichrist without the help of Lilith and that was his downfall. Nevertheless, he was trapped and couldn’t escape.

Mark’s body changed by itself, returning him to his true form.

The Sludge Monster sat on the throne and contemplated the evil person that he was.

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Jane and Harry popped into the throne room and looked at Sludgie sitting on the throne.

“We finally found you,” Jane said.

Sludgie ignored them.

They sat on chairs on both sides of Sludgie and waited. Days passed and Harry and Jane only left their chairs to sleep on beds they brought into the room, and to eat.

July 20 arrived.

“There’s something I want you to see,” Jane said.

A screen appeared in the center of the room and news anchor Simone Wilson spoke.

“Welcome everyone,” Simone said. “Today we are here to honor the greatest hero to have ever lived. But first, let’s break to talk to people from around the world.”

The scene changed to London, England.

Simone asked a group of people, “What do you think of Sludgie?”

One man said, “He’s a hero. He defeated the evil horsemen and sent them back to hell.”

A woman asked, “Didn’t he summon them?”

Another woman replied, “That was necessary. Didn’t the experts say that our planet was this close to being destroyed because of the sins of the past?”

“That’s true,” the first woman admitted. “According to the experts, he allowed enough pressure to be released to prevent everyone from going to hell.”

“Don’t forget General Draco,” a man in a t-shirt added. “He worked closely with Sludgie to manage the disaster.”

A teenage girl asked, “How are General Draco and Sludgie related?”

“We don’t know,” Simone said. “Here you have it. Sludgie and General Draco are National Heroes.”

“I can’t be a national hero,” Sludgie denied, speaking for the first time since Jane and Harry arrived. “I *am* the Antichrist. I am evil.”

The scene on the screen changed to another part of the world. Again, Simone spoke to citizens. Again, they declared Mark to be a hero.

“International polls are unanimous,” Simone said. “Sludgie, thanks to you the Four Horsemen have been vanquished. Thanks to you the Antichrist is no longer active. Wherever you are, we think you are a hero. Now let’s go to Washington, where King Ravenswood is honoring everyone’s hero.”

They cut to a large auditorium filled with thousands of people. Ravenswood stood onstage.

Princess Annie stood beside the king in all her radiant beauty. She looked both upset and confused at the same time.

That wasn’t surprising. Lilith was teleported without her consent and placed onstage. They had changed her clothes, restored her pink hair, and removed her contact lenses.

Lilith stared at the audience, and down at the beautiful dress she wore. “What’s going on daddy? Why am I here?” she asked angrily.

“Well daughter, in one month you shall become twenty-one. It’s time to meet your fiancé.”

“No way daddy,” Lilith shouted. “I refuse to marry some stupid prince.”

Lilith tried to leave but an unknown force prevented her.

Ravenswood ignored her and spoke to the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are here for one purpose. That is to give recognition to the man who has saved us all from destruction.

“Sludgie, I know you are listening, since my daughter Jane is with you. Sludgie, I acknowledge you as a National Hero.”

Sludgie stared at the screen in disbelief. How could the world be so stupid?

Ravenswood continued. “Years ago, Annie issued the Princess Challenge.

“The challenge was issued. After years of hardship and after overcoming great challenges, you have succeeded. You are without doubt a National Hero.

“I, King Ravenswood Van Duyn of the house of David, offer my daughter to you as your lawful wife.”

Sludgie couldn’t believe what he heard. He popped in front of the king and just stared at him. The audience got the smell of freshly turned soil.

A burden he didn’t know he carried lifted from Sludgie’s shoulders. For the first time he felt truly free.

Sludgie spoke to the Antichrist living within him. *‘I forgive you,’* he said with deep gratitude. *‘None of this is your fault.’*

*‘Thank you,’* the Antichrist said. *‘Understanding and forgiveness of both you and me is what we both needed. It is the only thing that can vanquish the Darkness. You have passed the test.’*

With that, the Antichrist let go and finally integrated with Mark. His final test was complete. His soul was now 100% restored.

“Thank you, Majesty,” Sludgie said gratefully. “Only forgiveness and acceptance can vanquish evil. You have finally killed the evil Sludge Monster.”

A tear rolled down Ravenswood’s face and his wife held his hand. In moments people in the audience began crying.

Sludgie turned sad eyes to Annie. Pieces of him flaked away and dissolved into sparkling diamond dust.

The world watched in horror as Sludgie disintegrated. Sludgie was dying.

Guilt and sadness flooded Annie. She made Sludgie do bad things. She had shunned him and made him suffer. Now, because of her, he was dying.

Annie ran to Sludgie and hugged him. “Please don’t die Sludgie. I need you.”

Jane stood helplessly onstage as she gripped Harry’s arm. Their best friend was dying, and they were helpless to stop it.

Feeling choked up, Ravenswood said, “I’m sorry Sludgie. I didn’t think this would end this way.”

Sludgie was halfway gone. He was now just a half torso and head floating in midair. Sludgie continued flaking away until only his smile remained. That too disappeared, leaving behind a cloud of shimmering diamond dust floating near the ceiling.

Annie fell to the ground and wept like a baby. In front of the world a ten-year-old princess in baby clothes cried.

No one spoke and Simone just stood there, unable to do her job. She too was choked up.

The cloud of diamond dust descended onto Annie and formed into a pure white kitten sitting on her shoulders.

“Grundy,” Annie cried. The amnesia spell broke and suppressed memories flooded Annie.

Annie remembered the first time she saw Mark. He was hitting on two Academy girls. She loved him instantly.

She remembered going to Dragonia and splashing naked in the hot springs with him. She remembered playing hide and seek and snuggling with him after seeing her First Parents.

The pretend wedding was fun, as was the times spent at the orphanage with him. Then came the Christmas party when her dad cast the amnesia spell for the first time.

She remembered how time after time, fate would intervene, allowing them to meet. She remembered capturing him and making him her pet.

Playing dress-up with him when he changed into his Carol form was fun.

Finally came her tenth birthday, when she took the Wizard’s Initiation prematurely, and formally issued the Princess Challenge to protect Mark.

She remembered why she hated her dad and how she had tortured him all those years. She also understood why everything he did was necessary to fulfill the Princess Challenge.

“I hope you can forgive me,” Ravenswood pleaded.

“Of course, daddy,” Annie replied and hugged her father. “I think I have punished you enough.”

With that forgiveness came rejuvenation.

The king’s hair returned to its natural color and became full again. He became younger and took on the appearance of a thirty-five-year-old man, the age most people considered the stateliest for a king.

“I’m sorry dear,” Marjorie said. “I didn’t know the burden you were shouldering.”

Husband, wife, and two daughters hugged.

Feeling like a third wheel, Harry left the stage and teleported into the audience.

“For those who don’t understand what is going on, we will release Mark and Annie’s biographies before the wedding,” Ravenswood announced.

“That was the most touching thing I ever witnessed,” Simone remarked. “Royalty really is magical. I can’t wait to see the movie.”

The royal family disengaged, and Ravenswood spoke. “Grundy, kindly turn back into big Mark,” he commanded. “Annie, change back too.”

Grundy was reluctant to leave his perch but complied. He got off Annie and transformed back into a young man with red hair and a cool moustache. He was dressed suitably for the occasion.

“Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present to you General Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan, whom you all love,” Ravenswood said.

The audience burst into mad cheering. It was pandemonium.

Feeling embarrassed, Mark bowed to the audience. The only damper was that Harry wasn’t on stage with him.

After several minutes, the audience finally calmed down.

Ravenswood addressed the world, “My daughter Annie will turn twenty-one on August 20. On August 21, we shall have the wedding. Dear, we only have one month. Do you think that’s enough time?”

“No,” Marjorie replied.

“Don’t worry,” Ravenswood said. “Mark’s parents just contacted me and said that they will help with the wedding. Mark, they said they love you and are amazed at how incredible you are.”

Mark nodded, wishing he could hug them.

“After the wedding, Mark and Annie shall go on a one-month honeymoon to see the world,” Ravenswood declared. “Once they return, they shall become the new king and queen of Washington.”

“No way,” Mark objected. “I never wanted to become king.”

Ravenswood sighed and said, “I’m sorry Mark but that’s the law. You have won the Princess Challenge brilliantly and have earned the right to marry my daughter. Along with that comes kingship.”

Ravenswood paused and then added, “I personally think that you’ll make an incredible king. Doesn’t everyone think so?”

The audience clamored in applause.

Announcer Simone walked up to Mark and asked, “Prince Marcus, the world wants to know. How do you feel?”

“I feel incredible,” Mark said. “I love Annie more than life itself, but the idea of marrying her never crossed my mind. Who could have conceived that a commoner would marry a princess, especially one as cute as Annie?”

“You are no longer a commoner, Prince Marcus,” Simone corrected. “I notice you have the same color eyes as Princess Annie.”

Mark nodded. “Like fresh grapes.”

Simone turned to the audience and said, “I want to thank everyone for joining us today to celebrate this momentous occasion. Tune in next time as we bring more news on this royal and magical wedding.”

The stage darkened and the audience filed out.

‘*Come here Harry,’* Mark called. ‘*Everyone has gone.’*

Harry popped onto the stage and said, “Congratulations Prince Mark. I can’t believe I’m best friends with a prince.”

“Shut up Harry,” Mark said, feeling embarrassed. “I’m still the man you’ve always known.”

Harry nodded. “No, you’re not. You’re a ten-year-old boy,” Harry corrected, and on impulse rubbed Mark’s head.

“Cut it out, you’re embarrassing me,” Mark said, annoyed.

Harry jerked his hand away. Mark grabbed Harry’s hand and placed it on his head. “It’s you job to embarrass me. Do my eyes disturb you so much?”

“Come dears, we have so much to do and so little time for the wedding,” Marjorie called.

“Yes mother,” Annie and Mark said in unison as Marjorie shuffled them away and to the waiting limo.

Mark looked back, but Harry was gone.

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“It was so nice of you to invite your humble uncle to your royal wedding,” Uncle Arthur groveled with a smirk on his face. Hanna Cortes stood beside him.

“Shut up uncle,” Mark said. “This month has been weird. Everyone has been treating me like a prince and a hero, when just before, I saw myself as the evilest creature in creation. I also find it strange looking at myself and seeing purple eyes, instead of green.”

“You should be proud,” Uncle Arthur said. “What you have done has been heroic.”

“If you say so,” Mark said uncertainly. “Even Harry has been a little standoffish.”

“It’s not his fault Mark,” Aunt Flo said as she approached. “Your eyes take getting used to. I’m fighting the urge to bow.”

“Hi, Aunty Flo,” Mark said and gave his aunt a hug.

“So, who’s your best man?” Aunt Flo asked.

“It’s this guy,” Mark replied and poked Harry in the side.

“Harry, you know Mark is still the same person, don’t you?” Aunt Flo asked.

“I suppose,” Harry replied.

“You’re just feeling lonely because your two best friends are royalty, and you’re still a commoner,” Aunt Flo said insightfully.

“Stop being so stupid Harry,” Mark scolded. “You and Jane supported me in my time of crisis, and I love you like my very own big brother.” Mark instantly regretted his choice of words.

True to form, Harry replied, “I love you too, my sweet, cute, cuddly, baby brother.” He hugged Mark and gave him a kiss on the eyebrow. He added, “I can’t wait to see you in your true form again. It’s been years since you hate sleeping.”

“Actually, I started sleeping again, right after my curse broke,” Mark replied as Harry let go of him. “Sleeping is something I missed.”

“Harry, do you have the ring?” Uncle Arthur asked.

“Yes,” Harry replied, taking it out. “I remember handing this to Mark when he had his pretend wedding with Prin…with Annie. I remember teasing him about it. I never expected that the fairytale would come true.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t wish that on you and Jane,” Mark said. “I don’t want either of you to experience what Annie and I went through. If only that stupid rule didn’t exist. I’ll try to change it when I become king.”

“King Mark,” Harry murmured, and Mark’s face turned red.

“I didn’t mean to sound pompous,” Mark said defensively.

Uncle Arthur laughed his usual strident laugh. “Believe me son, you’ll never be pompous. Then again, if Guido were here, he would say…”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it dear,” Guido completed the sentence as he approached.

“Guido,” Mark greeted, as the man who was once a woman hugged him.

“Come Mark, I have the most charming wedding suits for both your adult and child forms,” Guido said. “Harry, I have something for you as well. You can’t wear that dingy thing for the wedding of the next king of Washington.

Before Harry could blink, they were in Guido’s chariot.

“What is this place?” Harry asked. He was in a luxurious ship and didn’t understand how he got there.

“It’s my chariot,” Guido replied.

“Draco chariots are for the exclusive use of the Draco clan,” Uncle Arthur explained. “You have ridden on mine before but forgot, because…”

“I remember everything, now that the amnesia spell is broken,” Harry interrupted.

Harry changed in front of Aunt Flo and Hanna Cortes, without feeling embarrassed.

Ten minutes later both groom and best man were ready. They returned to the front of the cathedral. It was time for the wedding.

A royal limo pulled up and Ravenswood and Marjorie emerged. The limo drove away.

“Majesties,” Harry said and bowed. He then led them and Mark’s people into the church.

As expected, the cathedral was packed with royals, military brass, and VIPs. The only non-bigwigs were Mark’s relatives and journalists with their cameras.

“Majesty, please stand here and wait for your daughter,” Harry said.

Harry then led the others to the front. He seated Marjorie in the front row with some relatives. He also seated Uncle Arthur, Hanna Cortes, and Aunt Flo in the front rows.

He and Mark stepped onto the stage and waited. And waited. And waited.

Finally, the bride entered, and the Wedding March began.

Ravenswood took the arm of Annie, and they did the Wedding March to the altar. Jane, Carol Fortes, and flower boys and girls followed.

The wedding began with prayers and singing.

“Dearly Beloved,” the cardinal began. “We are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Prince Marcus Lucas and Princess Annie Van Duyn in holy matrimony…”

The traditional vows were given. Then individual vows were given.

Annie began, “I, Annie Jamie Van Duyn, dedicate myself to loving and supporting you no matter how difficult the challenges you face become. I also vow to put up with you even if you should turn into a Sludge Monster or a slob.”

The audience laughed, not sure which was worse, being a Sludge Monster or a slob.

Next came Mark’s turn. “I, Marcus Lucas Draco, dedicate myself to loving and supporting you no matter how difficult the challenges you face become. I also vow to put up with you even if you should turn into a ten-year-old brat.”

Again, the audience laughed. Being fans of Mark and Annie, the audience had all read their biographies and seen their movie. As a result, everyone knew that both were ten-year-old brats, pretending to be grownup.

Finally came the exchange of rings. Harry gave Mark the ring and Mark slipped it on Annie’s finger. Mark’s niece Carol gave Annie the ring and Annie placed it on Mark’s finger.

“I now pronounce you Man and Wife. You may kiss the bride,” the cardinal intoned.

Mark and Annie kissed, and the cathedral filled with thunderous applause and flashing cameras. The greatest challenge they could face was over and they were ready for a new beginning.

And then came the reception. Uncle Arthur organized it, so Mark knew it was going to be fun.

Mark and Annie took their places at the center of the main table. To the right of Annie were Carol, Jane, Marjorie, and Ravenswood. Carol’s friends from the school days and later were in the front tables, along with their husbands and boyfriends.

To the left of Mark were Harry, Uncle Arthur, Hanna Cortes, and Aunt Flo.

“Speech, speech,” the audience called.

Mark got up and told the audience how incredible Annie was and how she gave him the strength to face his destiny.

“To the strongest person I know,” Mark toasted and held up a Champaign glass. The Champaign turned into sparkling apple juice the moment he touched the glass.

Annie got up and described just how incredible Mark was.

“To the kindest gentlest person I know,” Annie toasted Mark with her glass of apple juice.

Just like with Uncle Arthur’s wedding, desert came first. As before, the guests just stared at the desert in confusion. Only the children were immune to changes in routine since they had no expectations.

“Toast, toast,” the audience called again.

Mark got up and said, “Isn’t it ironic? I have the legal right to marry an angel, but I’m not legally allowed to drink Champaign. Annie, turn into your official second form.”

Annie got up and transformed. Her clothes and body changed and in moments a beautiful cherub hovered in front of Mark.

“I told you I married an angel,” Mark said and kissed the cherub that was his wife. The audience loved it.

Annie changed back. Soup and fruit salad were served.

People tapped glasses and Annie said, “I must tell you ladies, I married a kitten. Mark, show them.”

Mark turned into the kitty-cat dragon and Annie kissed him. Again, there was cheering. Mark turned back.

The first main course was served. It was chicken.

Uncle Arthur called out, “Change into your true forms.”

Mark complied. His body shrank and his hair grew to waste-length. Annie also shrank, but her hair was already waste length. Both stood on their chairs so everyone could see them.

“I guess this is why I’m not allowed to drink alcohol,” Mark admitted.

The guests laughed and then tapped their glasses. Mark and Annie leaned forward and kissed. There was a collective, “Awww.”

“There’s nothing more romantic than a girl and boy kissing,” Marjorie cooed.

“How come?” Mark asked.

“You’ll find out when you grow up and have children,” Ravenswood promised.

Mark’s face turned red. “We can’t grow up. We’ve been cursed for taking the Wizard’s Initiation prematurely.”

“I’m sorry son,” Ravenswood apologized. “I shouldn’t have said that. I promise you; we will use all our resources to finding a cure.”

The second main course was beef. Some of the guests complained that they couldn’t eat.

Finally, the last main course, salmon, was served.

“If anyone is having trouble eating, just give it to my nephew. He’ll eat anything,” Uncle Arthur announced.

The guests laughed, knowing about Mark’s other identity.

More glass tapping came and Mark got annoyed. The guests were interrupting his meal, and to him eating was more fun than kissing.

The meal ended with coffee and chocolate cake.

Uncle Arthur stood up and began his comedy routing at Mark’s expense. As before, Uncle Arthur used veiled sexual jokes that went over Mark’s and Annie’s heads.

Finally, it was time to dance, and Mark changed back into adult form.

Mark’s first danced was with Annie, then with Marjorie, Jane, and finally his aunts.

Ravenswood declared that there was not going to be the removal of the garter, considering Mark and Annie’s age.

10:00PM arrived and the reception ended.

Mark and Annie went outside, followed by the guests.

“Mark, Annie, now that you’re married, it’s time for you to receive your brand-new Draco chariot. Actually it’s not brand new. You’ve been using it without knowing why it was given,” Uncle Arthur said.

The *Princess Annie* appeared overhead.

“I was right,” Ravenswood exclaimed. “That was a wedding present. So, in your clan’s eyes, you’ve been married for the last thirteen years.”

Uncle Arthur smiled at Ravenswood and said, “More like betroved. The Draco chariot represents the marital bond between husband and wife. As such it only awoke today when the two became one in holy matrimony.

“My own chariot fell asleep when the Tiikeris killed my previous wife. Thankfully she reincarnated and is now my new main squeeze.” Uncle Arthur squeezed Hanna Cortez.

“I just taught of something everyone,” Mark exclaimed.

“Father Ravenswood, Harry has been my constant companion and main support for countless years. It is fair to say, without his help I could never have succeeded in the Princess Challenge.

“Washington owes him. The world owes him for his instrumental role he played. Isn’t that sufficient for a knighting?”

Red faced, Harry exclaimed, “No way. I didn’t do anything that grand.”

“Me too,” Annie added. “I don’t know what I would have done without Professor Harry’s guidance.”

“You’re absolutely right Mark,” Ravenswood agreed, “You’re absolutely right Annie. I don’t know what would have happened to Washington and the world if you weren’t there.”

“You guided my daughter into a fine young woman,” Marjorie added.

“And a marvelous wizard,” Jane added, wanting to get in on the act.

Harry begged, “Please stop. You’re embarrassing me.”

“I have good news,” Ravenswood said. “Mark, your dad just gave me permission to knight Harry immediately. We don’t need to wait for normal business hours.”

Ravenswood paused a moment and then announced, “Attention everyone, Mark has nominated Harry for a knighting and Annie has second the nomination.

“Does anyone object to the knighting?”

No one said anything. Harry opened his mouth but Jane pinched him. He shut up.

Ravenswood took out his wand and it transformed into a sword.

“No I can’t,” Harry exclaimed and backed away.

Mark grabbed Harry on one side and Jane grabbed Harry from the other and forced him to kneel. Annie stood behind him.

Ravenswood approached and tapped Harry on the shoulders with his sword.

“In the presence of these witnesses, for the unrecognized years of toil that went above and beyond the call of duty to Washington and the world, I, King Ravenswood Van Duyn of the house of David knight you Lord Harry Banks of Washington.

“In addition, I, King Ravenswood Van Duyn of the house of David deed you, Lord Harry Banks of Washington the lands containing the old Magic Academy and town lands, hereby renamed to Harry County.

“You may rise, Lord Harry Banks of Washington, duke of Harry County.”

Harry got up. “Congratulations Lord Harry,” Ravenswood said and shook Harry’s hand.

The crowd went wild with shouting and applause. It’s not every day you see a knighting.

“I’m so happy for you Lord Harry,” Mark said, almost shouting in happiness. He shook Harry’s hand and then gave him a hug.

“Me too, Lord Harry,” Jane said with a smile.

“Me three, Lord Harry,” Annie added. “You will always be my favorite Professor.”

“Lord Harry, Lord Harry, Lord Harry,” the crowd cheered.

“You’re embarrassing me,” Harry objected. “And please stop calling me that.”

“Now you understand how I feel,” Mark said with a laugh.

“I have one more announcement to make,” Ravenswood announced. “A person of noble blood has the legal right to marry a royal.”

Ravenswood turned to his wife. “Dear, I’ve been monitoring Lord Harry for years, since he has been working so closely with Jane. He is an honorable man and has never acted inappropriately with our daughter.

“Dear, will you give Lord Harry permission to marry Jane?”

“Yes dear,” Marjorie replied. “I too have been monitoring him and I know he will take good care of Jane.”

Just then Harry fainted.

The guests stirred in worry, until Harry got up.

Ravenswood began, “Lord Harry…”

“Please stop calling me Lord,” Harry begged.

“I’m sorry son, but you’ll need to get used to it,” Ravenswood said gently. He then said, “Harry, Jane, you will both be married sometime next year.

“Harry, you may move into your new estate anytime.

“I also give you permission to hold hands.”

“But no kissing,” Uncle Arthur said with a laugh.

Harry watched hair fly as two kids jumped up and down and screamed. They stopped jumping and Annie said, “Don’t just stand there.” Mark continued, “Hug you future parents.”

Annie grabbed Jane and Mark grabbed Harry. They forced a family hug as the crowd cheered.

“That’s so sweet,” Uncle Arthur exclaimed and wiped pretend tears.

“Don’t just stand there Uncle, Aunties, join us in the hug,” Mark called and forced them to join.

After the group hug Marjorie scolded, “It’s almost 12:00AM. It is way past the kid’s bedtime.”

“Don’t worry Majesty,” Uncle Arthur assured. “The *Princess Annie* is awake. It can fly itself. More importantly their bed chamber is ready for them.”

“Have a good honeymoon, dears,” Marjorie said and gave Mark and Annie hugs.

“Remember to spend your time learning to make babies,” Uncle Arthur suggested with a laugh.

“Don’t be crude,” Hanna Cortes scolded.

“Okay Uncle, I’ll do that,” Mark said. Mark and Annie waved and then disappeared up into the chariot. As the chariot zoomed away, the clock struck Midnight.

Part IV -   
The Hidden Princess  
and the  
Sleeping Dragon



1. First Day at (Muggle) School

Magic is the hardest thing in the world  
to master

“Breakfast is ready,” Aunt Flo called.

“Okay Aunty,” Mark replied and rummaged through his stuff. This was the first day in a new school and he wanted to be prepared.

Mark ran to the kitchen, tried to wrap his arms around Aunt Flo’s humongous ass and then kissed her butt.

“I love you, Aunt Flo,” Mark said and sat at the table.

“I love you too, sweetie,” Aunt Flo responded. “Remember sweetie, most people don’t embrace the naturalist philosophy, so make sure you’re fully dressed at all times.”

“But I hate clothes,” Mark complained. “It’s so uncomfortable.”

“I know dear, but this is not home,” Aunt Flo reminded him. “Now Mark, go and dress and remember to wear underwear.”

Mark ran to his room and dressed as instructed. For his outerwear, he dressed in shorts and a t-shirt with a ferocious dragon in front. In addition, he wore a sports fisherman jacket which he loved.

The great thing about the jacket was that it had dozens of pockets. He filled them with all sorts of treasures. Unlike most people’s clothing, his jacket was practical.

Mark stepped out of his room and found his aunt fully dressed. It was time to go to school.

Aunt Flo stopped in front of the school and kissed Mark. Mark stepped out and waved bye.

All about him school kids and their guardians milled about. Mark quickly entered school and found his grade-4 homeroom.

“Hi Mark,” his new teacher greeted him as he entered the room. “Are you looking forward to being in a new school?”

“That depends, Mrs. Taylor,” Mark replied.

The school bell rang, and the teacher said, “Settle down children. Today we have a new student transferring in. His name is Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan. Mark, please introduce yourself.”

“Hi everyone,” Mark said. “I am Mark and I’m going to be a wizard when I grow up.”

