

A Princess Returning Home

Beyond this world
Lies
Other worlds

By
Trevy Burgess

Utopia Now!

by Trevannon Burgess

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Sometimes
the hardest journey
is the journey home

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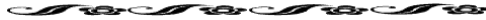
Prologue

The Old Man

There is NEVER any deviation from the stated laws of physics

- However -

I am the ghost in the machine



Bill Charming, the twelfth richest man in the world, began the Ritual of Transference. Surrounding him on five sides of the pentagram were five teenage boys, two of which were his grandsons. (For some unknown reason, both had purple eyes. With their golden hair, handsome faces and strong builds, they were popular with the ladies). The other three boys were their best friends.

Charming closed his eyes and focused on the needful. Unbidden, images of his eighty-six years of life flooded his mind.

Objectively, Bill was a successful man. At the age of eighty-six, he achieved more in the last five years than many people did in a lifetime. That was what others saw. Bill was a driven man, ever striving to fulfill his childhood dream, but was constantly failing.

He came to the belief early on that the best way to fulfill his childhood dream was to always strive for self-improvement and to influence the world in a positive manner. The belief some held that we exist here on earth to grow spiritually and the belief that we can't truly achieve our dreams until we meet our spiritual goals guided his path in life.

A decade previously, Bill created the company, *Charming Adventures*, featuring theme parks. This allowed people to escape their boring muggle lives, where life has no meaning, and where we're nothing more than meat robots.

The theme parks created virtual worlds where magic flourished and adventure hid behind every rock and bush. The biggest theme parks featured catacombs filled with traps, robot monsters and terrifying challenges. Those who completed their adventures won prizes. These

Nexus

prizes ranged from party favorites to autographed items to genuine treasures from all over the world. Successful adventurers simply never knew what they would get.

Unfortunately, the greatest prize, a portal into other realities, couldn't be given, since alternate realities don't exist. As for other worlds such as heaven or hell – that was simply the domain of poor deluded fools.

The company flourished, with parks springing up all over the world, proving everyone wanted to escape their wretched muggle existence.

Bill's successes in his various ventures made him one of the richest people in the world, but that didn't bring him any closer to fulfilling his childhood dream.

Back at the pentagram, Bill and the five boys raised their instruments of power. The two grandchildren gripped wands with Dragon crystals on the ends. The three friends yielded swords with the crystals embedded in the hilts. Bill held a staff with the jewel at the tip.

Years ago, Bill noticed that two of his 14 grandchildren had a restless spirit in them. This fostered a kinship between him and them. He helped them and three other friends form an adventure group.

Bill pushed them to the limit to be top treasure hunters and adventurers. Each mastered a different martial art, and was a superb athlete. Fortunately, they had excellent grades in school, so their parents couldn't complain.

Charming focused his attention on his Dragon Jewel – one of his lifetime endeavors.

Bill told everyone he found the formula for dragonite some forty years ago in a dream. In reality, one of his brothers gave him hints for the formula.

After that, the brother went on a journey and never returned. Before leaving, he insisted that Bill keep both his identity and the formula secret – alchemists don't like publicity.

Prologue

Unfortunately, the brother never wrote down the actual formula for Bill. As a result, it took decades and millions of dollars to produce the first crystal of sufficient purity to be practical. Bill renamed the crystals *Dragonite* for marketing purposes. The name *Philosopher's Stone* didn't seem flashy enough for him.

The Philosopher's Stone – Legend had it that it had the power to transform the world and ourselves. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. It couldn't transform lead into gold or do anything useful. The only explanation was that Bill got the formula wrong.

A secret R&D lab researched the effect of dragonite radiation on plant growth and in medicine, but so far, the endeavor was a failure. Other experiments proved equally futile.

There was only one success story, sort of –

In some quantum mechanical process, the ruby red crystals tapped into zero-point energy or the energy of the universe, when given an electrical current. In other words, you needed a battery to make it act like a battery.

The crystals drove many scientists crazy trying to understand them. They were impossible to analyze using any known method. Forcing the crystals only shattered them.

Most scientists considered the crystals a hoax. The rest of the world just ignored the stones. Only meta-physicists and the fringe community liked them and bought them despite the costs.

Being harder than diamond, and with more luster, they did make for pretty jewelry. It always grew in the shape of a twelve-sided solid called a dodecahedron, and was nearly impossible to cut. Cut stones fetched high prices. The wealthy loved that.

Back at the circle, the six stood alone in the stillness of the day. Only rocks, weeds and sand kept them company.

Bill and the five boys chanted. Two weeks in the Australian Outback and the imbibing of some undocumented substances placed them in

a state of altered consciousness. The blazing afternoon sun in the cloudless sky intensified the experience.