A brunette called out, “Aren’t you a little old for that?”

A boy beside her laughed and added, “He probably still believes in Santa Clause.” The class laughed.

“Settle down class,” Mrs. Taylor said sternly. “Mind your manners.”

A strawberry blond girl with blue eyes came up to Mark and said, “Don’t listen to them. I think your ambition is marvelous. Hi. I’m Annie. I’ll help you get settled in.”

There was something magical about the girl in front of Mark. She was like a splash of color in a featureless grey world. He knew they would become the bestest of friends.

On impulse, Mark got down on one knee, grabbed Annie’s hand and kissed it. “I, Dragon Master Marcus Lucas, am always at your service, Princess Annie. Do you like magic?” he asked. He pulled plastic flowers out of nowhere and presented them to her. She took them.

“That’s enough Romeo,” Mrs. Taylor said with an amused smile. “Take the seat behind Annie.” That was the only seat available.

Kids laughed in the background, and one said he was an idiot.

“I love magic,” Annie replied and took her seat. “I think it’s great.”

“Perfect,” Mark said happily and took his seat.

Mrs. Taylor began her lecture and Mark got bored. He had learnt all that in home schooling. Nevertheless, he pretended to listen, while working on perfecting his next magic trick.

Recess came and everyone went to the yard to play. Mark wanted to speak to Annie, but girls swarmed her. That was disappointing. He went to the congregation of boys and called, “Hi everyone. Who likes magic?”

Everyone said they liked magic.

“Who likes doing magic?” Mark asked.

“That’s too much trouble,” a brown hair boy said. The others agreed.

“Can you do magic?” a girl with glasses asked.

“Of course,” Mark replied and began is act. He became the center of attention as all were amazed by his ability.

“That’s amazing,” Annie said as the bell rang.

“Thank you, Princess Annie,” Mark replied. “Do you do magic?”

Annie nodded. “Yes, but I’m not very good at it.”

They entered homeroom and Mark said, “It doesn’t matter if you’re not good now. What matters is the passion. Passion is the driving force that allows us to achieve your dreams. Of course, hard work is essential.”

“That’s very wise, Mark,” Mrs. Taylor said. “Who thought you that?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Taylor,” Mark replied. “I don’t know who thought me that. It just came to my mind. By the way, is there a magic club in school?”

“Sorry dear,” Mrs. Taylor said. “We have plenty of clubs, but that’s not one of them.”

The bell rang and homeroom resumed. After that came English and history classes and again Mark shared the same classes with Annie.

It was lunch time and as usual, girls crowded around Annie.

“Who wants to form a magic club?” Mark called. “I’m going to the principal’s office to see if I can create one.”

“I’ll come too,” Annie offered.

Mark bowed and said, “Thank you Princess Annie.”

They headed for the principal’s office and Mark addressed the secretary. “Mrs. Wilson, I would like to create a magic club. How do I do that?”

“You do magic?” Mrs. Wilson asked.

For an answer, Mark pulled out stuff from his pockets and gave the secretary a show.

“That was marvelous,” Mrs. Wilson praised. “To get a club started, you need at least five people.”

“Princess Annie and I make two,” Mark said. “So, we need three more. That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Don’t be so sure dear,” Mrs. Wilson replied. “It’s easier to form a bug collecting club than a magic club. Good luck.”

“Princess Annie, you’re very popular. Can you ask people to join the club?” Mark asked.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know anyone who likes performing magic,” Annie replied. “They think I’m strange that way, but they don’t say it because of my dad.”

They headed for the school cafeteria and got in line.

“Are you saying that they only hang out with you because your father is a king?” Mark asked.

Annie laughed. “Don’t be silly. My dad isn’t a king. He’s only the governor.”

“That’s impossible,” Mark denied. “He has to be a king since you’re a princess, Princess.”

Annie giggled. “I’m not a princess.”

The other girls came up to Annie and said, “Why are you hanging around with him? Sit with us and let’s talk about fashion.”

Mark stuck his finger in his mouth and made gagging sounds. He then pretended to vomit. “Oh my God!” he exclaimed and presented a two-inch rubber brain to everyone. “Your talk about fashion just made me lose my brain.”

A few boys in the area saw it and laughed.

Annie felt torn between her new best friend and her cronies.

“Your subjects need you, Princess,” Mark said with a flourishing bow. “Go sit with them.”

“Okay Mark,” Annie said uncertainly and did as instructed.

As the girls walked away, a blond girl asked, “Princess Annie, what do you think of my new shoes? Aren’t they pretty?”

“Yes Ashley, they are very pretty,” Annie agreed, accepting the title of princess without question.

Mark nodded in satisfaction. This world needed princesses since princesses are magical. They also needed dragons, which he was, or at least that was what he liked to pretend.

Mark took a nearby seat. He then got up on the table and called out, “Attention everyone. I’m trying to create a club for people who like performing magic. If anyone is interested, please see me. Thank you.”

Mark got down and looked around. Despite the noise of the cafeteria, everyone heard him. The kids looked at him and their responses were all negative.

Many people thought that he was an idiot for climbing on the table. Others thought magic was boring. One boy called, “Why don’t you become a clown and perform at parties?”

“You can be the clown,” Mark shot back angrily. “I’m going to become a wizard.”

Stacey said, “He’s such an idiot. I’d die of embarrassment if I knew him.”

“Shut up Stacey.” Annie said angrily. “Don’t make fun of him.”

Annie felt Mark was a long-lost friend she had known forever. That, of course was impossible. They just met.

“I’m sorry Princess Annie,” Stacey said in embarrassment. “Ladies don’t behave like that.”

Annie nodded, “I think that blouse would go best with that skirt.”

“Princess Annie, you’re such a fashion diva,” Gale replied.

“Thank you,” Annie said. She wasn’t paying attention. She was too focused on Mark. He continued to canvas the cafeteria looking for new club members.

Following lunch was math class. The teacher, Mr. Docks, called Mark up to do a math problem on the board. As Mark walked up to the board, he called out, “27”.

“How do you know the answer is 27?” Mr. Docks asked.

“Because I’m a wizard,” Mark replied and proceeded to solve the problem the old fashion way on the board. The real reason was because his aunt gave him a book on speed math, which allowed anyone to solve math problems in their heads.

Next class was gym. Mark changed and entered the gymnasium. “Hi Marcus,” the teacher greeted. “Welcome to my class. My name is Mr. Jocks. Do you know why physical exercise is important?”

“It improves your health, grows new neurons in your brain, and strengthens your attention, allowing you to better learn magic,” Mark replied.

The class laughed.

“Other than the magic part, you are correct,” Mr. Jocks said. “Okay everyone, we shall do some warm-up exercises and then we will play a game of dodge ball.”

Annie stood next to Mark, and they exercised together. Annie then insisted on being on the same team as Mark. Working as a well-honed team they took out more opponents than anyone else and won the game.

The rest of the class glared at Mark, jealous that the most popular girl in school was paying so much attention to the transfer student.

Finally came computers. “Marcus, welcome to my class,” Mrs. Cadence greeted. “Kids, Marcus is new. Can someone help him get caught up?”

“I will,” Annie volunteered.

“Excellent,” Mrs. Cadence said and began her lecture.

School ended and Mark and Annie headed for the parking lot. Children filed into waiting school busses.

“See you tomorrow, Princess Annie,” Stacey called and the other girls waved as they entered their rides.

“There’s my aunt,” Mark said and waved. Aunt Flo came and gave Mark a hug.

“Aunty Flo, this is Princess Annie, my new best friend,” Mark said. “She’s the only person in this school who likes magic.”

“Princess Annie, is it? What can you do?” Aunt Flo asked.

Feeling embarrassed, Annie replied, “I’m not a real princess. Mark just likes calling me that, and now everyone’s calling me that.”

Annie removed her school bag and pulled stuff out. She gave a demonstration.

“That was amazing Annie,” Aunt Flo said and clapped.

“I tried to form a magic club, but no one was interested, except Princess Annie,” Mark said sadly.

“That can’t be helped dear,” Aunt Flo sympathized. “Most people believe magic is something other people do.”

“Aunty Flo, is it okay if Mark came to my place? I want to show him some of my magic stuff,” Annie asked.

“Of course, dear,” Aunt Flo replied. “Have fun with your new best friend.” She gave Mark a hug and left.

“That’s my ride,” Annie said and pointed at a black BMW. A man in a black suit and dark glasses rested against the car.

“Hi James,” Mark called.

“James, this is my friend Mark,” Annie introduced.

“Good afternoon, Master Mark, Ms. Annie,” James said and opened the back door.

Mark entered and Annie followed.

“I feel as if I’ve known you forever,” Annie said as they drove away.

“Same here,” Mark replied.

“When is your birthday?” Annie asked.

“August 22,” Mark replied.

“Mine too,” Annie said excitedly.

They pulled up into a driveway and got out. “Hey look. That’s my new house over there,” Mark exclaimed and pointed at the house next to Annie’s house. “I moved in Saturday morning.”

A moment later Aunt Flo drove in and stepped out of her car. Mark waved at her.

“My goodness,” Aunt Flo said as she approached. “I hadn’t realized that you were the governor’s kid. Well, have fun you two,” she said and headed in.

Both kids entered Annie’s house and went to the attic. The huge space was filled with professional quality magic stuff, as well as piled up boxes.

“Oh man this is incredible,” Mark said and ran around the room like a little kid. “We can do a professional magic act with all this stuff.”

Mark entered a box the size of a telephone booth and reemerged on the other side of the room, from a covered box.

“This is my favorite,” Annie said. “This belonged to David Copperfield.” It was a box where a woman would enter and be chopped into three sections.

Mark examined the box and quickly discovered the secret. “That’s so cool. I guess being the daughter of a king has its privileges.”

The nanny entered and gave them milk and cookies. They then did homework. After that they watched a video of David Copperfield.

“Annie, your parents are home,” the maid called.

“Thanks Mrs. Dungle,” Annie replied.

They went downstairs and Annie hugged her parents. “Mum, dad, I want you to meet my new best friend.”

Mark placed his left hand horizontally across his chest with palm facing downwards and made a formal bow. “Pleased to meet you, Majesties. I am Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan.”

“Pleased to meet you, Marcus,” the father greeted. “You address a governor as Honorable, not Majesty. I’m not a king.”

“You have to be a king because Annie is a princess,” Mark insisted.

“Well, she certainly is my princess,” Annie’s father agreed and hugged her.

“Hello Marcus, welcome to our home,” the mother greeted. “This is the first time Annie has brought home a boy.”

“I’m not a boy, Majesty. I’m a dragon,” Mark corrected. “One day I shall become a wizard and help bring magic back into this world.”

“Your friend has quite an imagination,” a voice from behind called.

“That’s my sister Jane,” Annie said.

Mark turned around and found a sixteen-year-old girl with blond hair and blue eyes smiling at him. “Pleased to meet you, Princess Jane,” Mark greeted and gave her a formal bow.

“I like you, you little squirt,” Jane said and rubbed Mark’s head. “You’re so cute.”

Annie’s mother and father went into the family room and sat down. Annie, Mark, and Jane followed.

“Markus dear, you said you come from the Draco clan,” the mother said. “I’m sorry but you don’t look Native American. You look Irish with your red hair, green eyes and fair skin.”

“The Draco clan is an obscure – I mean relatively unknown clan living in the Cascade Mountains,” the father explained. “Historical records show they were here well before Washington was first settled by the *White Man*. They were awarded a reservation shortly after Washington became a state. That was easy since no one wanted the land. According to the first settlers who met them, they are descendants of the Vikings.”

The doorbell rang and the maid went to answer.

“Oh my god, that’s so cool,” Jane exclaimed.

“I don’t believe that,” the father continued. “I have evidence that they predate the Vikings. Also, unlike the Vikings, they are naturalists and worship the dragon.”

“When you say naturalist, do you mean they all run around naked?” Jane asked.

“Don’t worry, Princess Jane,” Mark assured. “I promise not to run around naked in front of you. My aunt warned me to be careful.” That promise lasted only two months.

“That’s fine for you since you’re just a kid,” a voice called. It came from a sixteen-year-old boy with brown hair and brown eyes.

“Shut up Harry,” Mark scolded. “I’m not a kid.”

“Good evening Mr. and Mrs. Van Duyn,” the teen greeted. “Who’s the runt?”

“I thought you knew him,” Jane said. “Marcus, how did you know Harry’s name?”

“Magic,” Mark replied with a grin.

“Harry, this kid is a descendent of Vikings,” Jane told Harry.

“That’s cool,” Harry replied.

“He’s also a naturalist,” Annie added and giggled.

“Now don’t you dare start running around naked too,” the mother scolded. “It’s not decent.”

“Now dear, you mustn’t judge other cultures,” the dad scolded. “Their community is one of the few communities with no crime. I know since we investigated them.”

“You’re right dear,” the mother admitted. “We mustn’t judge. But don’t you feel embarrassed?”

“No, Majesty,” Mark replied. “To me, there’s no difference between a person who’s fully naked and one who is fully clothed. Do you feel embarrassed wearing a bathing suit at the beach?

“What we wear now would shock people living in the Victorian age. Especially the tights and boy shorts women wear in public. I personally think leotards are obscene.

“Of course, this jacket is my favorite since I can store all my fun stuff in all the pockets.”

“Why is he calling your parents, Majesty?” Harry asked.

“He insists that Annie is a princess, and by extension, we are king and queen. He’s a sweet boy with a vivid imagination,” the mother explained. She turned to Mark and asked, “Where do you live dear?”

“I just moved Saturday to the house next door, Majesty,” Mark replied.

“I believe it was going for almost twelve million dollars,” mother commented. “What do your parents do for a living?”

“I don’t know, Majesty,” Mark replied. “My parents disappeared years ago. My uncle and aunt are now my legal guardians.”

“I’m so sorry dear,” mother exclaimed, feeling sorry for the boy.

“Do you have any leads on where they are?” father asked.

“No Majesty,” Mark replied. “They transferred all their assets to me and my relatives, closed all their affairs, and were seen no more.”

“What do your uncle and aunt do?” the father asked.

“My uncle is a comedian,” Mark said. “He’s currently performing at the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. My aunt is a stockbroker. She’s home right now. They say they are both geniuses. I think they are wizards.”

“Maybe I should hire your aunt,” the father mused. “I don’t like my current stockbroker. I have an idea. If your aunt is home, why don’t you invite her over?”

“As you wish, Majesty,” Mark agreed. “I shall use telepathy to call her.” He took out his phone and called.

“Hi Aunty Flo, Princess Annie’s parents want to meet you…Okay. See you,” Mark said and hung up.

“You didn’t use telepathy,” Harry accused. “You used a phone.”

“Credendo Vides. By believing one sees,” Mark responded. “That’s the theme of the fantasy movie *Flight of the Unicorn.* It’s one of my favorite movies, but it has a sad ending. They leave the magic world and return to the muggle world and are never able to return.”

Mark continued, “Magic is an indwelling thing. You need to accept magic into your world before magic can manifest. Look at this.”

Mark took a coin and did a few slight-of-hand tricks. Encouraged by the response, Mark did more tricks.

“From one point of view, this is magic. From another point of view, this is a trick designed to fool gullible people. And yet, it is only the gullible that may know magic and live in a world that has meaning,” Mark lectured. “Of course, you need to be careful. Both in the world of magic and the world of muggles, people will always try to take advantage of you.

“That’s the reason I call your daughter Princess. It’s to help make this world more magical. It’s also because I love her,” Mark finished and smiled at the parents, Jane, and Harry.

“Aren’t you a little young for love?” Jane asked.

The doorbell rang and the maid went to answer.

“Why is that? Even little babies love their parents,” Mark asked, confused. Then he understood. “Oh, I see what you mean. I don’t love her that way, although I admit she is super cute. I’m talking about her passion for magic, her intelligence and how sweet she is.”

“You’re so wise,” the mother marveled. “I find it hard to believe you’re only ten years old.”

“I know,” Aunt Flo agreed as she entered. “My nephew is the most mature person I know, regardless of age.”

“Majesties let me introduce you to my aunt, Flowing Waters of the Draco clan,” Mark introduced and dragged his aunt into the living room. “Aunty Flo, let me introduce you to Princess Annie’s mother. By the way, what are your parent’s names?”

“You don’t know who we are?” the father asked, surprised.

“You are Princess Annie’s parents,” Mark replied. “That’s all I need to know.”

“I’m Marjorie,” Marjorie greeted. “This is my husband, Ravenswood. That’s our eldest daughter Jane, and her boyfriend Harry. And of course, this is Annie.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Aunt Flo said as she shook hands. “By the way, is Harry a prince?”

“Is he a prince?” Mark mused. “He must be a prince, since commoners are forbidden from marrying or dating princesses. That is the law.”

“But in fairytales, don’t commoners marry princes and princesses as well?” Jane asked.

“Yes,” Mark replied. “However, the commoner is forced to undertake an impossibly difficult challenge. Only when the challenge is overcome may the commoner gain the right to marry the prince or princess.”

“Dinner’s ready,” the maid called. The family entered the dining room and took their places. Marjorie and Ravenswood took the ends. Jane and Harry took the left side and Aunt Flo, Mark and Annie took the right side.

“Mark is right,” Ravenswood agreed. “In all the fairytales I can remember the commoner has to overcome a hardship – Snow White, Sleeping Beauty.”

Mark continued the story. “Therefore, Prince Harry was born of royal blood and switched at birth,” Mark said. “His true parents did that to save his life from assassins. To keep him safe, not even Prince Harry’s adoptive parents know the truth.”

“Are you saying I’ve been dating a prince and didn’t know it?” Jane asked with a chuckle. “That explains how you inherited that huge fortune and house from that long-lost uncle.

“So, are you a long-lost prince as well?”

Mark paused and thought a moment. A huge grin crossed his face and he said, “I was born a commoner. However, Princess Annie issued the Princess Challenge to me and demanded that I fight for her hand.

“Through years of hardships and monumental battles I became a national hero and gained the right to marry the princess. King Ravenswood acknowledged me and gave the princess to me as my bride, and we lived happily ever after.”

Marjorie laughed and clapped. “Flo, your nephew has quite an imagination.”

“Thank you, Majesty, – I mean Marjorie,” Aunt Flo said. “His imagination can be contagious.”

The rest of the meal was spent in peace and then Ravenswood invited Aunt Flo to the living room.

“Flo,” Ravenswood said. “Mark said you’re a wizard when it comes to the stock Market.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Aunt Flo denied. “However, I do well.”

“I’m looking for a new financial advisor,” Ravenswood said.

“I normally only give assistance to charities, since I don’t need money, but since Mark has offered, I will gladly be of assistance,” Aunt Flo replied.

Ravenswood bowed and said, “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Flo, what made you decide to move here?” Marjorie asked.

“It’s because of Mark,” Aunt Flo replied. “He’s been tossing and turning in his sleep, saying ‘I don’t belong here. I need to move.’ That’s when he wasn’t having nightmares.

“I asked him one morning, if he could move anywhere, where would he like to move? He brought out a map, closed his eyes and tossed a pebble. It landed here.”

“That’s so cool,” Annie exclaimed excitedly. “You doused to find my house.”

“That’s so weird,” Marjorie said. “Annie has been tossing and turning in her sleep as well, saying the exact same thing. We even considered taking her to the doctors.”

Mark and Annie looked at each other and said in unison, “Magic.”

“Mark, it’s getting late,” Aunt Flo said. “We need to be going.”

Everyone got up and headed for the door.

“Mum and dad, can we go out?” Jane asked.

“Not tonight dear,” Marjorie replied. “Tomorrow is a school day.”

“Good night, Jane,” Harry said and kissed Jane. A moment later he was gone.

“Flo, I’m glad Mark has become friends with Annie,” Marjorie confided. “I don’t know whether the kids like Annie because of herself or because of her dad, but it’s obvious Mark doesn’t care about social status.”

“That can’t be helped,” Mark declared. “That’s the burden you bear when you’re a princess. Goodnight Princess. See you tomorrow. Goodnight everyone.” Mark waved and headed home.

“Mark will make friends with anyone who loves magic,” Aunt Flo agreed. “Good night.” She headed home as well.

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The doorbell rang and Aunt Flo called, “Coming.” She put on a robe and answered the front door.

“Morning Mrs. Waters,” Annie greeted from the front entrance. “I asked my dad and he said Mark can ride with me to school.”

Mark took a sip of milk and ran to the living room.

“Hi Princess,” he called and waved to her.

“Hi,” Annie replied and waved back.

“Mark, aren’t you forgetting something?” Aunt Flo asked with a frown.

Mark looked down and realized that he was naked. “Oops,” he said, covered his mouth and giggled.

“Mark, get dressed, and then finish your breakfast,” Aunt Flo instructed.

“Okay Aunty,” Mark said and headed for his room. Annie followed him.

“So, this is your room,” Annie remarked as she entered. “You have a tea party set up.”

“That’s not a tea party,” Mark corrected as he slipped on underwear, shorts, and then a t-shirt. The t-shirt had the picture of a dragon sitting on the drawbridge of a castle. Defenders battled but to no avail.

“That’s a monster party,” he explained. “They are drinking blood and eating brain cookies and mealy worm soup. Who ever heard of monsters drinking tea?”

Mark slipped on his fishing jacket. “I wish I had more pockets,” Mark grumbled.

“Time to finish breakfast,” Aunt Flo called.

They went to the kitchen and Aunt Flo asked, “Princess, do you want some bacon and juice?”

“Yes please Mrs. Waters,” Annie replied, and Mark passed the bacon.

Suddenly Mark got up and pointed at Annie.

Startled, Annie asked, “What’s the matter?”

“Halloween is in two weeks,” Mark replied. “Do you have a costume yet?”

“I was thinking of dressing up as Hermione,” Annie replied.

“Boring,” Mark rejected. “Everyone dresses up as Harry Potter characters. You should dress up as your true self and I’ll dress up as mine.”

“What is your true self?” Annie asked.

“I am a dragon,” Mark replied. “We can be princess and dragon – a fairy princess and a ferocious dragon. Now the problem is costumes.”

“I could ask my sister,” Annie suggested.

“Isn’t it strange?” Mark mused. “People say, ‘I want to be Harry Potter’. Instead, they should be saying, ‘I want to be me, going to Hogwarts.’”

“That’s because pretending to be a wizard is easier than becoming one. Finish your breakfast you two,” Aunt Flo said. “It’s almost time to go.”

“Bye Aunty. I’m going to Princess Annie’s castle to study after school,” Mark said and gave his aunt a hug. He headed out the door with Annie following.

“Hi James,” Mark called to the limo driver.

“Morning Master Mark,” the driver called back. They got in and drove to school.

“Mark, if you went to Hogwarts, which house would you be in?” Annie asked.

“Gryffindor,” Mark replied. “And yes, everyone says that. You know, Professor McGonagall doesn’t seem to belong in Gryffindor. She doesn’t have the spirit of adventure, or maybe she lost it when growing up. She’s more like a Ravenclaw, who values intelligence more than anything.”

“I think that Hufflepuff is the least magical of the four,” Annie said.

Mark nodded. “They’re always huffing and puffing from all the physical labor they do, instead of using magic.”

The car arrived and Mark and Annie got out. The car drove away. Other kids arrived in busses and by cars.

“Hi Annie,” a girl called. “How come you came with him?”

“The princess lives next door to me,” Mark replied.

“Mark moved into the vacant house beside mine two days ago,” Annie clarified.

Mark’s reputation increased as the kids realized that his parents were rich. That bothered Mark in a vague sort of way he couldn’t identify.

“How much money do you have in the bank?” Nicole asked.

“What does that matter?” Mark asked.

“It does matter,” Nicole replied. “If you want to hang out with us, you need to be rich.”

“I never said I wanted to hang out with you. Not unless you want to learn magic,” Mark objected.

“Fine,” Mark sighed. “I currently have 7.3 million tied up in stocks and bonds, and some 320 thousand in liquid cash. My investments net me an annual profit of 950 thousand. I reinvest most of it, while at the same time donating to various charities. As a result, my taxes are minimal. Now are you satisfied?” Much of that came from his parents as his inheritance.

The snobby girls looked at him in astonishment. Stacey stammered, “How come you have so much money?”

“That’s because I’m a wizard,” Mark replied. “My Aunt, Flowing Waters thought me how to track the profitability of various companies, and how to identify leading trends in the business world, as well as potential market downturns. My aunt set up an online account for me, so age is not a problem.”

“I know her,” Ashley exclaimed. “My dad wanted to hire her, but she refused, saying she prefers working for deserving charities.”

“His aunt agreed to help my dad, because of Mark’s recommendation,” Annie said proudly.

“Can you please recommend our dads?” the other girls clamored.

“Not unless you show an interest in magic,” Mark stated.

The bell rang, saving the girls from needing to answer.

The rest of the day was uneventful, with the girls saying they would think about it. After school, while driving back home, Mark admitted, “I’m not sure using bribery to get people is a good idea. However, I don’t want to bother my aunt, who is always working.”

Annie nodded. “They would rather talk about clothes and how stupid boys are.”

The two went to the kitchen and did homework. Math was easy but time-consuming. The other subjects went fast. Finally, they went to the attic and surfed the net for ancient mysteries.

“We’re home,” Marjorie called.

“Hi mum and dad,” Annie called and raced downstairs. She hugged her parents.

Mark followed and bowed, “Good evening, Majesties.”

“How was your visit to Mark’s place?” Marjorie asked.

“Mark has a tea party set in his room,” Annie giggled.

Face turning red, Mark said defensively, “I don’t have a tea party set. I told you, that’s a monster party. Speaking of which, I’m going to start decorating the house this weekend for Halloween. You’re invited for the party. The princess and I will dress up as ourselves. I expect you to dress up as yourselves as well.”

“I am dressed up as myself now,” Ravenswood objected.

“In that case, where are your crown, scepter, and royal robes, Majesty?” Mark asked.

“Good point,” Ravenswood agreed. “I am governor. I mean I am king. I need to dress the part, and so does my wife.”

“Mum and dad, Mark and I perfected a trick we want you to see,” Annie said.

The parents followed the kids upstairs for a ten-minute show. When they came down, Jane was home.

“Jane, Mark and I are dressing up as princess and dragon for Halloween. Do you have suggestions?” Annie asked.

“So Mark, you want to dress up as a princess?” Jane asked, then chuckled.

Mark considered Jane’s suggestion for a moment and then said, “I don’t mind. However, I’d rather be a dragon. Dragons can fly. Unless Princess Annie wants to be the dragon,” he added.

“You’re a strange kid, you know that?” Jane said and rubbed Mark’s head.

“Thanks Princess Jane,” Mark replied. “Being normal is boring.”

“I know a fashionista named Guido,” Jane suggested. “I’m sure he’d love to make costumes for you two.”

“Thanks Princess Jane,” Mark said happily.

“Girls, we will be taking a cruise to Bermuda for Christmas with the extended family,” Ravenswood announced.

“The Bermuda Triangle,” Mark exclaimed. “That’s so exciting. Can I please come? Just tell me how much and I’ll write a check.”

“I better ask your aunt,” Ravenswood said, and called Aunt Flo. A minute later he hung up and said, “Flo agreed.”

“Can Harry come as well?” Jane asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Ravenswood agreed. “Harry and Mark can share a room.

“Damn,” Mark cursed. “I just remembered something. We Dracos celebrate Winter Solstice.”

“Can I go too?” Annie asked.

“That would be great,” Mark said excitedly. “We’ll have so much fun, and we can perform magic for my relatives.”

“But your relatives are naturalists,” Marjorie objected.

“Oh yare, I forgot,” Mark sighed. He placed his hand on his chin and thought for a moment. He then said, “I don’t need to go. We can celebrate the solstice at your home, or in Bermuda.”

“You would rather spend that important holiday with us?” Ravenswood asked in surprise. “That’s like Christmas for us Christians.”

“Actually I would have preferred that all of you came to celebrate with us,” Mark responded. “However I know that’s impossible. Therefore I choose to be with the princess. My relatives will understand.”

For several moments no one spoke. Then Marjorie changed the subject. “Ravenswood, tomorrow is Saturday. Why don’t you show Mark the Atlantis Stone?”

“Oh - my - God, Atlantis is real,” Mark exclaimed, almost jumping up and down in excitement.

“Don’t get your hopes up buddy,” Ravenswood warned. “It’s just the Rosetta Stone. Occultists on the Internet called it that, claiming it came from Atlantis.”

“A bunch of weirdoes,” Jane said.

“Don’t call them that,” Mark said angrily. “We are all seeking the world of magic in our own ways. I know real magic exists out there and not this pretend stuff I do. If magic really doesn’t exist then this world has no meaning and we are all in hell.”

“Mark son, do you know what a nihilist is?” Ravenswood asked.

“Nihilists believe that existence has no meaning and we are just flies stuck on the cogs of a giant machine,” Mark replied slowly, trying to feel the answer.

He continued. “I am aware of my existence, but science says that consciousness is just a product of the brain. If I’m just a fancy chemical reaction, how come I feel, and where did that ‘I’ come from? The universe doesn’t need it to function. Magic *has* to exist or this world truly is a nightmare world,” Mark finished as a tear rolled down his face.

Mark looked at Annie and said, “Princess, I feel you’re the only person in this world that can help me discover true magic, which is why I chose you. Will you help me?”

Ravenswood and Marjorie looked at Mark in shock. That was no rambling of an ordinary child.

“Of course Mark,” Annie relied and wiped away tears. “I’ve always felt the same way. Without magic, life is evil.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you felt that way?” Marjorie asked, upset.

“Because you’d take me to see the psychiatrist,” Annie replied. “You wanted me to go to the shrink when I got those nightmares, but then Mark had them too, which is why he is here.”

“I can almost see the wheels of destiny turning,” Jane mused. “It’s incredible how similar you two are, although I don’t understand that nihilism stuff. You two really are made for each other.”

“We are,” Mark said, smiling. “You were at our wedding.”

“And the princess and dragon lived happily ever after,” Annie finished.

“I better be going,” Mark said. “It’s dinner time and my aunt will be going on a business trip in the morning. I only see her 2-3 days a month. This week was an exception.”

“Your Aunt Flo visits you once a month?” Jane asked. A moment later she laughed hysterically, amused at the unintentional reference to a woman’s period.

“Jane, don’t be crude,” Marjorie scolded. She then turned worriedly to Mark and said, “Mark dear, are you going to be staying alone in that big house?”

“Don’t worry about me, Majesty,” Mark assured Marjorie. “I can do anything any adult can do, including shop, cook, clean, and manage my finances. When necessary, I can always call a relative to handle legal stuff, or anything only an adult can provide.”

“But you’re only ten,” Marjorie argued.

“But I’m a dragon,” Mark objected, as if that explained everything.

“Bye Princess,” Mark said. “See you tomorrow. By the way Majesty, when should we meet?”

“Come here at 9:00 AM,” Ravenswood said and waved at Mark as he crossed the property line.

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Mark rang the doorbell and Annie opened the door. “Hi Mark,” Annie said and they stepped in.

“Mark,” Ravenswood said. “I spoke with Marjorie and we agreed you could stay here in the guest room when your aunt is away. I spoke with your aunt and she agreed.”

As if on cue, Aunt Flo called. Mark answered his phone and Aunt Flo said, “Hi Mark. I just want to remind you again. The Van Duyn family aren’t naturalists. Remember to be dressed at all times, when not changing in your room or in the washroom. Also remember to close the washroom door when you use it. One more thing - Remember to wear underwear when you’re sleeping, unless you sleep at home.”

The aunt was so loud that everyone heard her. Annie giggled.

“Yes Aunty,” Mark replied with a sigh. “I promise.”

“Come on you two,” Ravenswood said. “It’s time to see that Rosetta – I mean the Atlantis stone.”

They got into the car and Ravenswood drove since it was James’ day off. “They entered the Seattle Art Museum and went to the Rosetta Stone exibit.

“Hey look,” Annie pointed. “Part of it is in English.”

“You’re right,” Jane exclaimed. She read. “‘The magic that was once lost will one day be restored, when the two shall secure the twelve.’ I wonder what that means.”

“What are you talking about?” a man asked.

Ravenswood pointed at the passage.

The man just stared and then walked away. His friend asked, “What was that about?” He replied, “I think the governor is seeing things. He said part of the stone was in English.”

“Does that mean the message is only for us?” Marjorie asked.

With shinning eyes, Annie and Mark stared at each other. They grabbed hands and jumped up and down, screaming, “We’re on the trail of magic.”

“That’s enough jumping,” Marjorie scolded. “People are staring.”

“Don’t you understand? This says we can restore magic,” Annie said excitedly.

“How,” Ravenswood asked?

“When the two shall secure the twelve,” Mark replied. “The fact that all of us can read a message no one else can is proof that it is possible.”

“We’re going to the Bermuda Triangle in Christmas,” Annie suggested. “Perhaps a clue will be found there.”

“I have to go to the washroom,” Mark said urgently and ran off.

Mark returned and Marjorie said worriedly, “I notice you go to the washroom a lot. Is there a problem?”

“I seem to have an overactive bladder, even when I don’t drink anything all day,” Mark replied. “I also poop twice as much as anyone else. My relatives were worried about that as well and took me to the doctors. No one knows what the problem is.”

“That’s odd,” Marjorie mused. “Annie has the opposite problem. She never goes to the washroom. We took her to the doctors, but they can’t find anything wrong. They performed a colonoscopy and found nothing. And by nothing, I man her colon was clean and empty.”

“Maybe Mark is going to the washroom for me,” Annie suggested.

“Don’t be silly dear,” Ravenswood said. “That’s impossible.”

Annie and Mark looked at each other and said, “Magic.”

The gang continued the tour. The rest of the artifacts on display were boring.

“Daddy, can you take us to Guido’s place?” Jane asked. “He said we can come anytime.”

“Yes dear,” Ravenswood replied and they left.

A short trip took them to *Pilchards and Sons*, an upscale fashion store in Downtown Seattle for both men and women.

As they entered, an effeminate man approached. “Why how lovely to see you Marjorie dear. You look as radiant as ever. I just have to design you a new dress, one that highlights your stellar beauty, but I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“Why thank you Guido,” Marjorie replied. “You’re such a flatterer.”

“You’re looking good too, Ravenswood. Every time I see you, you look more regal,” Guido said and then kissed him on both cheeks.

Turning to Jane, Guido said, “Beautiful Jane, you should be a model. Your radiance is so great that it sometimes blinds me.”

Jane blushed but said nothing.

Crouching down, Guido said, “Sweet Annie, every time I see you, you look cuter. I’m sorry I couldn’t make your last dress good enough to match your beauty, but I’ll try next time.

“This must be your super cute boyfriend.”

“This is Mark,” Annie said. “He’s a dragon.”

“Is that so, young man?” Guido asked.

“The princess and I need a costume for Halloween and Princess Jane suggested you,” Mark said.

“Princess? Yes, they are princesses,” Guido agreed. “Then that means her parents are the king and queen of Washington. I’ve been serving the fashion needs of royalty for years and I never knew that until now. Forgive me, Majesties.” He gave a flourishing bow to the parents.

“I was thinking of a fairy princess costume for the princess, and a dragon costume for me since I am a dragon,” Mark continued.

Guido turned to Mark and said, “Young man, did you know I’m a dragon too? I am a member of the Draco clan.”

“Really?” Annie asked in surprise. “Mark is a Draco too.”

“What a small world,” Guido commented. “If you’re a Draco, then Mark isn’t your first name.”

“It’s Marcus,” Ravenswood said. “How did you know?”

“By tradition in the Draco clan, we always give our children two-syllable names. We also tend to marry people with two-syllable names.”

“I have a two-syllable name,” Annie said excitedly.

“That means you’re going to marry my nephew,” Guido said. “Will you allow me to make your wedding dress?”

“Yes please Uncle Guido,” Annie said happily.

“Yes, yes, I’m seeing it,” Guido said. “I know the princess is crazy about magic, just like my nephew.”

“Magic is the best,” Mark replied with a radiant smile.

“Princess and dragon,” Guido mused. “I can’t wait to complete your costumes. I’ll call when they’re complete.”

“Thank you Guido,” Mark said and took out a bank card. “How much do I owe you?”

“You can pay when you pick them up, dear, since the price hasn’t been set,” Guido said.

“Don’t you need to measure them?” Ravenswood asked.

“No need dear,” Guido said. “I have an eye for such things.”

They waved bye and headed home. While driving home, Ravenswood asked, “How did Guido know Mark liked magic?”

For a moment, no one said anything. Then Jane suggested, “Magic?” That sent the kids into a fit of giggling.

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The wait was the worst. Mark spent the days doing school stuff or practicing magic with Annie. Occasionally they would switch roles when they performed. Sometimes Mark was the magician and Annie was the assistant. Sometimes Annie was the magician and Mark was the assistant.

They picked up the costumes a few days before Halloween. That was stressful since they both decided that they would see the costumes on Halloween.

Finally Halloween came and they put on the costumes. Annie’s princess costume had wings and a halo. Mark was a red dragon with gold highlights and tiny wings. His face and hair was fully exposed for the adults to see. Mark also had a golden chain around his neck, which Annie could hold.

Not surprisingly the parents insisted on taking pictures.

As the kids left for school, Ravenswood commented, “When did we adopt Mark?”

“I don’t know but I love him like a son,” Marjorie replied. “How about you?”

“He’s only been with us for two weeks, but I feel I’ve known him for a lifetime,” Ravenswood mused.

“I only wish his relatives would – but I guess they view him as an adult since he’s so mature and responsible, but still.” Ravenswood sighed. “Only when he talks about magic and treats us like royalty does he sound like a child.”

“And yet somehow it feels right,” Marjorie added.

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The two arrived at school and were greeted by a school filled with monsters, fairies and other assorted Halloween creatures.

School was mostly the usual, but then they had a Halloween party. After school James drove them to Ravenswood’s workplace and they were escorted to his office.

“Hi kids,” Ravenswood said as they hugged him and then Marjorie.

“Governor Ravenswood, who’s that cute little boy?” a lady asked.

“I am the ferocious dragon Draco, and this is my master, the magical Princess Annie,” Mark said. He growled and made a scratching motion with his hand.

The lady bent down and pinched Mark’s cheeks, leaving red marks. “You’re so cute. I mean your real name sweetie.”

*Why do adults insist on pinching cheeks?* Mark wondered as he rubbed his sore face.

“That is his real name,” Ravenswood replied, laughing. “He is Marcus Lucas of the Draco clan. We’ve been taking care of him while his parents are away.”

“He’s the sweetest, most mature child I’ve ever met, apart from my own Annie of course,” Marjorie said and rubbed his head.

“Come on Draco, let’s go trick or treating,” Annie said and led Mark by the chain.

“Okay Princess Annie,” Mark replied and followed.

“That’s how it should be,” a lady approved. “The lady should lead and the man should follow.”

“I’m not a man,” Mark called back as he selected the best piece from a basket. “I am a dragon, a ferocious dragon, and right now I’m hunting.”

After twenty minutes Annie and Mark returned with full bags. “That was fun,” Mark said.

“How come a ferocious dragon got captured by a princess?” a man asked.

“Dragons are weak against princesses,” Annie explained. “In fact, only a princess has the power to tame a rampaging dragon. They steak the princess against the rocks and the dragon comes. The dragon removes the chains and gets caught by the princess with those very chains.”

“That’s what happened to me,” Mark said. “I was rampaging through the town, eating all the townspeople when I saw Princess Annie chained to the rocks. I approached, removed the chains and got caught. Now the princess is my master and I have to obey her for the rest of eternity.”

“That was a lovely story,” another woman said and clapped. “Thank you Princess for saving the town.”

“You’re welcome,” Annie replied. “I was happy to tame him. Will you be coming to the Halloween party? I’ll be doing a magic show, and my dragon will be assisting.”

“Yes dear,” the woman replied. “I can’t wait for the show.”

“The office party won’t start for two hours,” Ravenswood said. “Why don’t you two go outside and play?”

“Okay Majesty,” Mark said. “I thing we need to practice some more for this evening.”

That evening the people came and mingled. Children of the guests came as well. Eventually the time came for Mark and Annie’s show.

The adults and kids sat down and Annie stepped on stage.

“In the beginning magic filled the world and casting spells was as easy as breathing. Then an Ancient Evil came and took away the magic and made everyone forget that they were magical,” Annie began. “Now it’s time for us to show you a way to regain that lost magic, and perhaps spark within you the desire to become wizards as well.

“For my first trick I shall cut my lovely assistant into three pieces,” Annie said. Mark entered the box and down came the square guillotines. Annie separated the three pieces and Mark waved his hands and feet from different boxes.

In the next act, Mark hovered and Annie passed a ring around his body. For the next twenty minutes they entertained the audience.

Finally the guests gave the two a standing ovation. They loved it.

The guests left and Mark said, “That was incredible. I think some of them almost believed in real magic.”

“Some found it strange that you were the assistant instead of Annie,” Marjorie said.

“That’s very sad for them, limiting themselves by age, gender, and other useless categories,” Marks sympathized.

“You’re right son,” Ravenswood said and rubbed Mark’s head.

2. Christmas Vacation

All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth

-- Christmas Carol --

“Annie, Mark, return to your rooms and put on some clothes,” Marjorie scolded. She watched them do as instructed and then asked, “What am I to do with those two?”

Moments later Mark and Annie came back, and the family sat at table for breakfast.

“Dear, when was the last time you had a haircut?” Marjorie asked.

Ravenswood felt his hair and said, “I guess you’re right. I do need one. I’ll take Mark with me. Never mind. He doesn’t need one.”

“Kids, are you both packed?” Marjorie asked. “What about you Jane?”

“No mum,” Jane said. “I still can’t decide what to take.”

“Me neither Majesty,” Mark agreed.

“I think mummy meant clothes,” Annie explained. “Yes mummy, we are packed.”

“Dear, why don’t you go get your hair cut? You have hours before we need to go to the airport,” Marjorie said.

“Yes dear,” Ravenswood said and headed out. An hour later he returned and took a shower.

The rest of the time was spent ensuring all was in readiness.

At 4:00PM, Harry entered with his luggage.

“Who wants to go on a cruise?” Ravenswood asked.

“I do,” two kids screamed.

“All right then, let’s call an Uber,” Ravenswood said.

Ten minutes later, an airport shuttle arrived and they headed off to the airport. They checked in and spent half an hour going through security. Then there was another wait for the plane.

“Muggle transportation is such a pain,” Mark grumbled. “If I were a wizard, we would be able to teleport instantly.”

“But then you wouldn’t be able to enjoy airplane food,” Ravenswood replied and laughed at his own joke.

Waiting on the tarmac for the go ahead was even more tedious than the previous waiting periods. Finally the plane accelerated and zoomed into the sky.

Annie sat at the window and Mark leaned over to see. Unfortunately all they saw was clouds on the leg to SeaTac. The overnight leg to New York was more interesting, since they could see the lights of multiple cities.

Mark woke as they descended onto the tarmac. A shuttle ride brought them to the docks where they boarded. The ship was scheduled to leave at 10:00AM.

“Mum, dad, we’re going exploring,” Annie said and pocketed her room key. They headed for the back of the ship where a large group of guests congregated.

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Cruise ships were like floating cities, filled with secret places to explore. The *Galaxy Star* was different. It was tiny. It only had 450 state rooms, and some 80 multi-room suites. However it was clearly designed for VIPs.

Mark knew they were sailing on a private cruise with Annie’s relatives. However, not being on a regular cruise ship was disappointing.

“I wish we were on a regular cruise ship. They are bigger and more fun, especially the Disney cruises. But I suppose this is what kings and heads of state do,” Mark grumbled.

“Yup,” Annie agreed.

“So where are your relatives?” Mark asked.

“All around us,” Annie answered.

On cue two girls approached. “Hi Annie,” both said and the girls exchanged hugs.

“Is this your boyfriend?” a thirteen-year-old girl asked. “Hi. I’m Kimberly. Everyone calls me Kim. This is Megan.”

“Pleased to meet you Kim,” Mark said and shook Kim’s hand. He then greeted Megan. Moments later a dozen of Annie’s relatives surrounded them, all of whom were under sixteen.

“Are you really Annie’s boyfriend?” a fourteen-year-old girl asked.

“That’s right,” Mark replied with a smile. “One day I shall marry her.”

“Aren’t you a little young to be talking about marriage?” a fourteen-year-old boy asked. “I only became interested in girls when I turned twelve.”

“I’m not interested in girls,” Mark denied with a frown. “I’m only interested in Annie. I need to claim her now before anyone else does.”

They headed for the game room where attendants organized games for them. The rest of the day was spent playing with the kids. Never once did Mark call Annie Princess in front of the others.

Evening came and an attendant made an announcement. “Children, it’s time to go to your rooms and change. We are having a formal evening dinner.”

Annie and Mark headed for their rooms.

“Hey you two, why are you aboard?” A grating voice called. “This is a private cruise. No dragons allowed.”

The owner of the threatening voice was a sixteen-year-old punk. He had the aura of a tiger and Mark had an irrational hated of tigers.

Feeling threatened, Mark yelled back, “None of your damn business, Tig-poo. Princess Annie Van Duyn has the right to be here.”

“What did you call me?” the bully snarled. He grabbed Mark by the scruff of the collar, lifted him and tossed him five feet. Annie ran worriedly to Mark, afraid he was hurt.

Annie was about to shout at the enemy, but the bully cut her off. “How dare Draco scum talk to me like that? I don’t know why the elders allowed you to live, or allowed you power and money. If I were them I would have exterminated the lot of you. Your kind is the source of all evil. Without you, we would have brought order into this world ages ago.”

He turned to Annie and accused, “You. You can’t possibly be Annie Van Duyn. It’s impossible for the Master Spell to reduce a wizard to below the age of sixteen.”

The words, *Master Spell*, sent a trill of excitement down Mark’s spine. That was confirmation that magic existed, but what was that about being sixteen? He felt he knew the jerk in front of him, but he couldn’t remember.

Not wanting to expose his ignorance, Mark shouted, “She *is* the daughter of King Ravenswood Van Duyn, current governor of Washington, fool. You obviously know nothing about magic, or you would know – Nothing is impossible.”

A flicker of recognition crossed the teen’s face. “You’re Marcus Lucas, the so-called savior of the world, aren’t you? I should have recognized that Draco stink.”

*So we do know each other,* Mark mused. *But what was that about being the world savior?*

Annie opened her mouth to express the same question. Mark cut her off, not wanting to reveal their ignorance, and said, “Of course I am. I bet you’re surprised to find I’m ten instead of sixteen. That proves you don’t know anything.”

“I’m going to speak to my dad about this,” the teen threatened.

“Go ahead,” Mark challenged. “I bet he’ll slap you and tell you not to speak about magical concerns to outsiders.”

That took the boy aback. “Fine,” he said. “This is none of my business. I’ll let my dad stew in his own problems.” He walked away, cursing Dracos.

“Let’s go to our rooms. This place is scary,” Annie whispered.

With a little bit of navigating, they found their rooms. Mark opened his door and they stepped in.

“I’m scared Mark,” Annie said and pressed next to him.

“I know Princess,” Mark said. “We need to figure things out. What’s-his-name said we were age regressed by a spell. He also said it’s impossible for the spell to age-reverse wizards to below sixteen. This implies that we were once great wizards and they stole our power from us and made us forget.”

“Dilbert also said that you were a world hero,” Annie added.

Mark nodded. “He also didn’t deny that you are a princess and your dad is a king. I don’t think most people aboard know that real magic exists. For example, your other cousins accepted you without question.”

For several minutes they just sat together. Then Mark clasped his hands together and said, “Please mum and dad, protect us.”

“Will that work?” Annie asked.

“Credendo Vides,” Mark answered. “We need to believe that my parents are unaffected by the spell and can still use their magic to protect us, wherever they are.”

“We need to leave this room sooner or later,” Annie said.

“I would prefer later,” Mark said. “However, I don’t think my parents would approve of us hiding here. We have to trust in their protection.”

“Okay Mark, you’re my dragon. I’ll trust in your parents,” Annie said and got up, no longer frightened.

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In another part of the ship a shadowy figure knelt on one knee and said, “Majesty, we think there might be a problem with the Master Spell.”

The king looked at his subordinate who dared blaspheme in his presence. “There is nothing wrong with the spell.”

“But Majesty, we found…” the shadowy figure began.

The king’s face became blotchy and red. He looked as if he was about to explode. “That spell has been twelve thousand years in the making, initiated by people with vastly greater power and wisdom than we can imagine. How dare you say it’s flawed? If anything is wrong, it’s our understanding of the spell. Make sure everything is in accordance with that spell. Is that understood?”

“Yes Majesty,” the shinobi said and disappeared.

The shinobi considered and then erased from the king’s mind the conversation they just had. He then appeared in front of his fellow shinobi and said, “The king has declared that the current age of both dragon and princess is correct, and it is our assumptions that are wrong. Therefore we shall adjust the memories of all the Illuminati to reflect how the rest of the world views the two.”

“What about the confrontation between dragon, tiger, and princess?” a second shinobi asked.

The first shinobi replied, “We shall erase their memories of them meeting in that corridor, since their conversation related to their age discrepancy. We shall make further adjustments as the need arises. Is there any objections?”

“What about our memories?” another asked.

A fourth said, “Ours too, otherwise that would confuse us later on. All must be consistent.”

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Mark and Annie looked at each other and Annie asked, “What were we talking about?”

“I don’t remember,” Mark said. “You better go change into your evening dress.” Mark undressed and Annie left for her room.

Ten minutes later they headed for the dining room, where they met Annie’s parents, as well as Jane and Harry.

“Are you having fun?” Marjorie asked.

“Yes Annie’s mum,” Mark replied.

Mother, father, Jane and Harry looked at Mark in surprise. Before they could say anything, he signaled them to come closer.

“Being around these people is making me nervous. Something is going on but I can’t figure out what. I hope you don’t mind, but while on this vacation I want everyone to pretend we are just normal everyday people, if you know what I mean,” he whispered. “Annie, while aboard I want you to pretend you need to go like everyone else, just to keep up appearances. No one must know we believe in magic.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Ravenswood whispered back. “As a matter of fact, I feel as if I’m being cut off and people are keeping secrets.”

The others agreed. Some of the older relatives seemed distant in a way they couldn’t understand.