Bill focused his desires into the prayer as he chanted. *Please let me escape this evil universe, where purpose doesn't exist. Please take me to where I belong.* Bill closed his eyes as he squeezed out tears.

The weight of the backpack and the hours of standing and chanting exhausted him. The stifling heat didn't help. Looking around, Bill realized the five were also exhausted.

Just as it seemed his brain would explode, Bill felt a wavering in the air. Above him, swirling clouds formed and descended. The Dragon crystals glowed with a dim inner red light. On the ground, the simple pentagram reflected the glow.

Lines appeared, forming a magic circle, joining the pentagram. The lines of the pentagram straightened, imperfections disappeared. The complexity of the circle increased as more lines formed and joined. Fog rose from the ground outside the circle, but none entered. The wavering intensified. The wind howled.

The boys looked around in fear.

Weird shadows appeared in the surrounding fog. They tried entering but the barrier blocked them.

The crystals glowed brightly. The markings below glowed with the same intense red light. The sensations within Bill increased, as with the buzzing in his head.

The howling of the wind became voices calling him to join them. The Darkness within Bill's heart stirred. He felt the urge to obey the voices and leave the protection of the circle. People he knew in life and death appeared in the fog. Demonic faces joined them.

Prologue

All suffering is meaningless. All happiness is illusion. The world is just a dead machine with us trapped as flies within its cogs. Let's return the world into the Darkness that spawned it. Let's end this charade.

Bill knew he had the power to end all human suffering by extinguishing all life. The urge to obey a lifetime of nihilistic thinking was unbearable.

"No one move. Everyone stay exactly where you are. Don't think. Don't say anything. Everyone keep your eyes focused on me. I promise you we'll get through this together," Bill spoke in a soothing, relaxing voice. Since he was terrified, he knew the boys were more so. Sweat poured down his face, but not from the heat.

Bill felt himself adrift in a sea of endless possibilities, on the verge of being lost forever.

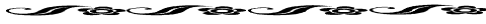
On the verge of insanity, Bill chanted, "We are where we need to be." The five joined him in the chant, focusing entirely on Bill. The tension grew - the desire to run, unbearable.

After an eternity, the possibilities shifted. The swirling moved to their will. The red light pulsed in harmony.

Just as Bill thought his brain would explode, the fog burst outward, revealing a bright sunny day.

Beyond the Gate

We travel the path of life,
not knowing where we will eventually land.



“Toto, I don’t think we are in Kansas anymore,” Grandson James commented as a bird with two heads flew overhead.

The magic circle remained, but the world had changed. Instead of the stony surface of Ayers Rock, they now stood on a foot-high circular granite pedestal, surrounded by manicured lawns. Around them were trees, a stream, houses off in the distance and animals. Most importantly, they were now in the backyard of a large stone castle.

A family celebrated a birthday party before the castle. The mother and father looked like the king and queen of a country. The father had purple hair and purple eyes. The mother had blue hair and blue eyes. The older son took after the father and the older daughter was like the mother, except their hair was lighter.

The last of the family, the youngest daughter, was obviously the birthday girl. She appeared to be six years old, had flowing waist-length hair the color of strawberry ice cream, and blue eyes that sparkled. The light danced about her hair like a halo, giving her the appearance of an expensive doll or little angel.

The angel stood before a cake with blown-out candles and stared at him in surprise.

There were servants around the royal family, but Bill ignored them. The family stopped its celebration and stared at them in surprise.

“I don’t think we should be here. We might be in a lot of trouble,” friend Larry said. “Maybe you’re right,” friend Peter continued. “I’ve never been to jail before and I would rather not have the experience,” friend Joe finished. The three friends nodded.

Beyond the Gate

The first of the residents to move was a fifty-year-old man dressed in wizard robes. He walked towards Bill's group and stopped at the base of the stone pedestal containing the magic circle.

Bill combed his hair with his fingers and ate a breath-mint. Proper grooming and minty fresh breath is important when dealing with others.

The wizard mumbled something under his breath and waved his wand. He pulled out something that looked like a Star Trek tricorder and looked at it. Satisfied, he turned towards the King as the family approached. "We seem to have guests from another plane of existence. They don't appear to be a treat to our world. I don't know how they broke through the augmented barriers we set up though. Shall I free them from the magic circle?"

"Call the palace guard first, just in case," the king commanded and handing some papers to a servant.

The family stood slightly behind the king, still in a good mood. The little angel hid behind the mother, head peeking out from behind. She stared intently at Bill. Bill looked at her and she retreated like a deer.