Robert Bloomberg got on stage and greeted everyone. “Hi everyone,” Bloomberg greeted. “Welcome to our annual Christmas vacation. We have plenty of entertainment lined up, so enjoy.”

The food was excellent and the grownups enjoyed the entertainment. Mark and Annie finished dinner and Annie said, “Mum, dad, we are going to the sundeck to watch the stars.”

“Okay dear,” Marjorie said. “Don’t stay up too late.”

The two went to the sun deck and rested against the railing. The stars shone beautifully in the night sky.

“Do you think magic really exists?” Mark asked. “If we are just meat robots, why do I exist? Why don’t people go mad living this muggle existence?”

Annie snuggled up to Mark and Mark wrapped an arm around her.

“Have you read any books by Piers Antony?” Annie asked.

Mark shook his head.

“In the book, *A spell for Chameleon*, a manticore asked the Good Magician if he had a soul. The Good Magician said, ‘Only those who have souls would ask that question.”

Mark thought about that for a moment and then said, “That’s brilliant. It’s greater than Descartes’ cogito ergo sum, I think, therefore I am. I love you my beautiful princess.” Mark kissed Annie on her head and stared out into the stars.

“Come on you two, it’s time for bed,” Marjorie called. “Aren’t you two cold?”

“I can’t get cold when I have my pet dragon to keep me warm,” Annie replied.

The two headed for their rooms and Marjorie wondered just how old her children were.

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The next morning was cool with a gentle breeze. The sky was clear with only wisps of clouds and vapor trails from long since past jets. Children ran wild as the grownups lounged in the sun or swam.

Mark and Annie headed to the pool in their bathing suits. It was turning out to be a fun vacation.

“Something is stinking,” a grating voice called from behind, just as Mark reached the pool. “Never mind,” he said. “It’s just Marcus, the so-called national hero.”

Mark turned around and faced a teenage boy. In appearance he resembled a tiger ready to pounce. Mark hated tigers, and felt like punching the towering boy in the nuts. Instead he said, “Get lost Tig-poo, or no cat-nip for you.”

Mark cupped his hand around Annie’s ear and whispered, “Who is this joker?”

“That’s Dilbert,” Annie whispered back.

“What the hell are you two whispering about?” Dilbert asked angrily.

“Annie was telling me how much uglier you’ve grown since she saw you last,” Mark rejoined.

Dilbert’s face turned red and he snarled, “You think you’re better than me, don’t you? Let me tell you, I could have completed the Spell just as well as you, perhaps even better than you.”

“But you didn’t because you weren’t chosen,” Mark retorted. “You weren’t worthy,” he added with a smirk.

“Worthy to do what?” Annie whispered.

“I don’t know,” Mark whispered back.

“Bastard,” Dilbert shouted and tried to grab Mark by the scruff of his shirt. That was impossible since Mark wasn’t wearing a shirt. Instead he said, “You stupid Dracos should all have been exterminated,” and shoved Mark into the pool.

“What’s this ruckus?” an authoritative voice demanded.

“Sorry Majesty,” Mark said as he climbed out of the pool. “Dilbert was being his usual self.”

“Mark,” Annie screeched.

Mark covered his mouth in horror as he realized his mistake. They had promised not to talk about royalty on the cruise. “I’m sorry Mr. Bloomberg.”

Surprise crossed Bloomberg’s face, followed by disbelief, followed by acceptance. Bloomberg gave Mark a smile and said, “It’s all right my dear boy. We all make mistakes. I myself still haven’t gotten used to being a commoner. However, we must all make sacrifices for the greater good.

“It’s too bad no one will ever remember your heroic role in saving the world and completing the Spell.”

“I don’t care about fame or fortune,” Mark said, careful not to say the wrong thing. “All I care about is spending the rest of my life with Annie.”

Bloomberg nodded. “You’re wise indeed, but that’s not surprising, all things considered. What are you planning on doing for the rest of your life?”

“Well sir, I’ve been blessed with wealth, health, great talent and ability,” Mark said slowly, considering every word. “Jesus said, ‘Those who have should share.’ I plan on spending my life helping those who are less fortunate.”

“Well spoken,” Bloomberg said happily and slapped Mark on the back, nearly knocking him over. “Dilbert, you should be more like Marcus. No more bullying him, is that understood?”

“Yes sir,” Dilbert said in a defeated but still defiant tone.

“I hope you two invite me for your wedding,” Bloomberg said. “Talk to you later.” Bloomberg walked away.

Dilbert walked away as well, fuming that he got the short end of the stick.

“What was all that about?” Annie asked.

“I have no idea,” Mark replied. “Let’s discuss this when we get back home. There’s a lot I need to meditate on.”

Annie nodded and jumped into the pool. Mark followed.

The rest of the day Mark reframed from calling Annie, Jane and their parents by name.

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During the night the ship docked at the main island. There were no mysterious lights in the sky, no ominous clouds, and no spaceships. In a word, the Bermuda Triangle was disappointing. However, aboard the ship, there was no shortage of mysteries.

Mark got up bright and early and did his half-hour meditation. He then changed into his regular clothes. He missed his magic props and fisherman’s jacket and pockets.

“Wake up lazy bones,” Mark screamed in Harry’s ear and shook him.

“Damn it Mark, this is vacation. Can’t a guy sleep a little late?” Harry grumbled from under the sheets.

“No you can’t,” Mark said and fought Harry for possession of the sheets. “What’s the point in vacationing if you sleep all day?”

“Damn kids, always getting up too early,” Harry mumbled. “All right, I’m getting up.”

After an agonizing wait, Harry was finally ready. They collected Annie and Jane from their rooms and entered the parent’s room.

“Hi mum, dad,” Mark greeted and hugged the parents.

“Morning Mark,” Marjorie said and returned the hug.

“How come you called us mum and dad?” Ravenswood asked.

“I talked with Mr. Bloomberg yesterday and told him that I’ll be spending the rest of my life with Annie. He gave me a smile and asked to be invited to the wedding,” Mark explained. “I don’t think I need to keep that a secret.”

“He said that in front of my cousins,” Annie added.

“Aren’t you a little young to be getting married?” Harry asked.

“I know,” Mark replied.

“So did you propose to Annie yet?” Jane asked.

“He doesn’t need to,” Annie answered. “He’s the only boy I like.”

“Everyone, they say the Bermuda Triangle is filled with mystery like monsters and disappearing ships,” Mark said with a smile.

Mark then became serious and said, “Actually the real mysteries are onboard this ship. Listen everyone; don’t be surprised by what anyone says. Pretend you already know everything and go with the flow. Strange thing are happening and I don’t want people getting suspicious. We can compare notes when we get home.”

“You’re right son,” Ravenswood said. “Way too many fishy things have been happening. The best way to get people to reveal secrets they want to keep hidden is to pretend you already know.”

“You really thing something fishy is happening aboard?” Harry asked.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Ravenswood said. “Keep your ears open and your mouth shut.”

“In that case, let’s go,” Mark said. They headed out.

The ship was docked at Kings Wharf in Sandys Parish on the western tip of Bermuda. Passengers disembarked for the various tourist attractions. The family got off as well.

Bermuda has plenty of attractions, most of which appealed to grownup tastes. This included museums, beaches and historic sites. However, there was one place that grabbed Annie’s and Mark’s attention. Located in the Hamilton Parish of the main island was Crystal Caves.

Mark and the others signed up for the tour. After going to several museums, they arrived at the caves.

According to the tour guide, the caves were discovered by two boys searching for a ball.

Crystal Cave was a large cavern with a lake in it. Standing on a platoon bridge on Cahow Lake, you could see all the way down to the stone floor 55 feet below.

Harry shook Jane and said, “Don’t fall, Jane. It’s a long distance to the bottom of this lake.” As a thank-you for the warning, Jane elbowed him.

They exited Crystal Cave and headed for Fantasy Cave. This cave was also pretty with its stalagmites and stalactites.

After that they swam at the beach and had a night-time bonfire. The crew supplied the barbeque and Mark toasted marshmallows with Annie. To Mark, it was more fun catching marshmallows on fire than eating them.

That night the gang camped out on the beach, along with dozens of other families. The adults wanted to sleep on the more comfortable ship, but were forced to camp by Mark and Annie.

Next morning, Mark did his morning meditation and then dragged Harry out of bed since it was still dark. “Damn it,” Harry grumbled. “Why do I have to stay with such a hyperactive kid?”

Mark decided to wear his favorite jacket. There was no harm in having trinkets in your pockets.

“Annie and I are going for a pit stop and then we’ll be back,” Luke said. By the time they got back Harry was up and drinking hot chocolate served by the staff.

Mark and Annie grabbed hot chocolate as well. They sat down together on a large beach chair and waited.

Finally the eastern sky brightened. The few clouds in the clear twilight sky burned with reds and yellows. Then came the rays of light shooting from a point in the horizon.

“Wasn’t that amazing everyone?” Annie asked.

“You’re right dear,” Marjorie agreed. “I’ve never seen such intense colors in my entire life.”

“I have,” Mark said. “But only in my dreams.”

The others nodded as well.

“I suppose it’s pretty,” the half-asleep Harry mumbled.

“You’re such a wet blanket,” Mark said. “I’m not sure it’s worth becoming a teenager if that’s what awaits me.”

“Come on, let’s eat breakfast,” Marjorie suggested. Everyone followed her as the beach was flooded with morning light.

One table held Wally’s and Bloomberg’s family. Wally’s son Dilbert sat nearby.

“Ravenswood, bring your family over here,” Wally called. “I noticed that your net assets have almost doubled over the last several months. What’s your secret?”

The gang stopped in front of Wally’s family. “I discovered a financial advisor named Flowing Waters,” Ravenswood said. “She’s this little guy’s aunt.”

“So Markus, does she do your accounting for you?” Bloomberg asked.

“Yes sir,” Mark said. “My Aunt Flo trained me in the stock market and comedies trading.”

The adults continued their conversation and ignored the children.

“Aunt Flow, did you say?” a teenage boy next to Dilbert asked. Just like Dilbert, he had the aura of a tiger. “Does she visit once a month?”

“Yes,” Mark replied. “How did you know?”

Both teens looked at each other and laughed.

Dilbert extended his hand and a tampon appeared in his palm. “You’ll need a new tampon when she visits you next month.”

“That’s a good one, Dilbert,” the unknown boy said.

“Thanks Harimau,” Dilbert said.

“And you’ll need a new brain…,” Mark responded and opened his hand. In his palm was a rubber brain.

“Because your brain is rotten,” Annie finished.

Until now the adults weren’t paying attention to the conversation. Then Bloomberg got up. He was furious and his face was red and blotchy. “How dare you perform magic in public,” he bellowed.

Dilbert’s face turned white with fear.

Mark also panicked. “That wasn’t real magic,” he squeaked. “It was stage illusion. See.” He took out a coin and made it disappear from one hand and reappear in another, but in a way that exposed the secret.

“And when I see Harimau I always go, barf,” Mark said and produced fake barf.

“As for Dilbert, he had that tampon with him before, since he likes to cross-dress,” Mark finished.

Bloomberg calmed down and smiled. “You’re right. It’s just sleight of hand.” He turned to Dilbert and said, “As for you. Wally, I suggest you deal with your cross-dressing son. It’s not natural.”

Both boys sighed. Dilbert wasn’t so happy though. He got away with doing magic in public, but he was accused of being a cross-dresser. He couldn’t say anything since that was clearly a lesser crime.

“Did you say real magic?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Off course not,” Bloomberg denied. “There’s no such thing as real magic.”

“Never mind that,” Mark said. “What are we doing for the rest of today?”

“We are just going to have fun at the beach. At 5:00 PM, we plan on going to the children’s Midnight Mass, and then open one present,” Marjorie explained.

“That sounds like fun,” Wally said. “They always have a pageant at Midnight Mass.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent playing on the beach. Just after 4:00 PM, they headed in to get ready.

“Everyone, I would like to give you my gifts before mass,” Mark said. “Don’t worry about the cost. I have a treasure chest filled with stuff in New Dragonia. These were some of the things in it.”

Ravenswood and Harry got tie pins and the ladies got necklaces.

“It’s beautiful Mark. Are you sure about it?” Marjorie asked.

“Of course,” Mark assured. “Remember. I’m a dragon. All dragons have a hoard of treasure. I’ll give my real treasure to Annie tomorrow.”

“Thanks dear,” Marjorie said and gave Mark a kiss. Jane and Annie also gave him kisses.

They went to mass. It was a standard Midnight Mass with a Christmas pageant. The only difference was that Annie was going crazy, wanting to see the gift. As a result she couldn’t sleep all night.

3. The Twelve

On the first day of Christmas,

My true lover gave to me…

-- Twelve Days of Christmas (Christmas Carol) --

Christmas morning came for the Van Duyn family. At 10:00AM everyone assembled in the parent’s room. Gift giving went quickly and then it was time.

“Annie, here is my greatest treasure. I hope you like it,” Mark said and handed her a gift bag.

Annie opened the bag and pulled out a doll. The doll had the beauty of a goddess, with blue waste-length hair and ruby-red eyes. She was dressed like a princess.

“Her name is Susan,” Mark said.

“Oh my God she’s beautiful,” Annie exclaimed with shinning eyes. “Thank you Mark.” She gave Mark a quick hug and then returned to playing with the doll.

“Where did you get that?” Marjorie asked. “The quality is incredible.”

“Let me get this straight, your greatest treasure is a doll. You play with dolls?” Harry said and laughed.

“Don’t laugh at him Harry,” Jane said angrily. “There’s nothing wrong with boys playing with dolls.”

“That’s not just any doll,” Mark corrected. “That’s my mother. That’s the only image I have of her and I don’t remember when I got it.”

“But that doll…” Jane began.

“Princess Susan,” Annie corrected.

“But Princess Susan has blue hair and red eyes,” Jane objected.

“My mother had blue hair and red eyed,” Mark insisted. “My dad also had unusual hair and eyes, but I don’t remember. We have no pictures of them.”

“Come on Princess Susan, let me brush your hair,” Annie said and went for her hair brush.

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With the Christmas vacation over, the gang returned home January 2. Harry went to his house across the street with his luggage and quickly returned. The family was having a meeting and he was needed.

Mark ran in and tossed his suitcase onto his bed.

“Mark, there’s a letter for you from Mr. Bloomberg,” Marjorie said.

Mark opened it and read aloud:

Dear Markus, I’m sorry I treated you so rudely. You’re a better man than me.

I wanted to thank you for you-know-what, but had a problem. How do I reward someone who has no financial needs and who can get anything in the world money can buy?

The answer is to give you something money can’t buy.

On February 19, they will be cleaning the Ka'aba.

I will pull strings to allow you to participate.

This is just a small token of my gratitude to you for you-know-what.

Someone will contact you at the end of the month to handle the logistics.

Sincerely,

Robert Bloomberg

“I better send a thank you note,” Mark said. “Mother always said, ‘A Draco is always courteous.’” Mark ran and returned with stationary.

“What is the Ka'aba? What’s so special about cleaning?” Harry asked.

“That’s the cube-shaped building in Mecca. It’s considered one of the most sacred places in the world,” Ravenswood explained. “It’s unheard of for a non-Muslim man to enter the structure.”

“What did you do to justify that?” Harry asked, incredulously.

“I saved the world,” Mark said with a smile.

“No, seriously,” Harry said.

“I am serious,” Mark said. “The first day Dilbert confronted me. Corrections – second day. He was jealous because he thought he could have done a better job saving the world and completing some sort of spell.

“Then Mr. Bloomberg came and called me by name. He too acknowledged me.

“Onboard I got two reactions. First, the crew treated me like any other guest. The same was true for kids under sixteen. Over the age of sixteen, people respected me but hated the Draco clan for reasons I don’t understand.”

Mark paused and then said, “To summarize, I’m even more convinced that magic is real. In fact, I believe Dilbert conjured that tampon. That was real magic, not sleight of hand.”

“Did you see Mr. Bloomberg freak out?” Annie asked with a giggle.

“The same thing happened to me,” Ravenswood said. “Many of the guests kept calling me Majesty, and everyone treated me like royalty. I just accepted it as natural and didn’t make a fuss, as Mark suggested.”

Marjorie, Jane and Annie had similar experiences.

“That didn’t happen to me,” Harry said, disappointed.

“I’m beginning to think that Mark’s vivid imagination isn’t so vivid, but the actual truth. We might actually have been royalty,” Ravenswood mused.

“What about me?” Harry asked.

No one commented for a moment, and then Mark said apologetically, “I’m sorry Harry but you don’t have a royal feel to you, like Annie’s family.”

“Are you royalty?” Harry asked.

“I don’t think so,” Mark said. “Do you remember before? I was joking about undergoing a great Princess Challenge to win the right to marry Annie. If my experiences on the ship are true, then that might have actually happened. Mr. Bloomberg has huge respect for me. This letter is proof.”

“Logically speaking, none of them should know Mark. And why were they all calling him Marcus?” Ravenswood asked and took the letter from Mark.

“So in order for a commoner to marry a princess, you need to do some crazy challenge,” Harry said. He wasn’t happy.

“Not in this world,” Mark replied. “In this world, there’s no law preventing you from dating Sister Jane.”

“Because I’m not a real princess,” Jane nodded.

“There are real princesses in this world,” Ravenswood corrected. “However, there are no laws preventing them from marrying commoners.”

“If all this is true, then neither of you could possibly be ten years old,” Marjorie said. “This sounds so impossible.”

“You’re right,” Ravenswood agreed. “If I were a former king, then why don’t I remember? Have we been cut off, and why?”

“That’s probably because of me,” Mark said. “As I mentioned, they all seem to hate Dracos. You are all Draco sympathizers, making you outcasts.”

“Yes, that’s another mystery,” Ravenswood agreed. “Why would they hate such an obscure group of people?”

“Don’t forget that prophesy on the Atlantis Stone,” Jane said. “Just what are those twelve items?”

“What prophesy?” Harry asked. Jane explained, since he hadn’t visited the museum with the others.

No one said anything for awhile. Then Annie said, “Mark is going to Mecca next month. Perhaps we’ll find a clue there.”

“We need to also investigate all the ancient legends of the world,” Mark said.

“Mark, you need to investigate the history of your clan,” Ravenswood said. “I’ll investigate our family, as well as the other families.”

“Please come visit New Dragonia,” Mark begged. “I’m certain you could learn a lot.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ravenswood answered.

“Is there an old Dragonia?” Annie asked.

“According to legend we originally came from a faraway land filled with dragons,” Mark explained. “That was Dragonia. It was filled with amazing beauty and magic. Another legend says that our First Parents were Lord Draco and Lady Lilith.”

“You’re kidding me,” Jane chuckled. “Aren’t those people demons from the bible?”

“Why did you leave?” Marjorie asked.

“No one knows,” Mark replied. He then said excitedly, “There’s more. You’ll love this. Another legend says Lord Draco was the thirteenth and last son of Jacob, grandson of Abraham.

“Lord Draco and Lady Lilith worshipped the dragon and believed that God partook of both male and female aspects. As a result, we must strive to embody both aspects within ourselves.

“Needless to say there was a fight and my tribe was banished.”

“No way,” Harry exclaimed. “Are you saying you’re the lost tribe of Israel?”

“Is there anything else? How about Genesis?” Ravenswood asked.

“Not really,” Mark replied. “It’s similar to the Bible’s Genesis, except that the Tree of Knowledge was *not* was an apple tree. It was a type of banyan tree, with cherries as its fruit.

“The children of Adam and Eva were expected to eat the fruit and thereby gaining wisdom. Why else would it be at the center of the Garden?

“The Children stopped eating of the fruit because it was bitter in the extreme. They lost their wisdom and began sinning. Wars broke out which caused the Flood and the eventual loss of the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge. Unfortunately most of the history was lost.”

“That’s quite a different spin on the Genesis story,” Ravenswood mused. “That means you don’t believe in original sin.”

“The only sin is closed-mindedness and the belief we know everything there is to know about life,” Mark nodded.

“Damn, I feel like a child in front of you,” Ravenswood marveled. “Can you please teach me this?”

“I’m not qualified to teach the ninety-nine lessons of life,” Mark said uncertainly. “I’ll need to ask Uncle Arthur for advice.

“Please read my thank-you letter. Is this good enough?”

4. The Ka'aba

Time to meet the daddy

A group of devout Muslim men approached the Ka'aba. Most were full grown men. One was a little person. He was included to show the world that the Muslim faith didn’t discriminate.

With face fully covered, the little person entered. Three pillars stood inside the sacred cube. A staircase was located to the right.

The cleaning began. The devout Muslims prayed as they worked. Cleaning complete, they headed to the staircase.

The stairs led to a door. On the other side was an empty room. In the center of the room was a box.

The group of devout Muslims looked at the box in surprise. That shouldn’t have been there.

The little person approached the box and removed his head coverings.

A radiant messenger of God stood in front of the devout Muslims. The ten-year-old boy had ruby-red hair extending to his butt, and purple eyes like fresh grapes.

A deep reverberating voice like the voice of God spoke. “Son, the item you seek is in the box. Take it with you and complete the task.”

One devout Muslim timidity asked, “Are you the son of God?” The others nodded.

The boy looked at them in surprise and said, “That’s my dad. I don’t think you should make public what happened here at this time. We better start cleaning.”

The men looked at the boy in awe. However they complied with his instructions and cleaned.

The boy put back his head covering and the glow disappeared. He was back to his former self. He helped clean.

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Back home, Annie asked excitedly, “So what was it like?”

“I entered the cube. Inside were three pillars and a staircase to the right,” Mark began. “Other than that the room was empty.”

Mark paused and then said, “I’m surprised it was so empty. I was expecting religious artifacts.

“We then cleaned. You know, I find it hard to clean something that doesn’t actually need cleaning.

“That done, we took the stairs and passed through a door. The room on the other side was empty, except for this box in the center of the room.

“I removed my head covering and approached the box. Then from out of nowhere my dad spoke. In a deep voice he said, ‘Son, the item you seek is in the box. Take it with you and complete the task.’ That freaked everyone out.”

“I bet they thought they were hearing the voice of God,” Ravenswood said with a laugh.

“That’s precisely what happened,” Mark confessed. “Actually he did sound Godly. What’s even funnier was that they thought that I was the son of God. One man even asked, ‘Are you the son of God?’ Isn’t that funny?” Mark laughed.

“You little munchkin, the son of God? That’s so funny,” Harry said and laughed. The others laughed too.

“What did you say?” Ravenswood asked when everyone calmed down.

“I told them that that was my dad, and that they should not tell anyone what happened,” Mark replied. “Other than that nothing unusual happened. We finished cleaning and then left.”

“So we are not on a fool’s errand,” Ravenswood mused. “You heard your dad. Then again, we still haven’t proven anything.”

“Never mind that,” Jane said. “Open the box. I want to see what’s inside.”

The box contained twelve pockets. One pocket contained a twelve-inch doll. It had long, beautiful, green hair and blue eyes.

“That’s my dad,” Mark exclaimed. “I forgot what he looked like.”

“Can I pick him up?” Annie asked. “What’s his name?”

“Baldwin,” Mark replied.

“Annie, go get Princess Susan,” Ravenswood instructed.

Annie did as instructed.

“They were created by the same artist,” Marjorie noted.

“There is no question now,” Ravenswood nodded. “We have two of the items. I’m guessing that the other ten items are dolls as well.”

“But what will we do with them when we find them?” Jane asked.

“That will be revealed at the appropriate time,” Annie said as she held both dolls. “Can I play with them?”

“Of course,” Mark said. “Have fun with them.”

“Be careful with them Annie” Ravenswood warned. “They are priceless artifacts.”

“I know daddy,” Annie said.

“Hello Prince Baldwin, Princess Susan, would you like some tea?” Annie asked.

“Are they real princes and princesses?” Jane asked.

“My clan doesn’t believe in royalty, since that just separates people,” Mark explained. “We do have elders. Elders of our clan are people who mysteriously disappear, after they have learnt all 99 lessons of our clan, like my parents.”

“How many lessons have you learnt?” Marjorie asked.

“According to my teachers, I have mastered 67 lessons,” Mark said. “They think I might be an ancient soul.”

“I believe that,” Marjorie said. Ravenswood agreed.

“How many lessons have I learnt?” Annie asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark replied. “You’ll have to take a series of tests. You’re all welcome to take those tests.”

Ravenswood got up and paced back and forth while Annie played happily with her dolls. He stopped and said, “I think it’s time to give up our outdated morality and visit New Dragonia.”

Ravenswood looked at two naked children sitting on the carpet and said, “I know Annie will be fine. She lost her shame, thanks to Mark. How about the rest of you?”

“I don’t know,” Marjorie said uncertainly.

“It’s okay for Annie and Mark to run around naked, since they are just kids,” Harry noted.

“But we are teenagers,” Jane agreed.

“This is only February. There’s plenty of time before Summer Break,” Ravenswood said.

“If you’re going, come for Summer Solstice,” Mark suggested.

Ravenswood nodded.

“Mum, dad, Nancy’s family is going to the World Youth Day in April,” Jane said.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“That’s a Catholic event that takes place every 2-3 years,” Jane explained. “There is no fixed date. It’s intended for young adults between 18 and 35. It was started by Pope John Paul II. It’s a 1 week event.”

“What do you think dear?” Ravenswood asked.

“Mark and Annie always have top grades,” Marjorie considered. “So does Jane. Harry, you need to ask your parents.”

“Yippee,” Mark and Annie cheered.

5. World Youth Day

We are one body,

One body in Christ

-- Major Catholic theme --

The parents couldn’t go to Rome because of work at the governor’s office. As a result only the four kids went.

Together with Jane’s friend Nancy, they entered the main square. It was only half full since they arrived at 2:00 AM, when the gates opened.

They headed forward. Half an hour later they got a good spot at the front railing, and close to the porta-potties. They opened chairs and waited.

The day progressed as people milled about and talked. In the meantime they traded US flag pins for flag pins from other countries. That done, they ate.

“I wish I could remote pee,” Mark grumbled and pressed his legs together.

“Don’t be crude Mark,” Jane scolded.

Harry just laughed. “What do you expect? He’s just a kid after all.”

“Don’t make fun of him,” Annie said angrily. “He’s going for me as well. Sorry Mark I won’t drink anymore,” she said guiltily. Mark dashed off.

“What are you talking about?” Nancy asked. “It’s impossible to go for someone else.”

“I don’t think this is an appropriate place to have that discussion,” Jane said.

Time passed and the various events of the day passed.

Three Cardinals approached. The first called. “Attention children. This afternoon the kids doing the Stations of the Cross for tomorrow evening came down with food poisoning…”

“That’s so sad,” Mark interrupted.

“Don’t feel bad son,” Cardinal #2 said. “They’ll be better in a few days.”

“I don’t mean that,” Mark said. “I mean they won’t get to experience this once-in-a-lifetime event.”

“That’s kind of you for thinking that,” Cardinal #3 said.

“Because of the unexpected event we need new children for the performance,” Cardinal #1 said.

“Who wants to do it?” Cardinal #3 asked.

Mark and Annie raised their hands up and screamed, “I do,” along with the other children.

The Cardinal selected kids, including Mark and Annie.

Suddenly Mark remembered something important. “Oh no, I can’t do this, I’m not baptized,” Mark said aloud. “I’m not Catholic.”

The cardinals looked at each other and Cardinal #1 said, “That’s okay son. The Apostles weren’t Catholic either. Do you know when they became Catholic?”

“At Pentecost, when they were baptized by fire,” Mark replied.

“That’s correct,” Cardinal #3 said, impressed. “Many Catholics don’t know that.”

“How would you like to be Simon of Cyrene?” Cardinal #2 asked.

“That’s perfect,” Mark said excitedly. “Simon was just an ordinary guy who was called to do something beyond everyone’s imagination or understanding.”

“What do you mean?” a woman asked.

“Everyone thought Jesus was just a criminal who defied the Roman Empire,” Mark explained. “Helping a criminal like that would be considered demeaning. We know better.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Cardinal #1 said with a smile. “He certainly was given a blessing.”

The other roles filled. Then Cardinal #2 said, “Parents, we need your kids to practice for tomorrow. Tomorrow, we’ll practice before the mass. Come kids. It’s time to practice.”

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The Stations of the Cross is not a regular play. Instead it is composed of fourteen dramatic poses.

Harry held his phone and recorded as kids performed the Stations of the Cross.

The announcer called: “5th Station: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his cross.”

Mark lifted the cross to one shoulder and the boy playing Jesus held onto Mark on the other side. Mark’s small body looked tiny under the weight of the cross and the teenager.

“Oh my, can Mark carry such a big weight? He’s only a baby,” Jane said worriedly.

“Remember Jane, he can carry me,” Harry whispered back.

The announcer called: “6th Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.”

Annie got up and wiped Jesus’ face.

The passion completed and the children exited the stage.

At the end the Pope called the children onto the stage and asked questions concerning their faith.

“What is the greatest commandment?” the pope asked.

A teenage girl said, “Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Hold it,” Mark called, raising his hand. “How can you love your neighbor as yourself unless you love yourself?”

“That’s right,” Annie said. “We are one body, one body in Christ.”

“You’re absolutely right,” the Pope said. “We need to accept God’s love first and also accept his gifts before we can truly love our fellow Man.”

The questioning continued and then the Pope gave everyone rosaries. He then asked Mark and Annie to come with him. They exited the stage.

Five minutes later they returned with a wrapped package.

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Back home everyone watched the home videos of the event.

“What happened when the Pope called you backstage?” Marjorie asked.

“That was a freaky thing,” Annie said. “The Pope lifted his hat and pulled this out from inside his hat.”

“He then gave it to me and said, ‘Give this to your sister,’ and left,” Luke said.

“He was just carrying that in his miter?” Ravenswood asked in surprise. “Unbelievable.”

“Open it up. I’m curious to see,” Jane said.

After unwrapping, Annie revealed a young man with golden hair and orange eyes.

“I remember,” Mark exclaimed. “This is Peter. He used to visit. He too disappeared, just like my parents.”

“Hello Prince Peter,” Annie said. “Come I’ll introduce you to your friends.”

Annie then held a conversation with her three dolls.

‘Hello Peter, It’s been so long since I saw you last.’

‘You too Baldwin.’

‘Susan, you look more beautiful than ever.’

‘Peter, are you trying to steal my wife.’

‘I would never do that. I’m a man of the cloth…’

“What cloth is that, the one on the Pope’s head?” Harry asked and laughed.

6. New Dragonia

Where there is mystery,   
there are dragons

Ding-Ding.

“I’ll get it,” Mark said and opened the door.

“Hi Mark, you’re looking the same,” Uncle Arthur said in his loud jolly voice and gave Mark a hug.

“That’s something I need to talk to you about, Mr. Lucas,” Ravenswood said by way of greeting. “Please come to the living room. You too Mrs. Lucas.”

“Just call us Arthur and Hanna,” Uncle Arthur said as he took a seat by his wife.

“Would you two like something to drink?” Marjorie asked.

“A bourbon please,” Uncle Arthur said.

“You’re driving,” Hanna scolded.

“No, you’re driving,” Uncle Arthur corrected. “I’m drinking.”

“There’s no way I’m driving that monster,” Hanna said adamantly, “We’re both having cokes.”

“I’ll get the coke,” Mark said and went to the kitchen.

“This is my wife Marjorie, daughter Jane and her boyfriend Harry. This is my youngest Annie,” Ravenswood said.

“I heard about Annie,” Uncle Arthur said. “I hadn’t realized she liked being all natural.”

“You can blame your nephew for that,” Marjorie complained. “Two months after he started living here, he started running around naked. Soon after, Annie began doing the same. We couldn’t stop them, no matter how much we scolded.”

“You shouldn’t stress. It will give you wrinkles,” Uncle Arthur warned. “So what’s on your mind?”

“Mark began living with us last October,” Ravenswood said. “At that time we got his medical records. Mark is 51 inches tall and weighs 69.4 pounds.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Uncle Arthur asked. “He looks healthy to me.”

“He is healthy,” Marjorie said. “That’s not the point. Those were his measurements in August when he turned ten. He hasn’t grown since. Moreover are his teeth. The proportion of baby to adult teeth is the same from when he turned ten. He also has one tooth that is only starting to grow.

“What we’re trying to say is that he seems to have stopped growing, as if frozen in time,” Ravenswood said.

“Isn’t that great? He’ll be a cute little baby forever,” Uncle Arthur said.

Hanna elbowed him and said, “That’s not funny.”

“You’re right,” Uncle Arthur considered. “At that rate, he’ll never get a girl.”

“Damn it, this is serious,” Ravenswood said angrily.

“That’s okay since I have Annie,” Mark said as he handed drinks to everyone. “She’ll be by my side forever.”

“For some reason Annie also has the same condition,” Marjorie said. “The doctors think they are suffering from some rare genetic disease. So far they are healthy, but we don’t know for how long.”

“We can talk to the seniors of the clan if you wish,” Hanna suggested.

“Now let’s talk about your stay at New Dragonia,” Uncle Arthur said. “You’ll be pleased to know that Mark and Annie will share the same bed, as will Harry and Jane.”

Hanna elbowed Uncle Arthur again and said, “Don’t listen to that idiot. Harry and Mark will share a room, and Annie and Jane will share another room.”

Uncle Arthur looked at Harry and laughed. “You look disappointed I see.”

“Arthur, the history of your tribe confuses me,” Ravenswood said. “Mark says you’re a lost tribe of Israel. Is that true?”

“We don’t know,” Uncle Arthur said with a shrug. “Our legends say that we are descended from Draco, youngest son of Jacob and his wife Lilith. They are considered our first parents. Unfortunately much of our history was lost centuries ago. Now our family tree only goes back a few hundred years.”

“I thought you were supposed to be descended from Vikings,” Harry said.

“I’m not sure how that came about,” Uncle Arthur said. “The real story seems to fry people’s brains. They would then spread the rumor that we were descended from Vikings. It seems to be more believable to people.”

“That’s amazing,” Marjorie marveled.

“Mark told us about your clan elders and the 99 lessons,” Ravenswood said.

“I remember when Elders Susan and Baldwin walked down the Forbidden Path,” Uncle Arthur. “You’ll be pleased to know three clan members will walk that same path for Summer Solstice. It’s something no outsiders have ever seen.”

“Why are you making this exception for us?” Ravenswood asked.

“Because you’re not outsiders,” Uncle Arthur replied.

“That’s right,” Mark said. “You’re family. After all, I’m your son-in-law.”

Uncle Arthur laughed his shrill laugh. “So have you consummated your marriage yet?”

Hanna elbowed Uncle Arthur. “Sorry about that. He like saying stupid things.”

“Well?” Uncle Arthur asked again.

“Of course not,” Mark denied. “I would never do that, not until after we are formally married when we both turn eighteen. As dad would say, ‘A Draco is always honorable.’” Mark hugged Annie and added, “I’m just happy to give Annie hugs and kisses whenever I feel like it.”

“Come on everyone, it’s time to go,” Uncle Arthur said and got up.

“Put on some clothes kids,” Marjorie said.

The two headed for their rooms to change. Moments later everyone exited.

A semi pulling two 53-foot-trailers waited for them. The front cabin was huge.

“Holy cow that’s huge,” Harry exclaimed. “Is that legal?”

“Mark, do you want to drive?”

“I can’t drive, silly,” Mark said and laughed. “I’m too small.”

“You need a commercial driver’s license to drive that, but yes, that’s legal,” Ravenswood assured.

“Come on, let me get your luggage,” Uncle Arthur said. “By the way, you packed too much luggage. A toothbrush is all you need.”

They entered the semi cab and Uncle Arthur said, “This is my chariot. It can go anywhere, even on water. Unfortunately it can’t fly. You should see the expressions on people’s faces when I float by them on the lake. It freaks them out. Very few RVs have that ability, especially one this size.”

They headed out.

“Can you tell me more about the elders?” Ravenswood asked.

“There’s little to tell,” Uncle Arthur said. “A person who has mastered all 99 lessons of our tribe is eligible to become an elder. Some believe there is one more lesson to master before becoming an elder. I’m level 94 and I don’t know if that’s true.”

“It’s hard to believe he’s level 94, isn’t it?” Hanna said.

Uncle Arthur blew a raspberry at Hanna and continued. “No one gets to see the elders. Also, they rarely communicate with us. They do however oversee the tests used to verify what level a person is at.”

“The tests weren’t easy,” Hanna said. “I’m only level 55.”

“Does magic exist?” Jane asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Uncle Arthur said. “Think of these life lessons as just our religion. We are no different than anyone else in the world. The only mystery we have is, where do Elders go when they walk the Forbidden Path?”

“Aren’t they the leaders of your society?” Ravenswood asked.

“Elected senior members of our clan do the leading and such,” Uncle Arthur replied. “I’m eligible but I have no interest in management. The only thing the Elders are interested in is making sure the lessons are properly thought.”

“How many are there in your community?” Ravenswood asked.

“I don’t know,” Uncle Arthur said. “There are millions of us scattered throughout the world.”

“There are over 20 million Jews around the world,” Jane said.

“From a religious point of view that’s true. World War II devastated their numbers,” Uncle Arthur said. “From a genealogical point of view, that’s false. Hundreds of millions of people are directly descended from Jacob. However most of them have forgotten their genealogy.”

They merged onto highway I90 and headed east.

“I’m getting nervous,” Jane said.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Hanna said. “It’s just like being at the beach.”

“As the saying goes, what happens in New Dragonia stays in New Dragonia,” Uncle Arthur said. “For some unknown reason, knowledge of our community always disappears from the world’s attention. That’s why we’ve never been persecuted, even though our beliefs are so radical.”

“So no one will be aware that I’m visiting you,” Ravenswood said.

“That’s correct,” Uncle Arthur assured. “You can do all the…” Hanna slapped Uncle Arthur’s hand before he could finish. He rubbed his hand and said, “Ouch. That was harder than normal. One of these days my hand will fall off, and then I won’t be able to…Ouch. Okay I’ll stop.”

They turned off I90 and headed down a state highway.

“Does he always act like that?” Marjorie asked.

“Yes mum,” Mark said. “Just ignore him. Everyone does.”

“That’s so mean,” Uncle Arthur said, feigning hurt. “I thought I was your favorite uncle.”

“You are my favorite uncle and the craziest,” Mark insisted.

They drove down a mostly deserted highway. Steep hills rose on both sides. Occasional cliffs were exposed where the sides of the hills were blasted to make the highway.

“Are we there yet,” Annie asked as they drove.

“As a matter of fact, we are,” Uncle Arthur said.

They pulled off onto a gravel road snaking into the vegetation. They approached a rock cliff and the cliff-side opened. They drove in.

“Is your place underground?” Annie asked.

“Not really,” Uncle Arthur said. “We don’t like exposed infrastructure, so we hid everything underground.”

Occasionally cars passed them as they drove. Taking several lefts and rights, they stopped at a parking spot in front of a bright red door. They entered with their luggage.

Uncle Arthur removed his shoes and put on slippers. The others did the same and entered.

Inside was an open-concept living space. To the left was the kitchen area. To the right were closets, a washroom and a staircase. The rest of the living space consisted of the dining area, living area and a large swimming pool with a Jacuzzi and a waterfall. It was a modern house filled with paintings from a surrealistic artist.

“Was it expensive to build all this?” Ravenswood asked as they climbed to the second floor.

“Not really,” Uncle Arthur replied. “Most of this is above-ground structures that we built over and backfilled. I guess it’s three or four times more expensive than a regular road, but it’s worth it.

“Ravenswood, Marjorie, this is your room,” Uncle Arthur said and guided everyone to a room. He placed their luggage on the bed and came out. “This is Jane’s and Annie’s room.”

They headed to the last room and Mark said, “This is my room. You can tell by how manly it is. I’ll take the top bunk. Harry, you can take the bottom.”

The room was a standard little boy’s room filled with magic related items and toys from fantasy movies.

“I love those paintings,” Marjorie said as she stared at an oil painting on the wall. “I feel something stirring in me when I look at them.”

“Mark painted them all last year just after he turned ten and before he moved,” Aunt Flo said as she stepped into the hallway. She wore a bath robe. She had lost all her fat and now was a beautiful, slender 35-year-old woman.

“I see you lost weight,” Marjorie said. “You look good.”

“Thanks Marjorie,” Aunt Flo said.

“No way,” Jane said in shock as she gazed at the painting. “Mark, I can’t believe you’re so talented. How come you haven’t painted since?”

“After I met Annie, I didn’t feel the need,” Mark shrugged. “Annie, have you ever painted before?”

Annie nodded, “Just after I turned ten and before meeting you, I painted.”

“How come you never showed them to us?” Marjorie asked.

“Because I knew you would think I was crazy and start freaking out,” Annie said. “You were already freaking out about my nightmares.”

“Last year I dreamt I was flying through an endless thunderstorm filled with endless wonders,” Mark said, changing the subject. “This is Dragonia. Unfortunately I couldn’t capture the beauty I saw in the dream.”

“Kitty-cat dragon,” Annie exclaimed excitedly and pointed at another painting. In the painting, the kitty-cat dragon hovered in front of a beautiful ten-year-old princess and stared into her eyes.

“The princess looks a lot like Annie,” Jane commented.

“That is Annie, before she lost her magic and turned into a muggle,” Mark said.

A tear ran down Annie’s face. “I don’t want to be a muggle,” she whimpered and hugged Mark.

Mark hugged Annie back and consoled, “Remember what the Atlantis Stone said. ‘The magic that was once lost will one day be restored, when the two shall secure the twelve.’ We already have three of the twelve items.

“Here’s another painting. As I said before, ‘A human male may not look upon the naked body of a princess and live, unless that male be her betroved or a family member.’

“The king is about to call down divine judgment on me for accidently seeing Annie naked. The queen and two daughters are begging you to spare my life. You refuse, since laws are absolute and must always be obeyed.”

Marjorie looked at Ravenswood furiously and pinched his arm. He was wearing a t-shirt. “How dare you do something so horrible to such a sweet boy?”

Ravenswood grimaced in pain from the pinch and mumbled, “I’m Sorry.”

“What’s going on?” Aunt Flo asked. “Why is everyone so stressed? That’s just a fantasy from a little boy’s mind.”

“You’re right,” Marjorie said. “Sorry dear for pinching you.”

“I feel as if I deserved that,” Ravenswood said solemnly. “I’m feeling very guilty right now. It’s not good to blindly obey laws. Instead we need to understand the reasons for laws and then apply them appropriately on a case by case basis. Laws are just tools we use. We mustn’t let them use us. I feel as if I just learnt an important life lesson.”

“That’s one of the 99 lessons thought by our clan and encompass a great many truths,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Remember dad, Mr. Bloomberg acknowledged me as a world hero, thereby giving me the right to marry Annie. He also asked to be invited to the wedding.”

In the meantime Harry wasn’t looking too happy. He dropped to one knee in front of Jane and said, “Will you marry me?”

“Yes of course,” Jane said quickly.

“I don’t understand,” Aunt Flo said, confused. “What’s going on?”

“Mark and Harry can see our daughters now, but what about Arthur and the others,” Ravenswood asked worriedly.

Uncle Arthur’s cell phone beeped. He pulled it out and said, “I have a text message from an unknown caller. It says, ‘Those laws no longer apply in this world, since royalty have been stripped of their divine status.’ The message just deleted itself. I believe this came from Elder Baldwin. This is the first time he contacted me since he left. What’s going on?”

“Let’s sit in the living room,” Aunt Flo suggested.

Ravenswood sat down and stared at the nasty bruise on his arm. “According to Mark, Marjorie and I were the king and queen of Washington. Mark performed some heroic deed that gave him the legal right to marry Annie. Then something happened that stole everyone’s magic and memories.

“Last October we visited the museum. On the Rosetta Stone was a message in English saying…”

Ravenswood paused and Mark said, “The magic that was once lost will one day be restored, when the two shall secure the twelve.”

“We had a Christmas vacation with the extended family on a private cruise,” Ravenswood continued. “Many of the family treated me like royalty. Also, many of them expressed open hatred for the Draco Clan. They did however have much respect for Mark, even though in theory they never met him before.”

“I’ll get my dollies,” Annie suggested and ran out the door. A moment later she came back with the box.

“Those are Elders Baldwin, Susan, and Peter,” Aunt Flo said in surprise. “They all disappeared up the Forbidden Path years ago.”

“Magic is real,” Ravenswood declared. “It’s the only thing that can explain why Annie never goes to the washroom, while Mark goes twice as often.”

“Seriously?” Uncle Arthur asked in surprise.

“I gave Annie Purple Poople,” Mark explained. “The next day my poop turned purple.”

Uncle Arthur laughed so hard he fell off the couch. After calming down, he asked, “Annie, did you verify that?”

Annie nodded. “It was purple.”

Again Uncle Arthur fell down laughing.

“Mark gave Elder Susan to Annie on Christmas,” Ravenswood said. “Mr. Bloomberg pulled strings and got Mark invited to the cleaning of the Ka'aba…”

“No way,” Hanna exclaimed. “Only Muslims may enter.”

Ravenswood explained how Mark discovered the box and how Baldwin spoke. As expected, Uncle Arthur found it hysterical.

Finally Ravenswood described how the third doll was found in the Pope’s hat.

“That’s so hard to believe,” Aunt Flo said.

“Combine that with the fact that both Annie and Mark haven’t aged since turning ten, and it’s hard not to believe,” Ravenswood said.

“We have medical records showing Mark’s and Annie’s weights, heights, and teeth haven’t changed,” Marjorie said. “Even their hair is the same length.”

“Freaky,” Hanna said.

“Pretending to be God. Pulling dolls from pope’s hats. I never knew that Elder Baldwin had such a wicked sense of humor. You’re right. Magic does exist,” Uncle Arthur said as he wiped his eyes.

“There are still nine more dolls to collect,” Annie said.

“I don’t know how to help you there,” Uncle Arthur said. “I don’t think you should worry about that. After all, Elder Baldwin did arrange for you to get three dolls from nearly impossible locations.

“More importantly, I wonder what kind of wizard I would have been. Maybe my chariot could fly through other realities, and not just travel on the ground or on water.”

“Dear, what kind of paintings did you paint?” Marjorie asked.

Annie looked at Mark and shrugged. “One was Armageddon. The sum was black, the moon was red and people were fighting. In the sky was a boy – Mark was flying a red and gold Chinese Dragon. Another painting was of a black dragon holding a princess in his hand…It doesn’t matter anymore. I no longer need them.”

“Come, let’s go outside for a walk,” Aunt Flo suggested.

“Don’t we have to – you know?” Jane asked nervously.

“You’re not required to be naked,” Aunty Flo said. “The footpaths are designated to be walked on barefoot. However you may use shoes.”

They got their shoes, passed through the living room and out into the front garden. They were on the mountain side lined with houses. The other side of the valley was also lined with houses. However there was so much vegetation that it was hard to see the houses.

Walking paths and bike trails snaked everywhere. People strolled and chatted. Others were on their patios, barbequing or otherwise socializing.

“Many people who live here full time grow their own food,” Aunt Flo explained. “We also have plenty of hotels for those who just visit for the important celebrations.”

“I can’t believe something like this is here,” Harry said.

“What’s stranger is that you can’t see any of this on Google Maps,” Mark said. “Even from the road, all you’ll see are signs for private property. I always thought there was something magical about that. I mentioned that to my relatives and they thought I was being silly.”

“Flo, I haven’t seen you in ages,” a 35-year-old woman called. Three children played near her. “Is that the governor? What’s he doing here?”

“Hi Irene,” Flo greeted. “It seems that the governor’s daughter Annie wants to marry Mark when they grow up. They came here because they wanted to understand our way of life.”

“Annie is a good Draco name,” Irene said approvingly. “This is my son Philip, and daughters Amy and Zola.” She then introduced the family to over a dozen other people who wandered in.

“Is it my imagination or does everyone have two-syllable names?” Harry asked.

“That’s Harry,” Flo said.

“That’s a tradition with us Dracos,” Irene said. “We always take two-syllable names.”

“Hi, I’m Billy Jensen,” a young man said. “This is my wife Helen. What do you think of our place?”

“I was here before in the capacity of governor last year,” Ravenswood said. “However this is purely social. We only arrived an hour ago, but I’m seeing things I never saw before, like those underground tunnels.”

“We don’t like concrete roads and cars but we can’t do without them, so we burry them. You’re no longer outsiders,” Billy said with a smile. He looked at Harry and said, “Don’t feel nervous. Friends of the family are welcome as well.”

“I feel overdressed,” Jane said.

“Don’t worry about that,” Helen assured. “Do whatever feels comfortable. Our hectic schedules don’t give us much time for fun. Let’s all have a barbeque.”

“I’ll be back in a minute. I have to make a pit stop,” Mark said and ran back to the house. Annie followed. Moments later the two were back with just their shoes.

The group headed for Helen’s place.

Mark removed his shoes and ran to a shower. He quickly showered and then jumped into the pool. Annie followed his lead.

“Come on you two, join us,” Annie called.

Harry hesitated a moment and follower the kids’ lead.

“Harry, turn around,” Jane said. He did as instructed and she joined the others in the pool. Other kids jumped in the pool as well.

“Mum, dad, why don’t you join us?” Annie asked.

“Perhaps another time dear,” Ravenswood said.

“Okay,” Annie said reluctantly and splashed Jane.

“I hadn’t realized that such a peaceful place could exist,” Marjorie said. “However I’m starting to feel overdressed.”

“Then join us in the pool,” Mark said. “Swimming is the best on hot sunny days.”

“I suppose we’re all family here,” Marjorie said reluctantly. “Dear, if I’m going, they you’re going too.”

“Yes dear,” Ravenswood said. Soon both were in the pool.

“Finally we are one happy family,” Uncle Arthur said as he attended the barbeque. “I just need to make sure I don’t burn my – ouch,” he said and rubbed his arm when Hanna pinched him.

The kids tossed a ball around as the adults gossiped.

“Food is ready,” Uncle Arthur called.

“It’s going to take some time getting used to this,” Jane said as she looked at the steps. “I’m feeling awkward getting out.

“Isn’t it funny?” Mark said. “We are born naked, but we die fully clothed. Then the bugs eat us, leaving only our clothes.”

“That’s a good one Mark,” Uncle Arthur said.

“Just say ‘To hell with it,’” Hanna suggested. “We are all family here. There’s no need to be embarrassed. Besides, you have a nice body.”

“Okay,” Jane said and got out. She wasn’t embarrassed in front of the others but she was in front of Harry. Harry tried his best not to look, which made matters worse.

Aunt Flo sighed and said, “You two really need to get laid.”

Uncle Arthur laughed hysterically and said, “That’s my line.”

“Marjorie, if it makes you comfortable we can have a wedding in the Draco tradition,” Aunt Flo suggested, noting Marjorie’s discomfort. “Next year we can have a public wedding when they both turn eighteen.”

“I think I would be happier that way,” Marjorie said with a touch of relief.

“I’ll check to see if we can book a room at the town hall,” Uncle Arthur said and picked up a phone.

“Come on everyone, let’s eat before the food gets cold,” Mark said. A moment later he ran into the house.

Evening came and they went home.

While playing board games, Uncle Arthur got a call. He hung up and said, “I have good news. We can hold the ceremony tomorrow.

“Normally rooms are booked solid at the town hall, but a couple cancelled at the last moment,” Uncle Arthur said. “We’ll take their place. It’s one of the smaller rooms, perfect for us. We were very lucky. Harold got the cancelation message just after I called. All the arrangements are made.”

Annie and Mark looked at each other and said, “Magic.” They giggled.

“Sorry we can’t invite your relatives over Harry dear,” Aunt Flo apologized. “Except for government officials, outsiders don’t come here.”

“But I’m an outsider,” Harry said, feeling excluded.

“Harry, you have an older brother. If he marries, then you’ll become an in-law, just like mummy, daddy, and Sis are,” Annie said.

Annie placed her hands together and prayed, “Mark’s parents, please let Charlie find someone to marry in the Draco family. Now you won’t be an outsider.”

Harry smiled at Annie and said, “Thanks Annie but that’s not possible.”

“Nonsense,” Annie said. “Where there’s a Draco, there’s a way.”

“Well said Annie,” Uncle Arthur clapped. “Spoken like a true Draco. Harry, do you think he would be willing to come here?”

“Yes,” Harry nodded. “He’s a free-spirit hippy type who lives in Mount Shasta, California.”

“What a coincidence,” Uncle Arthur said. “I too am a free-spirit hippy type.”

“Unfortunately he eloped a few months ago,” Harry said. “My parents weren’t happy, since they weren’t invited. All we know is that she’s a cute girl.”

“That’s too bad,” Aunt Flo said. “Mark, your niece Carol is flying over on her husband’s private jet. They will arrive tomorrow morning at our private airfield.”

“I didn’t know she was married,” Mark remarked.

“She eloped a few months ago without telling anyone,” Aunt Flo said. “All we know is that he’s a cute boy.”

Annie and Mark looked at each other and laughed. They laughed so hard that they slid off the easy chair and landed in a tangled mess on the floor. They continued laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Marjorie asked.

“I was thinking it would be funny if Carol and Charlie had married each other and are coming here,” Annie said.

“Oh man I have to pee,” Mark said and ran off.

“Well I better go to sleep,” Aunt Flo said and headed upstairs. The others went to their respective rooms.

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Friday Morning dawned bright and sunny.

Mark and Annie sat on an easy chair and watched TV.

“What are you watching?” Marjorie asked.

“Ancient Aliens,” Annie replied. “Erich von Däniken claimed our history was shaped by aliens. He’s famous among alien hunters.”

The back door opened and several people entered from the underground road.

“Uncle Mark,” Carol called. She ran into the living room area and scooped Mark up.

Mark wrapped his legs around Carol’s waist and hugged her back.

“Harry my man, what are you doing here?” a voice called.

“What am I doing here? What are you doing here?” Harry asked.

“I see you have finally embraced the natural way of life,” Charlie said. “Good for you.”

“Mark, I want you to meet my new husband,” Carol said. “We eloped a few months ago. I wanted to invite you but you were busy in school.”

“Yo dude, aren’t you Washington’s king or something?” Charlie asked. “Nice scepter.”

Ravenswood’s face turned red and he said, “Thanks.”

“Niece Carol, this is my girlfriend Annie,” Mark introduced. “That’s Sister Jane, Mother Marjorie and Father Ravenswood.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Carol said.

“Jane and Harry are getting married this afternoon,” Annie said.

“Would you believe it, Uncle Arthur got them a room at the town hall,” Mark said.

“That’s cool,” Carol said and lowered Mark down. “By the way Jane, is that short for anything?”

“It’s Jeanette,” Marjorie said.

“Mother,” Jane screamed. “I hate that name.”

“So you do have a two-syllable name,” Mark said triumphantly. “Now we are all one happy family.”

“Yo Majesty, are you one of the Illuminati?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Ravenswood replied. “We were excommunicated for the sin of associating with Dracos.”

“That’s too bad,” Charlie said. “What’s it like to be royalty?”

“I don’t remember,” Ravenswood said. “The Illuminati erased everyone’s memories but their own.”

“Please don’t encourage him, Governor,” Carol said. “He believes in aliens, Atlantis, and global conspiracies.”

“I don’t know about Atlantis and aliens, but global conspiracies are real,” Ravenswood corrected. “The world is filled with more secrets than you can imagine. Many are right here in New Dragonia.”

“Here’s another mystery,” Harry said. “Last Christmas we went on a private cruise with Jane’s extended family. I’ve never seen so many CEOs, billionaires and heads of state in all my life.

“More importantly, would you believe, all the adults were in their mid thirties? Additionally, all their children were sixteen or younger. There were no old people.

“Freaky,” Charlie said excitedly. “Here’s another mystery. There are no old Dracos. Everyone here is either in their mid-thirties or teenagers.”

“I know,” Hanna grumbled. “I’m 22 years old. I feel like a freak, being too old for the teenagers and too young to be an adult.”

“Can’t be helped dear,” Uncle Arthur said. “How can I be a dirty old man if I don’t have a sexy young girl by my side?”

Hanna responded by hitting him.

“Why did you choose to marry him?” Marjorie asked.

“That’s because this overweight hippy is my soulmate,” Hanna replied and patted Uncle Arthur’s ample gut. “Our souls were created to be together.”

“This conversation needs to be postponed,” Aunt Flo interrupted. “It’s time to go to the town hall.”

They headed out.

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Uncle Arthur pressed a button on his phone and a slideout extended from under the first trailer of his RV. A convertible sat on the slideout. Mark and Annie jumped into the back seat and waited for Uncle Arthur and Hanna to join. The rest of the gang entered other rides.

After driving twenty minutes, they entered a large parking facility. They got out and entered an elevator. Within moments they were outside.

A large park filled with thousands of people surrounded them.

“Good grief, what is that thing?” Jane asked, pointing at a bonsai tree the size of a skyscraper. It overshadowed a sports complex and football stadium. Hotels lined the park.

“That’s our town hall,” Aunt Flo replied. “It was built a decade ago and symbolizes the Tree of Life. It is 99 stories tall and used for celebrations.”

“We can take the steps or the elevator,” Uncle Arthur said. “Each floor has a plaque detailing one of the lessons of life, such as the importance of hard work. We are on the 42nd floor, ‘Nurturing.”

They rode up the elevator and exited on the 42nd floor. People walked around from room to room. They entered a room with a plaque saying, “Reserved for the wedding of Harry and Jeanette.”

They entered and discovered people within.

“Annie, that’s my brother Marty,” Mark said, pointing at a thirty-five-year-old man. “He’s Niece Carol’s father. That’s Paris, his wife…” Mark then proceeded to introduce other people.

Uncle Arthur went to the front and stood behind a podium. He started. “Dearly beloved, we are here to celebrate the union between Harry and Jeanette…”

The wedding proceeded until finally Harry and Jane kissed.

“Finally it’s time to party,” Uncle Arthur said and disco music began playing.

The waiting staff brought in the first course.

“Aren’t all Dracos rich?” Annie asked.

“I guess some people just like serving,” Mark replied. “See how happy they seem?”

“That’s not quite true dear,” one of the ladies said. “It’s true we enjoy serving. However, this is important training to master our life lessons. When you grow up you’ll understand.”

“Yes Aunty,” Mark said.

“Is she your aunt?” Annie asked.

“No,” Mark replied. “We kids call all adults uncle and aunty, or if they are Sister Jane’s age, brother or sister.”

“It’s important for children to be polite,” the lady said. “So who’s getting married?”

“My sister Jane is marrying Harry. I mean Brother Harry,” Annie said. “Her full name is Jeanette, but she hates that name.”

“Aren’t you the governor’s child?” the woman asked.

“Yes aunty,” Annie said. “I’m here because Mark is my boyfriend.”

“Oh my, children are dating at such a young age,” the woman said. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said and left.

“Mum, dad, can I take Annie and explore?” Mark asked.

“Okay you two,” Marjorie said.

“Come on, let’s go Annie,” Mark said and got up. “We need to start at the bottom and climb the steps to the top. There is no fixed order to the lessons. However, learning the lessons in this order tends to make later lessons easier.”

Annie followed Mark to the elevator and all the way down. The first floor had the sign, “1: Patience.”

They wandered through the floor. The walls were covered with sayings revolving around the lesson of patience.

The second floor had the sign, “2: Obedience”

The tenth floor had the first branch. They walked to the tip of the branch and climbed to the top of the branch. The top part of the branch was flat and had a railing. Both children and adults wandered around.

Level after level they slowly ascended. Finally they arrived at the top. The 99th floor held a staircase that ended at the ceiling, without any way of going beyond.

The two stood near the ceiling and Annie asked, “Why do the stairs stop?”

“This is as far as human understanding can take us,” Mark said. “Beyond this is the world of the elders. We can’t hope to go beyond until we master all 99 lessons. Come on, I bet the others are waiting for us.”

They returned to the reception hall and found the adults dancing.

“What were you two doing?” Marjorie asked.

“This treehouse is so much fun,” Annie said. “Being a Draco is the best.”

“I don’t know about that,” Marjorie said. “Mark, I didn’t know your uncle was so funny.”

“I know,” Jane agreed. “He’s hysterical. Come on Annie, Mark, dance with me.”

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Next day was the Summer solstice festival. The first order of business was the predawn meditation as everyone greeted the sun.

Following that, exalted grandmasters gave sermons.

“This is sort of like World Youth Day,” Jane commented.

Just like on World Youth Day, children ran wild on the fairgrounds as parents heard the sermons and gossiped.

Later came ceremonies celebrating summer.

Three people stepped on stage and gave speeches. “It’s time for us to join our elders,” the man in the middle said. “It was hard work getting past 99. However it was well worth it. I hope every one of you strives to join us. I hear the world of the elders is beyond anything we can imagine.”

The three got off the stage and climbed a path that snaked up the mountain side. The path became a ledge on a cliff. The three disappeared around the corner in the cliff. People cheered.

“That path dead-ends. I know. I checked,” Mark explained to Annie and the others. “Some say there is a hidden tunnel in the cliff side. Others say a door opens to another world from there. No one knows. Isn’t that cool?”

“What exactly are elders?” Ravenswood asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark replied. “My dad seems to be guiding us even though he’s nowhere to be seen. You have full access to the teachings of the clan.”

“I can’t wait to find out what my level is,” Annie said.

“You can begin the tests tomorrow,” Uncle Arthur suggested.

“Jane, Harry, have you decided where you will go for your honeymoon?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Harry said. “This was a spur of the moment thing, no thanks to this little munchkin,” he said and rubbed Mark’s head.

“We’re going to China in July 15. One of the places we will be visiting is the Huashan Teahouse,” Charlie said. “It’s on the holy mountain of Hua and is an important Buddhist and Daoist temple.”

“You want us to spend our honeymoon at a temple?” Jane asked in surprise.

“I don’t think that’s appropriate,” Marjorie said. “More importantly, I would like you to have a formal wedding before you go. Your parents should be involved.”

“Okay I’ll tell them that we are going to get married next year,” Harry said.

“Invite them over next Saturday and we’ll plan the wedding together,” Marjorie said.

“Why don’t you all go to China in July?” Ravenswood suggested.

“You think they will find another doll there?” Marjorie asked.

“I don’t know,” Ravenswood said. “However I think it’s best to go whenever someone invites them.”

“What dolls?” Charlie asked.

“Annie is collecting dolls from places around the world,” Ravenswood explained.

7. Huashan Teahouse

Some tea is worth risking your life for

Mount Hua is one of five sacred mountains of China. Considered the most dangerous hike in the world, around a hundred people a year die while journeying to the teahouse on the southern peak.

The gang stood at the base of the Heavenly Stairs. It was a staircase cut into the side of the mountain. Parts of it had chain railings. As its name implied, the staircase seemed to go to heaven.



“Let’s go Annie,” Mark called and began climbing. Annie followed close behind.

“Not so fast you two, it’s dangerous,” Jane called.

They waited for the others to catch up.

A few minutes later Harry began complaining. “Oh man, these steps are tiring,” he grumbled.

“That’s because you’re a wimpy little boy,” Charlie said.

“But we’re over a mile above sea level,” Carol complained.

“The two munchkins are fine,” Charlie denied.

“Those two never get tired,” Jane grumbled.

“The views are incredible,” Mark marveled. “China has very pretty mountains.” He adjusted his head-mounted camera and slowly looked at the vista. The ridge of the mountain was lined with buildings.

On and on they climbed, stopping every now and then for a rest. The Heavenly Stairs weren’t the longest in the world, but they were a contender.

Along the side of the path were houses dedicated to servicing the pilgrims. They stopped by one to get tea.

Finally they arrived at the gondola station, where the gondola would take them to the base of the southern peak.

The gang got on and the gondola moved forward. After a while the gondola began swaying in the wind.



“I’m scared,” Annie whimpered and held onto Mark for dear life. He didn’t say anything. Instead he gripped the central pole in terror.

“If the cable breaks, we would fall and fall and…,” Harry began.

“Shut up Harry,” Mark shouted. “You’re scaring Annie.”

Jane looked at the two kids with pale faces and said, “Stop it Harry. It’s okay you two, cable cars are a proven technology.”

“If you think this is scary, wait for when you walk the planks,” Charlie said.

Finally the long ride ended and they got off. They found themselves on a path that narrowed and ended at the edge of the cliff.

Mark turned off his camera and handed it to Annie. “I’ll be back,” he said and ran to the washroom.

“He goes to the washroom a lot, doesn’t he?” Charlie commented.

“It can’t be helped,” Annie said. “He’s going for me.”

Carol laughed and said, “I wish Charlie would go for me.”

Pit-stop completed, Mark retrieved the camera and turned it back on. He then connected his climbing harness to Annie’s.



They walked to the cliff edge and Mark looked down. Hundreds of feet below, the valley floor beckoned unwary travelers. The cliff was a sheer wall with metal poles stuck into it. Wooden planks held together by giant spikes lay on the poles. A waist-length rusty metal chain was used as a handrail. Slightly above it was a wire installed by the government. It was designed for people who had mountain climbing harnesses. Unfortunately, the wire and chain were slightly above Mark and Annie’s heads, making them hard to use.

“Remember to connect yourselves together,” Mark advised as he gazed over the edge. “We are hundreds of feet…never mind.”

“Are you two okay?” Jane asked worriedly. “This path isn’t designed for children.”

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Mark said. “I’m certain the next doll is at the teahouse.”

“How can you be so sure?” Jane asked.

“We know that we are being guided by supernatural powers. First the Atlantis stone, and then the other dolls and Uncle Arthur’s text message,” Mark said.

“But still, isn’t this extreme?” Jane complained.

“Where there is a Draco, there’s a way,” Annie said. “I don’t think we can avoid this.”

Mark reached over his head and hooked his strap onto the wire. Behind him Annie did the same.

“Why does my pee-pee always hurt whenever I’m faced with heights?” Mark muttered as he inched forward.

“Mine too,” Harry said between clenched teeth. “I’m glad I have a harness. I can’t believe half of these fools don’t have any safety equipment.”

“But this climb doesn’t require any mountain climbing equipment,” the woman in front denied.

Just then the woman sneezed and lost her footing. She screamed and fell.

Mark let go of the chain and dove head first off the planks. He grabbed the woman’s wrist with one hand and then the other. “Grab my wrist lady,” Mark shouted.

The woman trashed around for a few frantic moments, and then did as instructed. That saved her life since Mark’s grip was slipping.

Slowly and steadily the woman pulled herself up. However she wasn’t strong enough. Unfortunately, the man in front couldn’t help because he didn’t have a harness. All he could do was freak out.

Harry came around and pulled. “Damn, this is so awkward,” he muttered as he pulled on the woman’s arms. After a minute of struggling the woman finally returned to the plank.

“I guess equipment is needed,” Harry said.

The woman said nothing but nodded.

“Thank you for saving my wife,” the man said in gratitude.

“Lady, do you have a lock? This is the perfect place to put it,” Mark asked. It was tradition for pilgrims to place locks on the safety chain and then throw away the key.

The woman pulled a lock out of her pocket and handed it to Mark. Mark put the lock on the chain and handed the key back to the woman. She tossed the key to the valley below.

“Lady, why don’t you stay between Harry and Jane?” Mark suggested. “The belt connecting the two will keep you safe for the rest of the trip. Unfortunately we can’t go back. We created a monster backlog.”

The trembling woman looked at the handprint she left on Mark’s forearm and said, “Okay.”

“This isn’t over,” a white-faced Jane said. “Let’s get moving.”

Harry and Jane went on, with the woman between them.

The wooden path ended and they climbed up the cliff side. The only assistance was the rusty metal chain on the right and footholds carved in the granite.

After climbing around fifty feet, they arrived at a natural ledge. This ledge had a metal railing with red and yellow flags. Beyond was another sheer cliff with foot holes in the granite.

Finally they arrived at the backbone of the mountain. A staircase was carved on the ridge.

“Finally,” the woman sighed as she stepped onto the steps.

Breathing heavily, Harry advised, “Don’t let your guard down. I heard people fall down these steps more often than on the plank path.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jane muttered. “I’m exhausted and my legs are shaking.”

They continued up the last leg of the trip. By the time they entered the teahouse, the woman had finally recovered from the near fatal incident.

They stopped in front of the teahouse and the woman bent down and hugged Mark.

“Thank you for saving my life,” the woman said.

“Yes thank you,” the man said. “I am Greg and this is Barbie.”

“You’re welcome Aunty Barbie,” Mark said and returned the hug.

“Did you say he saved your life?” a man asked.

Greg explained the rescue.

“How can a little guy like you lift her?” the man asked.

“Let’s go inside and have some tea,” Jane suggested.

They went in and introductions were made. As more people entered they had to tell the tale again.

“I’m sorry I hurt your arm,” Barbie said worriedly. “I hope I didn’t break it.”

“Don’t worry Aunty Barbie,” Mark said. “See, my arm is fine. I may be small, but I am strong.”

“I saw you two climb,” a lady said. “I’m completely exhausted, but you and your sister are fine.”

The others nodded.

“That’s because we two are descended from dragons,” Mark declared proudly.

“Is that true?” One of the monks asked in broken English.

“That’s right,” Annie said. “We are Dracos.”

“Their abilities are crazy,” Harry said. “They always have too much energy. They also heal fast and never get sick.”

“They also don’t age,” Jane said. “They stopped aging last year when they turned ten. Even their hair is the same length.”

Barbie removed her backpack and opened it. “I bought a doll while travelling in China. I would like to give it to you. You can give it to your sister.”

The doll looked like a Chinese princess with jet black hair and blue eyes.

“This is Yuan Liu,” Mark said and handed the doll to Annie.

A moment later a strange transformation came over the crowd. They looked at the two in amazement and the monks and porters fell to the grown and bowed.

“Damn. My camera just died,” Harry grumbled. “Mine too,” another tourist added. The sentiment was repeated.

People prayed to them.

Feeling embarrassed, Annie said. “Please stop.”

“We aren’t gods,” Mark said.

“We are just kids,” Annie added.

“My dad sent us here to get this doll,” Mark explained.

“Thank you Aunty Barbie for giving us Yuan Lu,” Annie said.

“What do you need them for Great Ones?” a monk asked.

“The enemy stole the magic of the world,” Annie began.

Mark continued, “Then last year we were given a prophesy. It said…”

“‘The magic that was once lost will one day be restored, when the two shall secure the twelve,” Annie finished.

“My camera is working again but it’s too late,” Harry said, sounding disappointed.

“We found four dolls so far,” Mark said. “We just need eight more.”

“Then what will happen,” a woman asked.

“No one knows,” Jane said.

“Search the internet for the Draco clan and New Dragonia in the Cascade Mountains in Washington State,” Annie suggested. “Also search for the 99 Lessons of Life. Unless you specifically look for it, you won’t find it.”

“Magic is the hardest thing in the world, but it’s worth it,” Mark said.

“Don’t worship false gods when the true one is closer than your own heart,” Annie said.

“Where’s the toilet? I have to pee,” Mark said and walked away.

“That’s so cool,” Charlie said excitedly. “I hadn’t realized you two were psychic. The Draco clan is so cool. I’m glad I married into it. Have you been to Mount Shasta? It’s considered one of the great spiritual centers of the world, especially for New Agers such as myself.”

“Wasn’t that last century stuff?” Harry asked.

“No it’s not,” Charlie denied emphatically. “The Aquarian Age has barely started. It’ll be over a century before all Piscean influences end, provided we survive. I assure you the truth shall reveal itself in two years when the planets align. Then either the old laws shall be cast away or the human race shall perish.”

“What can we do?” a tourist asked worriedly.

“Seek out the truths of life,” Charlie commanded. “Don’t be satisfied with living a muggle life. As Annie said, don’t worship false gods, or you’ll be a slave forever. Find the true master within you. Remember the Draco clan. The Illuminati are trying to erase them from existence, so don’t be surprised if you have difficulty finding them.”

Mark came back. “Did I hear we had our next destination?”

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The gang sat in the living room and discussed the trip to China.

“It was so much fun,” Annie said. “We went to all the museums and restaurants.”

“Chinese folk religion is diverse,” Mark marveled. “Each region and town has its own variations that are bound to local communities, families and the land. They believe in ancestors, nature spirits, gods and demons. It’s a grassroots religion that has no central authority. It’s super fun.”

“Some even worship dragons,” Annie added. “I like dragons, but I don’t worship him.”

“And I like princesses,” Mark said. “Unfortunately dragons have to obey princesses.”

“I have to say the Chinese food is much different from here,” Jane grumbled.

“I prefer American Chinese food,” Harry declared. “Some of the tastes were weird and half of the foods were disgusting.”

For the next few minutes they looked at pictures on the TV screen.

“Now here is the fun part,” Mark said. “Before we start, I need to tell you something. Before we left, we talked to the good people at REI. I told them where we were going and showed pictures. They suggested appropriate mountain climbing gear.”

“Why would you need mountain climbing gear?” Marjorie asked.

“You’ll see,” Annie replied, giggling.

“Here we are wearing the gear,” Mark said. The pictures showed them wearing harnesses going around their legs. “Few people who went to the teahouse had harnesses. Those who had them only had loose fitting harnesses around their shoulders, which in my opinion were useless. Raise your hands and you slip through. Ours were safe.”

“You’re making me nervous,” Marjorie said.

“Don’t worry mum, we returned safely,” Jane assured.

“Here is the video from my head-mounted camera. If you’re ready,” Mark said and pressed a button on the screen on his lap.

The first scene showed them at the base of the Heavenly Stairs. Mark fast forwarded the trip up, stopping occasionally to point out points of interest.

Next came the gondola ride. The video showed how much the gondola swayed. “That was a scary ride,” Annie confessed. “If I could have peed, I would have wet myself.”

“I did that for Annie,” Mark said with a chuckle.

They got off the gondola and the video cut off.

The next video showed them walking to the cliff edge. “For safety I tied myself to Annie,” Mark said. “Harry tied himself to Jane and Charlie and Carol did the same. We then made sure we were fastened to the safety chain at all times as we walked the planks.”

“What planks?” Marjorie asked and gripped Ravenswood’s arm. “What are you doing at the edge of that cliff?”

They edged onto the plank path and Mark hooked himself on.

Marjorie got up and squealed, “Don’t tell me you’re going to walk on those planks.”

On screen, Mark clamped his line overhead and walked nervously on. They proceeded slowly when suddenly the woman in front of Mark sneezed, and lost her balance.

The woman screamed and fell. Mark dove and grabbed her wrist.

“I don’t want to see anymore,” Marjorie screamed and covered her eyes. Her face was white.

Mark stopped the video.

“Don’t worry Mother Van Duyn,” Harry assured. “No one got hurt and everyone returned safely.”

“I can’t believe people are so stupid as not to use any harnesses,” Ravenswood said.

“Strangely my fear disappeared when I rescued that woman,” Mark said.

“Me too,” Annie agreed. “That woman gave us Princess Yuan Lu as thanks for rescuing her.”

Harry showed the video of the teahouse. “Something strange happened when the lady gave Mark the doll,” Harry said.

“Princess Yuan Liu,” Annie corrected.

“Annie and Mark transformed,” Jane said. “Annie’s hair doubled in length and reached down to her butt. It turned a beautiful shade of pink, like strawberry ice-cream. She was radiantly beautiful. Mark’s hair turned ruby red and was equally long and lush.”

“Don’t forget their eyes,” Harry added.

“That’s right,” Jane said. “Their eyes turned purple.”

“Unfortunately I couldn’t capture it on camera,” Harry said. “Everyone’s cameras died then.”

“I don’t remember that,” Annie said.

“Me neither,” Mark agreed. “Annie looked the same to me.” Annie nodded.

They checked Mark’s footage. It captured the conversation, but didn’t show Annie.

“I’m starting to get nervous,” Ravenswood said. “What exactly will happen when we get all twelve dolls?”

“Charlie mentioned an end of the world prophesy when the planets align in less than two years,” Jane said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Ravenswood said. “We now have four of the twelve. I have faith we will have the rest in time.”

“Charlie suggested we go to Mount Shasta for a week long retreat,” Harry said.

Ravenswood turned on the TV.

“I’m Jerry of Nexus Magazine, reporting from the studio in Las Angelis. Here with me is Dr. Jerome, a leading authority on fertility.”

“Good evening Jerry,” Dr. Jerome said.

“Dr. Jerome, what is this disturbing trend in fertility you discovered?” Jerry asked.

“I analyzed the number of births reported by hospitals throughout the world and have concluded that there has been a 0.1% decrease in birth rate through the world over the last year,” Dr. Jerome said. “Most scientists think it’s because of improving economical conditions. However, I think that is the beginning of something disturbing.”

“That’s not surprising,” a man with messy hair and a cheap suit said. “The world shall come to an end in December 21, 2012, when the planets align.”

“Poppy-cock,” a scientist-looking guy sneered. “People have been predicting the end of the world since forever.”

“Then how can you explain the fact that business has been booming for fertility clinics?” Dr. Jerome asked. “Many clinics on the verge of bankruptcy now have multi-year waiting lists.”

The program continued with a back-and-forward argument until the show ended.

“This is Jerry. See you next time on Nexus when we explore the Inner World and Admiral Byrd’s journey beyond the South Pole.”

The show ended, followed by a Disney commercial.

“Hi kids, to celebrate the opening of a brand new adventure theme park in Walt Disney World in Florida, we are having a competition.

“On August 12, teams of two kids will compete for marvelous prizes, Disney cruises, one-of-a-kind dolls, and much more.

“As of August 12, must be eighteen years old or under to enter. No purchase necessarily.

“Ask your parents to log onto Disney.com to enter.”

“Did he say a doll is a prize?” Ravenswood asked.

“I’ll look it up,” Mark said and typed on his iPad. “They didn’t give any prize details. They just said we had a choice of various prizes, including a Disney cruise for eight people – presumably since there are two people in a team and possibly two families.”

“Okay Mark, let’s sign you and Annie up,” Ravenswood said.

“Brother Harry and Sister Jane can compete too,” Annie suggested.

“I think we are a little too old for that,” Jane said.

“You are seventeen and sixteen,” Ravenswood said. “That’s young enough.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said uncertainly. “My student ID says I’m seventeen, but I feel I’m 29 or so. I’ve always felt uncomfortable with the kids in high school. They are all kids to me.”

“Me too,” Jane agreed. “I’m only comfortable with the teachers and Harry.”

“All right you two, you win,” Ravenswood sighed. “However I think you’re missing out on something great.

“The only question is, why Disney? It’s not a spiritual center.”

“Well it is the magic kingdom,” Mark suggested.

“It’s more than that dear,” Marjorie said. “Disney represents the spirit of childhood. It’s a sacred place we all lose when we get older.”

“That reminds me of Maid Cafés in Japan,” Harry said. “Adult men go there, and the maids treat the patrons like children. They even have coloring books and board games.”

“I would feel embarrassed,” Jane said.

“Same here,” Harry agreed.

“We can all go to Disney,” Mark said. “We can leave on Friday evening and return on Sunday, since the contest is on Saturday afternoon.

“Mark, since we are a team, we should wear matching clothes,” Annie suggested.

“Okay Annie. That sounds like fun,” Mark agreed.

8. The Magic Kingdom

It’s a small world after all

-- Disney theme song --

August 11.

The gang arrived Friday evening and checked in. Overhead echoed the song ‘*It’s a small world after all’.*

“Let’s go to Epcot Center and then have dinner,” Ravenswood suggested.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if Dilbert were here?” Mark said with a chuckle. “He would say, ‘Mummy, can I please enter the contest? I’ll be a good boy.’”

“She would say, ‘Being a good boy is impossible for you, son,’” Annie completed.

“What did you say, jerk?” Dilbert asked menacingly. “Do you want a knuckle sandwich?”

Wally smacked Dilbert upside the head.

“Ravenswood, Marjorie, what a surprise to see you,” Coralline called. “Are these two entering the contest?”

“They are joining because they are babies,” Dilbert sneered, trying to be insulting.

“Of course they are,” Marjorie replied. “What a strange thing to say.”

Dilbert opened his mouth, and then closed it, unable to respond.

“My two nephews Bobby and Timothy are entering. They wanted Dilbert to come for moral support,” Coralline said.

“Hi,” twelve-year-old Bobby and thirteen-year-old Timothy greeted.

“Jane didn’t want to participate,” Marjorie said. “She felt she was too old. We’re going to eat. Do you want to join us?”

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Next day the gang arrived at the venue. Thousands of teens and tweens packed the space before a warehouse-sized building.

“Hello boys and girls, welcome to the contest to see who the greatest adventurer is.

“The challenge is simple. Enter the maze and find your way to the center. The first ten teams to exit will pass.

“Don’t worry. Being last to enter will not disqualify you.

“Be warned. The maze has traps and monsters to fight.”

Slowly, the contestants trickled in. Mark and Annie entered the building over an hour later. Within, five rows of people stood in front of five doors. Each pair waited for a door to open before entering.

Mark and Annie chose a line at random. Twenty minutes later they entered the door. Beyond, an animatronic pirate greeted them. He said, “Greetings me maties. I am Captain Hook. What is the worst vegetable to have on a ship? You have 60 seconds or you shall walk the plank.”

“Let’s go through all the vegetables,” Annie suggested. “We have tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers…”

Mark added, “Potatoes, onions, leeks…”

“That’s it,” Annie said excitedly. “The answer is leeks.”

“Well done me maties,” Captain Hook said. A door opened.

A multi-colored tile floor waited beyond the door. To the right was the Mad Hatter, sitting at a tea party. He said, “Greetings adventurers. Your job is simple. Cross this room and exit. If you step on a wrong tile, the queen will chop your heads off. Or you can spend the rest of eternity drinking tea with me. Have some tea.”

“Look,” Annie said. “The hatter, the cat, mouse, and Alice are all drinking green tea.”

Mark stood at the edge of the safe area and then stepped on a green square. Nothing happened. He stepped on the next green square. “Okay Annie, follow me.”

Within moments the two stepped on the safe area on the opposite side of the room.

“Well done adventurers,” the Hatter cheered. “You get to keep your heads. Come back anytime. We can drink tea together.”

The door opened into a dungeon room. Crumbling passageways led away. Kids slowly trickled into the room from four other entrances.

Off in the distance kids screamed. Ghoulish sounds echoed in the chamber.

“I’m scared Mark” Annie said, holding onto Mark for dear life.

“This is just a Halloween maze,” Mark remarked. “I’m sure that kid just fell down into a padded floor. Don’t worry. I have an excellent sense of direction.”

They spent several minutes exploring passageways when they passed two doors. One had the image of a sludge monster with a tie and the other had an image of a zombie in a skirt. The doors had the words, ‘Boil’ and ‘Ghoul’.

“Just a second,” Mark said and opened the door marked Boil. A minute later he remerged and said, “I really needed to pee.” They continued walking.

They entered a room containing a screen. A team stood on a platform in front of the screen. They chose a movie and then answered a question about the movie. The team chose wrong. The floor opened and the two plunged, screaming. They fell on a pile of cotton bales. The trapdoor closed.

Mark and Annie stepped nervously on the trapdoor.

Words appeared on the screen and a voice said, “Touch your key to the screen to begin.”

Mark did as instructed and a list of movies appeared. “Which movie should we choose?” Mark asked.

“How about the Incredibles?” Annie suggested.

The voice asked, “What drink did Mr. Incredible enjoy when going to Syndrome’s secret base?”

“Mimosa,” Mark answered.

“Correct,” the voice said and a light on Mark’s key lit up.

“Come Annie, we have six more to go,” Mark said and they continued.

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Mark and Annie emerged from the warehouse maze and stepped onto a stage. A small crowd, consisting of the parents of the contestants and reporters, stood in front of the stage.

The contestants who lost had long since gone to other parts of the park.

People waited as the tenth and final team emerged.

“Okay kids, congratulations on winning the challenge,” the announcer said. “97% percent of the teams failed to answer all the questions. Of the remaining, you were the first to unlock the secret door with your keys.”

The announcer pressed a button and numbers spun on a screen. “Team 665, you get to choose the first prize.”

Ten images of prizes replaced the number. “We’ll take the Princess Jasmine doll,” Mark said as he presented his key to the announcer. The presenter handed him the doll in a transparent plastic box.

“Why would you choose such a stupid prize?” Bobby asked in surprise.

“Team 427, you may choose the second prize.”

“Let’s choose the Disney cruise,” Timothy suggested. “It’s the most expensive.”

The remaining prizes were given away and Mark and Annie stepped down to greet the gang.

An announcer approached and said, “Congratulating on winning. Why did you choose the doll?”

“Because he’s a girly man,” Dilbert sneered. “My cousins chose better.”

“Don’t make fun of the LGBTQ community,” a woman, or was it a man in a dress, said angrily. She/he looked at Annie and Mark, who both wore identical Mickey Mouse outfits. “Are you a boy or a girl dear?”

“That freak doesn’t know if you’re a boy or girl,” Dilbert sneered and laughed. Bobby and Timothy joined.

“Stop making fun of people,” Coralline said angrily. “You’re embarrassing us.”

Mark paused a moment and said, “I was born with the Y chromosome. However my true essence is spirit. It has no gender, just like God has no gender.”

“That’s blasphemy,” Wally said angrily.

“What do you expect from a stupid Draco?” Dilbert sneered.

“God can’t be defined as male,” Mark said.

“To say God is male is to say he is an animal,” Annie continued.

“Only animals can be male and female,” Mark said.

“My two X chromosomes give me girl parts,” Annie said.

“And my Y chromosome gives me boy parts.” Mark said.

“The only time gender is important is when it’s time to have children,” Annie said.

“But to discriminate based on the role we play in procreation is wrong,” Mark continued.

“We have animal bodies,” Annie said.

“But we aren’t animals,” Mark said.

“We are after all, children of God,” both said together.

“Oh my,” the reporter said. “You two are most interesting children. Let’s interview other winners.”

“Well said,” the person of unknown gender praised. “If more people could understand that, the world would be a better place.”

9. Mount Shasta

What mysteries hide in these craggy mountains?

Only the wind may know

August 22 was bright and sunny. Summer break was coming to a close.

The town of Mt. Shasta was a small town with nothing to set it apart. They drove off highway 5 and into town. Within minutes they arrived at the hotel.

“We just booked one double-bed room,” Charlie said. “I don’t see the point in having two, since camping together is more fun. Which bed do you want?”

“I want the bed near the window,” Mark said. He dumped his suitcase on a chair near the window and Annie’s suitcase on the other.

“I don’t think mummy would approve,” Annie said with a giggle.

“It’s almost 10:00AM, time for the first session,” Charlie said. “By the way, do you two meditate?”

“Mark thought me,” Annie said. “We meditate for 30 minutes when we wake up and 30 minutes before bed.”

They exited the room and headed for the car.

“There are many different cults in the area,” James said. “Everyone views St. Germain as a great master.”

“When did he become a saint?” Annie asked.

“He’s not a Christian saint,” Carol said. “No one knows his real name. Instead he’s called either the wonder man of Europe or the Count of Saint Germain. Of course other people call St. Germain a charlatan and a trickster.”

They entered the car and drove off.

Charlie took out his iPad and read:

Exodus 3:13. Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?

Exodus 3:14. God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Charlie stopped reading, since there was no point in continuing. The words of the next paragraph, “The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” described a relationship, not a name.

“In other words, the thing within us that says ‘I Am’ is the true God we should worship,” Carol said. “God is a title, not a name.”

“A guy named Guy Warren Ballard, and his wife, Edna Anne Wheeler Ballard, claimed to have met St. Germain,” Charlie continued. “They then gave and recorded a series of sermons called the ‘I AM Discourses’. We have arrived.”

They entered a non-descript building. Charlie introduced the kids to the assembled people.

The meeting started and the meeting leader lit candles. The assembly raised their hands to the ceiling and spent ten minutes reciting affirmations. Followed that was a reading.

Eventually the meeting ended and they broke for lunch.

Over lunch, Charlie said, “They claim, people who are worthy will be contacted. Then they will gain the power to perform miracles. However, I have never seen any miracles.”

“That’s because you need to believe,” a man said. “Hi. I’m Gregory. It’s so nice to start so young. You two are blessed.”

“I don’t believe in believing,” Mark said. “It’s too easy to rationalize. If it worked, then your faith was sufficient. If it didn’t work, then it means either your Karma got in the way or because you had insufficient faith.”

“We are seeking rules that don’t require believing,” Annie said.

“What else can we do?” A woman asked. “We need to have faith until we can prove it for ourselves.”

“I believe Mark’s parents are Ascended Masters,” Charlie said. That grabbed people’s attention.

“These two have been travelling the world looking for dolls of Ascended Masters. By the way, Annie’s dad is the governor of Washington.”

By then the conversation had pulled together a huge crowd. “Amazing,” a man said.

“But wait, there’s more,” Charlie said, sounding like an infomercial. “Everyone in both their families is super rich. Also, no one in their families is over the age of forty.”

“You’re rich too, Brother Charlie,” Annie said.

“Except for my brother and me, none of my family is blessed with fame and fortune,” Charlie explained. “Also, my parents are in their late sixties and are retired. We, on the other hand, received a fortune from a long lost uncle a few years ago.”

“Do the Illuminati exist?” a woman asked.

“Yes,” Annie said. “However my extended family has excluded us from any of the secret stuff, because they hate Mark’s and Sister Carol’s family.”

“This is so exciting,” a man said. “What kind of miracles have you observed?”

“I haven’t seen any miracles,” Mark said. “The Dracos are ordinary people who seem to have more success than everyone.”

“That’s not true,” Annie said. “Remember the Forbidden Path.”

The next event was delayed because everyone wanted to know about their travels.

“I propose a change in schedule, if everyone is in agreement,” the leader announced. “These two are more qualified then I am to teach.”

“But we aren’t qualified,” Annie objected.

“Mark, Annie, we can tell them about the 99 lessons of the Draco clan,” Carol suggested.

“That’s a good idea Niece Carol,” Mark said.

“Did you say Carol is your niece?” a voice asked. That resulted in more discussions.

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Back in their room, Mark said, “That was tiring.”

“I’ll say,” Charlie said. “I was hoping you would learn from them, not the other way around.”

“It’s 9:00PM,” Annie said. “It’s time for mediation and then sleep.”

The four meditated for a half hour. Mark then took a pit stop and a quick shower. “Good night Niece Carol, Brother Charlie, Annie,” he said and slipped into bed.

Mark closed his eyes. The rest of the night went peacefully, other than the usual nightly pit-stops.

At 9:00AM, after doing the needful, they headed out.

The next few days were pretty much the same, where the gang explained the teachings of the Draco clan.

Saturday came and they headed for the mountain for an overnight camping trip.

The group sat by the campfire and chatted.

“Damn it’s cold,” Charlie grumbled, despite being wrapped in a winter jacket, hat, gloves, and sweaters.

“What do you expect?” Carol asked. “We are just above the frost line.”

“Yes, but this will make for the best sunrise,” the leader responded.

The campfire conversation turned to soul mates.

“I wish I had a soul mate,” someone lamented.

“Everyone has a soul mate,” Charlie said. “Not everyone is however blessed to find that one in a particular life time. That doesn’t mean you are bad. It just means your spiritual advancement will increase if you are separate.”

“Of course being with your soul mate is the best,” Mark said. “Isn’t that right, Annie?”

“Right,” Annie replied as she toasted a marshmallow.

“Are you saying you are soul mates?” a woman asked in wonder.

“That’s right,” Mark said proudly. “Together we shall rediscover true magic.”

“Will you tell us if you do?” a lady asked.

“Of course,” Annie said. “There’s no point in having magic powers if we don’t use them or share them with all who want it.”

“But we haven’t found the doll yet,” Carol said. “And we have to return tomorrow.”

“Trust in your grandparents Niece Carol,” Mark said. “We did find Elder Peter under the Pope’s hat.”

“That’s kind of funny if you think about it,” Charlie said. “Saint Peter was the rock on which Jesus built the Church. We then find the doll of Elder Peter on the rock, which is the Pope’s noggin.”

“You should tell that to Uncle Arthur,” Annie suggested. “I bet he’ll die laughing.”

“Come kids, we need to go to bed,” Carol said. “We need to get up before dawn for the hike up the mountain.”

“Let’s call on St. Germain to help us find that doll,” the leader called.

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The freezing predawn sky sparkled with an explosion of stars. After doing the needful, Mark and Annie waited in their winter jackets.

“Okay everyone, let’s go,” the leader called.

Mark and Annie followed the others. The head lamps gave barely enough light to see the icy path up the mountain.

After much complaining from the adults, they arrived at the destination. They put down chairs, and waited in the star-lit night.

Eventually, dawn shot light beams into the sky, radiating scattered clouds with brilliant reds and golds.

The rays of the sun converged on a block of ice near the cliff edge. The light became dazzling, causing everyone to blink.

“What was that?” someone asked as the light disappeared. Everything was back to normal.

The group continued watching the sunrise and then the leader said, “That was a beautiful sunrise. We received the energy of the divine.”

“Come on you two, it’s time to go,” Charlie said.

“No wait,” Mark said. “Come on Annie.”

“Be careful you two,” Carol cautioned. “It’s very slippery, especially near the edge.” Just then Mark slipped and Carol screamed.

“Do you have to go there?” Charlie asked.

“Yes we do,” Annie said and crawled the rest of the way to the edge.

Carol watched as the two stopped at the edge and asked, “Was it worth it?”

“Yes Niece Carol,” Mark said and reached over the ice block. He pulled something out from behind the block and put it in his winter jacket.

When they returned, Mark said, “We found the sixth doll.”

“Come on, let’s see it,” Charlie said excitedly.

Mark took out the doll and showed it to everyone.

“That’s St. Germain, the great Ascended Master of this mountain,” the leader said in surprise.

“No he’s not,” Mark denied. “This is just a friend of the family. I met his years ago, when he visited my parents. His name is Adamus.”

“Dear, Adamus is one of St. Germain’s aliases,” the presider said. “Incredible. If you hadn’t gone to the cliff edge, you would never have found him.”

“Now the question is, where do we go next?” Mark asked.

10 Doll 7

11 Doll 8

12 Doll 9

13 Doll 10

14 Doll 11

15 Doll 12

16 Rediscovering Magic

What was lost can once again be found

It was Saturday, July 2, 2011. It was time for the week long summer vacation for the family.

This was unusual because both Aunt Flo and Uncle Arthur were joining, along with Carol and Charlie.

Harry entered with his suitcase and said, “Sorry I’m late. Father Ravenswood, I got this letter in the mail and I don’t know what to do with it.”

Ravenswood accepted the documents and sat down. After five minutes he got up and said, “I need to go to the office. This is important. I need an hour at least.” A moment later he was gone.

“Why is going to the office now so important?” Charlie asked.

“I’d rather not say,” Harry replied. “Those documents are weird. I rather not say more until Father Ravenswood returns.”

The gang tried to get information but it was futile. Almost two hours later Ravenswood returned.

“Harry, I looked these documents over multiple times and they seem legitimate,” Ravenswood said, staring at Harry. “I even cross referenced these documents with archival documents.”

“Oh my god, is Harry in trouble?” Jane asked, frightened.

“On the contrary,” Ravenswood said. “According to these documents, almost six miles square of the Olympia National Forest belongs to Harry.”

“What?” everyone exclaimed in unison.

“It was so shocking I just had to triple check it at the office,” Ravenswood said. “Here, look at the map.”

Everyone stared in amazement.

“What’s even crazier is that this piece of land has the same legal status as any native reservation in Washington,” Ravenswood continued. “In other words, no tax.”

Harry collapsed on a sofa and asked, “Are you serious? I own my very own reservation?”

“That’s why I took so long to return,” Ravenswood said. “I didn’t want to make a mistake. There is only one restriction. The land cannot be sold or divided, but must instead be inherited in its entirety by one of your descendants.”

“Congratulations old man,” Charlie exclaimed and pumped Harry’s hand.

“Let’s go and check it out,” Uncle Arthur said cheerfully. “This sounds like fun.”

“I made a copy of the map,” Ravenswood said and handed the map to Uncle Arthur. Uncle Arthur gave the map to Hanna.

“Let’s go everyone,” Mark shouted.

“Yea,” Annie replied and led everyone to Uncle Arthur’s chariot. In moments they were on their way.

The gang spent the trip speculating on how Harry could have inherited such a large property and from whom.

They travelled down a forested road, then stopped at a gate with a sign saying, “Government property. Trespassers will be prosecuted.”

“That’s scary,” Harry exclaimed. “Are you sure we are going the right way?”

“I’m positive,” Hanna said.

“In that case, let me open the gate,” Mark offered. He got off and opened the gate. He then closed it when the Uncle Arthur’s chariot passed and got back on.

The government road kept its secrets as it meandered into the forest.

The forest opened out and they entered a modern city. At the entrance was a sign announcing, “Welcome to Harry City. Previous population – 587,000. Current population – 0.”

“Dude, you have your very own city. You lucky dog,” Charlie exclaimed.

Face red, Harry exclaimed, “I think I’m dreaming.”

The city was modern and in perfect repair. The traffic lights were operating and they were all green for them. The only thing missing were people.

They passed an empty park with an empty play area. “This city is so lonely with no one around,” Marjorie mused.

“More importantly, this city seems to have been abandoned for barely one year,” Ravenswood said. “There are only subtle signs of neglect.”

Eventually they crossed to the other side of the city and encountered a large wall.

“Left or right,” Uncle Arthur asked.

“Right,” Ravenswood said. “This place is tugging at my brain.”

“Right it is then,” Uncle Arthur said.

They turned right on Kings Street.

After a short ride they approached a humongous door in the huge wall. It was double the height of the wall and at least 6 stories tall.

Beyond was a kingly palace with an acre of manicured lawns.

“Drive in,” Ravenswood said. “Park in front there.”

They barely parked when Ravenswood opened the door and got out. “I’m home,” he said softly.

“Is this part of…?” Hanna began.

“No,” Ravenswood replied, cutting Hanna off. “This is not part of Harry’s property.”

“Are you all okay?” Aunt Flo asked.

“We are okay,” Marjorie replied as she followed Ravenswood into the palace. “It’s good to be home.”

They stepped into a grand entrance with large doors to the front, large hallways to the side, and sweeping staircases.

Ravenswood opened the large doors and stepped into the throne room.

The throne room was two stories high and ringed with balconies.

At the far end of the room was a raised dais containing two thrones.

Ravenswood, Marjorie, Annie and Mark climbed the steps to the dais. The others remained on the main floor.

Ravenswood sat down on the king’s throne and closed his eyes. “This feels so good.”

Ravenswood looked to the right at his wife sitting on her throne. Mark and Annie stood next to them.

At the bottom of the steps were the others. They were kneeling to them. “You may rise,” Ravenswood said and the others got to their feet.

Ravenswood got up and said, “Mark, would you like to sit?”

Mark frowned at the chair and said reluctantly, “I suppose I have to.”

Mark approached the now vacant chair and the chair shrank down to accommodate his tiny frame. However, the throne was no less impressive. He smiled at Annie sitting next to him, then at the people again kneeling.

“Why are you kneeling?” Mark asked and the others got up.

“Harry, would you like to try the throne? It’s really comfortable,” Mark asked.

“No way,” Harry exclaimed in fright. “Only the reigning monarch and spouse may sit there.”

“Then how come I can sit?” Mark asked.

“Harry is right,” Ravenswood said. “I no longer want to sit there. I guess I’m now the former king and Mark is the current king.”

“Does that mean Annie is the current queen?” Jane asked.

“That’s correct dear,” Marjorie replied.

“Come let’s explore the rest of the palace,” Mark said and joined the others at the base of the dais.

“Does this mean the two are married?” Hanna asked.

“Apparently,” Ravenswood said. “This is giving me a headache.”

Ravenswood led the others to the back of the throne room. There was a hidden passage.

“I think we are in the private suite of the royal family,” Ravenswood said.

“Hey look that’s my room,” Mark said. They stepped in and Mark said, “It’s definitely my room. See how manly it is?”

Harry started laughing as tension left his body. The gang followed.

“You’re just a kid,” Harry said and ruffled Mark’s hair.

“Am not,” Mark said angrily. “I’m older than you.”

The others stopped laughing and Ravenswood said, “So many mysteries.”

“There should be guest rooms somewhere,” Marjorie said.

“That’s a good idea,” Mark said. “We can stay here for the night.”

Mark led the way and they soon discovered the wing containing the guest rooms. A short exploration later and they found the kitchens.

“This kitchen is fully stocked and everything is fresh,” Harry said.

“How can everything be fresh?” Hanna asked. “Right, magic.”

“Come let’s get settled in and then we can worry about lunch, or should I say dinner?” Ravenswood suggested.

5:00PM rolled in and they sat down to eat in the royal dining room. The gang chatted as they ate.

“There’s a walled off hot spring behind the royal suites,” Mark said. “Who wants to go after dinner?”

“I suppose we could,” Harry said. “We have our bathing suites.”

“Somehow I don’t want to skinny dip there,” Aunt Flo said. “Bathing suits it is.”

“I’ll clean up and join you,” Harry said.

Mark ran to his room and quickly showered and changed. He then stepped out the back of his room and into the hot spring area.

The others started to trickle in as he walked around. Mark sat on a rock in the back of the pool area.

“This feels nostalgic,” Annie said as she stared at Mark.

“Déjà vu,” Jane said as she joined them.

“Kitty-cat dragon,” Annie exclaimed and hugged Mark.

“This has been quite a day, hasn’t it?” Ravenswood asked.

“Yes it has,” Marjorie agreed. “We better go. The others don’t want to join us, since this is just for the royal family.”

“There should be another hot spring here for the rest of the palace,” Mark said.

“I found it while wandering the grounds,” Ravenswood said. “Follow me.”

They arrived at their destination and found the others splashing around.

“Get in Mark old man,” Charlie beckoned. “You too majesty.”

“This is the life,” Harry announced as he relaxed in the pool.

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All of Sunday was spent exploring the palace.

The next day was bright and sunny. The gang sat in the royal kitchen and chatted.

“So what should we do today?” Mark asked.

“Why don’t we just relax?” Harry asked. “This is much better.”

“Stop being an old fogy,” Mark complained. “There’s nothing to do here and we’ve explored the entire palace.”

“Fine,” Harry grumbled as he washed up.

Back on the chariot they headed out the front gates and right on Kings Street.

The wall gave way to a gate. Above the gate was a sign saying, “Lord Harry Banks’ School of Magic and Mystery.”

They entered the open gates and found a statue of Harry with one foot on a stone and resting on a cane. The inscription read, “Lord Harry Banks, duke of Harry County.”

“Mark, I remember you mentioning a commoner may not marry a princess,” Ravenswood said. “Apparently Harry is not a commoner.”

“I’m feeling dizzy,” Harry said softly.

They drove through the school grounds.

“Look that building says, ‘Temple of Initiation.’ Let’s stop there,” Mark shouted.

They got off and followed a path. The path led to a bridge that crossed a crack in the ground.

“Freaky,” Mark exclaimed as he saw a cloud float by below him.

Upon arriving Mark pushed open the doors and stepped in. He ran to the far end of the hall and climbed onto the stage.

“Hey look there something written here on this page,” Mark exclaimed.

“How to conduct the initiation ceremony. First, make sure the twelve elders are in their rooms. Second, gather the elect into the initiation room. Third, instruct the elect to quiet their minds. Finally, cast the spell.”

“I’ll get my dollies,” Annie said and ran away.

Mark examined the wall and found the hidden door. Beyond was a simple room with a pedestal. There were eleven other rooms just like it.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” Marjorie asked worriedly.

“If God didn’t want us to do this, we wouldn’t be here,” Annie replied as she entered.

“Okay Annie, place the elders on the pedestals,” Mark instructed.

Once the dolls were in place, Mark asked, “Is everyone ready?”

The adults seemed reluctant but everyone agreed.

Mark closed all the doors and said, “Okay everyone, quiet your minds and we shall begin.”

Mark waited a few moments and then read, “In the name of God, the creator of all, we humbly ask for these elect to be initiated into the hidden mysteries of your great universe.”

Mark closed his eyes and became silent. For a moment nothing happened.

Then it happened. Memories flooded into Mark’s brain.

He remembered growing up in Dragonia and playing with the Caretaker, the animals and his friends. He remembered going to school.

Then came the time after the graduation when a strange force compelled him to turn into a sludge monster and do bad things. That and being forced to swallow the sins of the world shattered his self esteem and his world became a nightmare. His only hope was repression.

He remembered the war, and then the horrible challenges he had to face to protect the world. He remembered having to sacrifice himself multiple times without hope of reward.

Finally he remembered Ravenswood offering his daughter to him as reward. That was the key to forgiving himself.

After that came memories of his life with Annie and how they first met in a popular restaurant. He remembered going to Dragonia and playing with Annie, and then the meeting with the First ones. He remembered the Princess Challenge.

Mark looked at his fully grown body and the adult version of Annie with her purple eyes. He reached out to her and held her tight.

After a long hug Mark let go of Annie and looked around the room. Everyone present had regained their magic.

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Out of thin air Susan and Baldwin appeared.

“We are both so proud of you,” Susan said tearfully as she and Baldwin reached out to hug Mark.

Susan reached a hand out and grabbed Annie into an extended hug.

After the hug, Baldwin hugged his brother and sister. “So Author, you’re as paunchy as ever,” he said and poked Uncle Arthur in the stomach.

“Ravenswood, I know you feel bad about being too strict about the law,” Baldwin said. “However, everything you did was according to prophesy. And yes, we are eternally grateful to you for the role you played.”

“What would have happened if the Princess Challenge was never issued?” Ravenswood asked.

“The world would have gone Boom,” Baldwin replied, gesturing with his fingers.

Feeling relieved, Ravenswood asked, “So what do you think we should do now?”

“What do you know about the current world order?” Baldwin asked.

“Magic is forbidden in public,” Ravenswood said.

“Is there any place in the world you can safely practice magic?” Baldwin asked.

“How about New Dragonia?” Uncle Arthur asked.

“Bingo,” Baldwin said. “Anywhere else?”

“How about Harry County and palace grounds?” Ravenswood asked.

“And that’s one reason why I suggested you deed the land to Harry,” Baldwin replied. “These lands have powerful protections that will keep you safe from our enemies.

“Remember, the Illuminati have been working on their Master Spell since just after the fall of Atlantis. Even supreme masters aren’t immune and will be killed. That is why magic must never be done in public.

“The spell is so powerful that even the Illuminati need to be careful. By the way Mark, you helped save Dilbert’s life by your magic trick. Too bad he didn’t learn.

“The good news is private spaces can be created for all initiated people, like Arthur did for Mark and later Jane.”

“That’s enough talking,” Susan declared. “It’s time to celebrate.”

In a blink of an eye they were in the ballroom of the palace. Soft music played in the background.

Mark looked at the mountain of food and said, “I wonder why I never bothered to cast my perfected my pooping spell.”

“That was my fault,” Baldwin said. “Being forced to go for two people strengthened your bond with Annie.”

“That’s so incredibly funny,” Uncle Arthur said with a laugh that drowned out the music. “Speaking like God, pulling dolls out of pope’s hats. Baldwin, you crack me up.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Baldwin said wryly. “Humor is essential on the path we all thread.”

“Harry,” Susan said. “I want to thank you for taking care of my son. You too Jane.”

“Well someone had to take care of that ten-year-old brat,” Harry said.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Marjorie asked. “Why was Mark left alone in that big house?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Susan asked. “By doing that it paved the way for you to informally adopt Mark and allowed him to live with you.”

“It was rather hard giving you all those hints,” Baldwin said. “Thankfully you were all rather open to suggestion, allowing us to better guide you.”

The party continued on and then the music stopped.

“So Mark, it’s time for us to go,” Susan said.

“So soon?” Mark asked sadly. “I haven’t seen you in over seventeen years.”

“We know son,” Susan said as she and Baldwin hugged Mark and Annie.

“There are still challenges ahead of you,” Baldwin said. “But I know you can overcome.”

“Thanks to Mark’s life book I feel I’ve known you my entire life,” Annie said sadly. “And now you are leaving.”

“We will always love you two,” Susan and Baldwin said in unison as they faded from view.

The gang watched as Mark and Annie cried tears of loneliness.

“Cheer up you two,” Charlie said. “It’s only a matter of time before you become supreme masters and ascend.”

“Damn, I forgot to ask,” Ravenswood grumbled. “Why are Annie and Mark still ten years old?”

“It’s because we still have challenges ahead,” Uncle Arthur replied.

“Speaking of challenges, we have less than one and a half years before winter solstice 2012 is upon us,” Charlie said. “Either that is the beginning of the end or a dawn of a new era.”

“Let’s start by initiating all Dracos,” Uncle Arthur said. “Then we can look outside. Harry City has housing for half a million people. Keeping people save is our number one priority after the initiation.”

“And there is a school going to waste,” Harry added. “And plenty of kids turning sixteen.”

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Aileen stood with a group of strangers. They all had one thing in common. Each hated this world and wanted it to end.

Just like the others, Aileen received an invitation. She could obtain a new life if she was willing to give up her old life. That was a no brainer.

Now here she was, surrounded by hundreds of people from all over the world.

“Hi everyone, I’m Harry Banks, headmaster of this school,” a teenager Aileen’s age said. “You are here because you are all tired of being muggles. In a few moments I will give you the Wizard’s Initiation. Be warned. Once complete, you can never return to your old life and must forever remain a wizard.

“It is forbidden to reveal the existence of magic to the general public and is punishable by death.”

Harry’s words sent a shiver down Aileen’s spine but it also made her excited. Giving up her old life would be worth it if magic was possible.

“This is your last chance to back away,” Harry said and waited.

Seeing no takers, Harry said, “It is time for your initiation. Close your eyes and clear your mind. Other than that you need to do nothing.”

Aileen closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind as best she could. At first nothing happened. Then memories flooded her…

Aileen remembered when she was a child, dreaming of becoming a wizard. She remembered the rise of technology and how people started losing interest in magic.

She remembered her parents. They forbade her from going to magic school, claiming it was a complete and utter waste of time. They didn’t have magic and they were living happy fulfilling lives. More importantly, having a wizard in the family would be embarrassing.

She remembered meeting the Dragon’s Bitches in a park one day. Overhearing their conversation she knew she had to join them. After listening to her story they agreed to let her join. That was the last time she saw her parents.

Life after that was though but well worth it. Then was the war where she met a wizard whom she could share her love of magic with.

Then magic disappeared.

Now it was back, she was grateful her repeated attempts at suicide failed.

Aileen opened her eyes and found herself surrounded by her dear friends and husband.

“I’m glad you are all back,” Annie said as she greeted her long-lost friends.

“Group hug,” Carol called as she hugged everyone.

Aileen looked at the headmaster happily and said, “Hi professor, or should I say headmaster or what?”

“Professor is fine,” Harry said with a smile.

17 - Emancipation

Breaking the bonds of tyranny is hard –  
especially when people think those bonds  
are the will of God

Saturday, July 7, 2012 was bright and sunny, a perfect day for vacation.

Mark looked at his assembled relatives and in-laws.

“I think we should go to Dragonia,” Mark said by way of greeting. “I’m worried about the Tree of Life.”

“How do we get there?” Jane asked. “Isn’t the sea of Chaos closed?”

“We don’t need that,” Uncle Arthur assured. “The only issue is discretely leaving. Let’s drive to Harry City and leave from there.”

Everyone got out and entered Uncle Arthur’s RV. They headed out. The drive was non-descript and eventually they arrived.

“Finally,” Uncle Arthur said. “I hate having my chariot in disguise mode.” A moment later and the RV transformed into a Draco chariot.

The chariot lifted off the ground and moved towards a newly opened rift in space. Within moments they were zooming through the Sea of Chaos.

Off in the distance Dragonia came into view. It was in a sorry state. One of the branches was broken. The tree moss was missing in many places and the island was crumbling.

“Oh my god that’s horrible,” Uncle Arthur exclaimed. “I’ll park at the gatehouse.”

They zoomed down to the gatehouse and landed.

They stepped into the dilapidated structure, and Mark lost his cookies. A moment later, Annie did the same. The two raced out.

“Are you two okay?” Ravenswood asked worriedly.

“The paths are messed up beyond belief,” Mark said between breaths. “They are too dangerous to use. Also, did you see those warning signs across the corridors?”

“So what should we do?” Aunt Flo asked.

“Let’s go to the Garden,” Mark said. “Perhaps the caretaker can give us some information.”

“Might as well try,” Uncle Arthur said as he led the gang.

They zoomed upwards and an acre-wide piece of rotten wood slammed into them, causing the chariot to shudder.

“Damn that hit like a meteor,” Uncle Arthur cursed. “We need to be careful from now on.”

“I can’t believe anyone would consider the destruction of this magnificent tree to be a good thing,” Ravenswood grumbled. “Of course not long ago I was one of those fools.”

They landed in front of the North gate of the Garden and stepped out. The Garden wall was crumbling and the gate looked creaky.

*‘Welcome child. Are you ready to enter?’*

“Who was that?” Annie asked, startled.

“That is the Caretaker,” Mark replied. “It wants us to enter.”

“Caretaker, what’s going on?” Mark asked the Caretaker.

“I’ll translate for the Caretaker. It said, ‘You are seeing the folly of the human race. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. Just come in and play. You no longer need to worry.’”

“How do we stop the destruction?” Ravenswood asked.

“It said, ‘Just come in and all your questions will be answered,’” Mark said. “What should we do? There’s no telling how long it will take, and there’s a good chance we might be trapped.”

“Are you saying you could be here for days, weeks or months?” Jane asked.

“Yes,” Mark agreed. “Don’t worry. We can just summon the Princess Annie. We are always connected, no matter how far we are.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Ravenswood said.

“It’s not instantaneous,” Uncle Arthur admitted. “But it is fast at maximum speed.”

“Isn’t it dangerous leaving the kids here?” Marjorie asked.

“The Caretaker said there is no need to worry,” Mark translated. “We will never suffer and eventually our curse will be broken if we stay.”

“Can we trust it?” Harry asked.

“What choice do we have?” Charlie asked. “We are months away from the end of the Mayan calendar. We either sour to new heights or our race will end.”

The *Princess Annie* appeared in front of them.

“I guess you can return home by yourself,” Marjorie admitted.

“Can anyone think of a good reason for them not entering?” Aunt Flo asked.

Hearing no reply, Aunt Flo hugged the kids. The others added their hugs.

Mark and Annie held hands and walked towards the gate. The gate opened and they stepped in. A moment later the gate closed.

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Mark and Annie played happily together with their animal friends. The Caretaker thought them lessons in the form of games. Everything was perfect in the world.

But something was off.

“Why are we here?” Mark asked.

“To learn our lessons to be proper adults,” Annie replied.

“Is that all?” Mark asked.

*‘What more do you need to know? It’s time for a new game.’*

The new game distracted Mark and the kids resumed their games.

Time passed and this time it was Annie who asked, “We have parents, don’t we, and a sister?”

*‘Yes dear. You do have these things. In time all things will end, and then you will meet again.’*

Play resumed. Time passed.

Mark paused a moment and asked, “What do you mean, All things will pass?”

“Something about the Tree,” Annie agreed.

“Will the Tree pass?” Mark asked.

*‘Yes children, the Tree of Life will pass soon. But that is okay. Since all will return to the Source. Now let’s resume playing.’*

Again Mark and Annie let the Caretaker distract them with games – For a time.

“What will happen if the Tree dies?” Mark asked.

*‘Then all life on Earth will become sterile. That’s not important. Just play and have fun.*

“If that happens, what then?” Annie asked, starting to get worried.

*‘There will be wars and famines as the world turns to dust. Don’t you want to play?’*

“No I don’t?” Mark said angrily. “I want to know everything?”

“So do I,” Annie said adamantly. “We came here for knowledge of how to save the Tree of Life.”

*‘When a child is born, a cherry blossom grows on one of my branches.’*

The caretaker presented a branch for their inspection.

*‘When you both turn approximately twelve your blossoms will bloom and transforms into ripe cherries.*

*‘You will then eat the cherry in the presence of your loved and gain carnal knowledge.*

*‘The pit will be returned to me for maturing.*

*‘By the time you turn sixteen the pit will be ready. After your initiation, the pit will be returned to you as your magic wand.*

*‘Are you sure you want to know more?’*

“Yes,” Both Annie and Mark said emphatically.

*‘Carnal knowledge is essential for learning some of your life lessons. For example, you can never master the genders without it. The same is true for your wand.*

*‘Without both, becoming a supreme master is impossible, and so is the ascension.*

*‘You have both taken the initiation prematurely. This has permanently stunted the growth of your cherry blossoms. They will never become cherries.’*

The caretaker paused to let the information sink.

*‘A side effect is that you are both immortal. Mark experienced this when he became a sludge monster and tried to kill himself multiple times.*

Again the Caretaker paused.

*‘You have three choices.*

*‘First, you can stay here and play. When the time comes, you will return to the Source without pain or worries.*

*‘And second, you can return to Earth and participate in the suffering as the Earth dies.*

*‘Either way, your curse will break when the Tree of Life dies. However, the first choice is better.’*

*‘Come, let’s play.’*

For a moment Mark wanted to play. Instead he said, “You mentioned a third choice.”

“That’s right,” Annie agreed.

*‘The third choice is to take your cherry blossoms and burn them on the Altar of Eternity in the temple in the heart of Mount Everest.*

*‘This will break the curse killing the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life will rejuvenate, allowing humanity to prosper.*

*‘However, you will retain your immortality.*

*‘Knowing all you know, are you sure you want to sacrifice your blossoms?’*

“What do you think?” Mark asked.

“We will always be together no matter what,” Annie said.

“We choose the third option,” Mark said.

*‘Very well. Take your cherry blossoms. Remember you have until 12:00PM, Atlantic Time, December 21 2012. After that time it will be too late.*

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8:000PM, Saturday December 15, 2012.

Everyone was at New Dragonia for an emergency meeting.

The gang waited while Mark and Annie told their story.

“I can’t believe the Illuminati could be so wrong,” Ravenswood marveled.

“You shouldn’t be surprised,” Uncle Arthur said. “Why would the Caretaker have so many protections if it wasn’t important to God’s plan?”

“I hadn’t realized just how literal the name Tree of Life was,” Marjorie said.

“Maybe it’s for the best the tree dies,” Aunt Flo said. “The kids can resume their work in another world.”

“The Illuminati will realize their great mistake when it’s too late,” Ravenswood said with a grim smile.

Mark took Ruby from Jane and held her in his arms. “What about Little Ruby and the souls who want to become human?”

“But you’re talking of being trapped here forever,” Jane argued.

“We will not be alone,” Annie said. “We’ll have each other.”

“I know it will be sad to see all of you leave,” Mark said.

“But we will always have family and friends such as Ruby and her descendants,” Annie said as she held Ruby’s foot.

“Are you sure you know what you are doing?” Marjorie asked.

“How can we?” Mark asked. “We are only in our twenties. The concept of living forever and never ascending is hard to fathom.”

“But the alternative is letting the human race die,” Annie said. “There will never be another human race.”

“We only have days to decide,” Charlie said. “If only you were let out sooner.”

“Is there any way we can make you change your minds?” Marjorie asked.

“Sorry mom,” Annie said. “Even the Caretaker couldn’t change our minds. And it really tried.”

“Isn’t this place guarded?” Uncle Arthur asked, trying to change the subject. “How will you enter?”

“The altar of Eternity is in a large cavern in Mount Everest,” Ravenswood said. “It’s guarded by two protections. The first are wizards on the lookout for trespassers and automatic security measures.”

“Bypassing that shouldn’t be a problem for the *Princess Annie*,” Uncle Arthur said.

“The second is a barrier that prevents anyone who has eaten of the Forbidden Tree from entering,” Ravenswood said.

“Is it so bad to let the human race die?” Carol asked. “We can all reincarnate in another world.”

For awhile no one spoke.

“Is it so bad to let someone die, just because they will reincarnate?” Mark asked as he fed the baby a bottle of milk.

“I suppose old fogies such as the Grand Poo-bah can keep you company,” Jane said with a wry smile. “As for us, there’s no rush ascending. I can keep you company for as long as possible.”

“Thanks Jane, everyone,” Annie said and gave Jane a hug.

“Immortality isn’t so bad,” Mark quipped. “I can do extreme sports such as parachuting without a parachute. That will surprise people. I could also do magic in public without fear of the Illuminati’s curse.”

“That’s the spirit,” Uncle Arthur said with a sad smile.

“We might as well go,” Annie said. “The faster we do this the better.”

“Just a warning,” Ravenswood said. “Just because they can’t enter the chamber doesn’t mean they can’t use magic.”

“No problem,” Uncle Arthur said. “I’ll cast an invisibility spell on them so only they can see each other. I’ll activate it when they enter the *Princess Annie.*”

“Come and give me a hug before you go,” Marjorie admonished.

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Mark and Annie stepped out of the *Princess Annie*. It was pitch black, but the altar glowed with an eerie green tint.

Mark paused a moment at the altar. He was terrified. Annie held his arm a little too tightly.

After an endless moment Annie said, “Might as well do this.”

Annie placed her cherry blossom on the altar, followed closely by Mark.

“Well Annie, we will be spending eternity together,” Mark said. “But not in the way I hoped.”

“Are you ready?” Annie asked and raised her hand.

“Let’s do this,” Mark agreed and raised his hand.

Together they blasted fire onto their cherry blossoms. The blossoms vaporized.

Nothing happened for a heartbeat.

Then the altar cracked down the center. A wave of energy blasted from the altar and raced outwards.

Then alarm bells rang and lights flooded the chamber.

“It’s time to go,” Mark said. They entered the *Princess Annie* and the *Princess Annie* slipped into the ether and out of range of the Illuminati.

Epilogue

God never punishes a selfless act –   
although He sometimes seems to.

Elders Susan and Baldwin looked lovingly at their children.

“They sacrificed themselves without hope of reward, knowing they could never become supreme masters and ascend,” Susan mused. “They knew what it was like to be left behind and yet they did it.”

“A pure and innocent sacrifice, without hope of reward, was necessary to break the ancient curse,” Baldwin agreed.

“I wish I could tell them how proud I am of them,” Susan said.

“Should we tell them that by burning their cherry blossoms they have been freed to obtain new undamaged cherry blossoms?” Baldwin asked.

“And that the Pillars of Hercules were created before the planting of the Tree of Life for just such a contingency?” Susan asked.

“And they now have all the tools they need to ascend?” Baldwin asked.

“I think we should let them find out for themselves, when their bodies tell them that they are no longer babies,” Susan said.

**-- The End --**

Appendix

If the wise were as foolish as I…  
what was I getting at – I forgot?

Life Lessons

* Patience
* Obedience
* Curiosity
* Courage
* Compassion
* Temperance
* Forgiveness
* Perseverance

Dolls

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | [Religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/List-of-religious-populations) | Location |
| 1 | Susan | Illuminati | Bermuda |
| 2 | Baldwin | [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam) | Ka'aba |
| 3 | Peter | [Christianity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity) | Vatican in Rome |
| 4 | Yuan Liu | Chinese folk religion | Huashan Teahouse |
| 5 | Jasmine | Disney | Disney’s Magic kingdom |
| 6 | Adamus | [Spiritism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Spiritism) | Mount Shasta |
| 7 |  | [Hinduism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism) | October 26, 2011 |
| 8 |  | [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism) |  |
| 9 |  | [Agnosticism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/agnosticism)/[Atheist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/atheism) |  |
| 10 |  | Aboriginal |  |
| 11 |  |  |  |
| 12 |  |  |  |

Hebrew

Mayan

Egyptian

Australia

Wizard levels basics

There are no mechanical rules in magic, just paths people tend to follow.

A power level of 22 for Water and Earth allows the user to cast the remote-pooping and remote-peeing spells.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Title | Level | Skills |
| Freshman | 1 – 19 | * Learns basic skills |
| Sophomore | 20 - 29 | * Gets second form * Masters basic spells in one of the four elemental powers |
| Rookie | 30 – 39 | * Learns how to use all four base elements * Learns how to teleport items openly and at a distance. |
| Journeyman | 40 – 49 | * Can combine elements * Has natural ability to resist disease |
| Junior Wizard | 50 – 59 | * Learns to use Light and Darkness * Can teleport * Can enter the Sea of Chaos * Aging slows and our life-span doubles to 200 |
| Senior Wizard | 60 – 79 | * Learn to use void magic. * Life span increases to 1000 |
| Master Wizard | 70 – 79 | * Masters all 4 basic elements and has a firm foundation on Light and Darkness. * Aging stops and we gain eternal youth and vitality |
| Grandmaster | 80 – 89 | * Can bind other people’s second forms * Can alter reality for small groups of people. * Complete control of one’s biology. |
| Exalted Grandmaster | 90 - 98 | * Masters all 7 elements. |
| Supreme Master | 99 | * Highest level a human sorcerer may achieve |
| Ascended Master | 100+ | * Enter a world beyond human understanding |

If – By Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

But make allowance for their doubting too:

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,

Or being hated don't give way to hating,

And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;

If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim,

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same:.

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,

And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

And lose, and start again at your beginnings,

And never breathe a word about your loss:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

To serve your turn long after they are gone,

And so hold on when there is nothing in you

Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,

Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,

If all men count with you, but none too much:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,

And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

Source: https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/if-by-rudyard-kipling