A few minutes later, the palace guard appeared and surrounded Bill's group. The wizard broke the circle with his hand, causing a flash of light. Bill felt slightly disoriented as the pressure equalized. He walked toward the wizard and his people grouped around him.

The wizard greeted him. "Greetings. I am court wizard Jerald. This is the royal family. That is his Royal Highness King Jason the 23rd, his royal wife Queen Jenny, their son Crown Prince John the 15th, daughter Princess Dara, and youngest daughter Princess Annie."

Bill looked for Annie, but she still hid.

The King stepped forward and addressed Bill. "Welcome to our humble kingdom. What brings you here?"

"Good day, your majesty. My name is Bill. These are my grandchildren James and Joseph. These are our dear friends Larry, Peter, and Joe. It's an honor and privilege." Bill bowed to the king and the others followed suit.

Bill looked at the beautiful angel. "I'm guessing that's the birthday girl. I hope she's having a great birthday. I'm sorry we interrupted her party."

Queen Jenny looked sadly at Bill. "Annie is shy around strangers, recently more so. The loss of her prince has been hard on her."

It had been hard on the mother too. The mother looked worriedly at her baby. Bill could see stress lines around the queen's eyes. He felt sorry for both her and the Little Princess.

Bill smiled and waved at the little girl, wishing he could give the angel a bone-crushing hug and a sloppy kiss. Annie looked into his eyes and ran toward him. She gave his legs a hug with her entire body.

Annie bawled her eyes out, crying as hard as she possibly could. She used Bill's leg as a Kleenex. "What a beautiful daughter you have," Bill commented, rubbing Annie's head.

"Incredible. I'm so glad she likes you. You're the only person she has opened up to since the incident." The queen smiled lovingly at Bill with gratitude in her eyes.

It felt good being accepted by this loving family. For the first time in his life, he felt at home and at peace. He smiled at the queen and said, "Yes Mama Jenny."

Beyond the Gate

In shock, Bill realized he was being a little too friendly with this family. After all, this family was royalty and the rulers of a country. Bill bowed. "Sorry for being so familiar to you."

Larry reached out to pat Annie on the head, but a guard stepped forward and slapped Larry's hand. "Peasants may not touch royalty without permission", the guard commanded in a stern voice. Peter and Joe rubbed their hands in sympathetic pain. That ruined the festive mood for Bill.

"I'm guessing I have permission, since Princess Annie is the one who's hugging me," Bill said, a little nervously.

The king looked at Bill, a little confused. "What are you talking about? Royalty always has permission to interact with royalty – Jerald?"

"Prince Bill and his grandchildren seem to have forgotten their heritage. In some worlds, royalty and nobility aren't recognized on sight."

Jerald turned to Bill. "In this world and many others, a person's station in life is always recognized on sight. You and your grandchildren give off an aura of royalty. Your three friends, on the other hand, are commoners, just like me. You'll soon discover this sense in a few days, when your bodies adjust to this new world."

Jerald turned to the three friends. "Larry, Peter, Joe, please allow me to give you a tour of my wizard's lab. I believe you have what it takes to become first-rate wizards. I can see your potential lying dormant inside of you." Jerald led the three away.

The queen spoke. "Prince Bill, kids, please join us in celebrating our daughter's birthday."

The king dismissed the guards and walked back to the party area. Servants took Bill and the boy's equipment.

Bill looked at his grandchildren. Joseph only had eyes on Princess Dara. Dara didn't mind. Bill smiled. *Young love*. James looked like he wanted to join the wizard. "Is it okay if James joins the others on Jerald's tour?"

The queen nodded and James ran off.

Bill placed his hand on Joseph's shoulder and whispered, "You're a prince. You are my grandson. Royalty can talk to royalty. Have a breath-mint." He gave Joseph a box of breath-mints and a shove towards Dara.

Dara smiled at him and beckoned him to follow. "Tell me about your world. Do many people use magic there? What types of dragons do you have? We'll be getting a portal into Nexus in two years, they didn't say where. It's so exciting." Dara rattled off questions and comments, without waiting for a response. Joseph followed meekly but happily.

"I'm glad Dara is getting along with Joseph. There're few suitors available for my baby and she's almost marriageable age. How long do you plan on staying with us?" Queen Jenny motioned for him to come to the tables. The king was already seated, reading a ledger and signing papers.

Bill hobbled towards the table. It's not easy walking with a little girl stuck to your foot. Getting off the foot high pedestal was a problem, until he stepped off with his free foot and swung his other foot with the girl attached to it. Annie's hair flew in the breeze. *Why do children like to ride on the feet of adults? I don't remember wanting to do that.*

Bill was a restless, antisocial child whose moodiness kept people at bay. It wasn't fun growing up, looking for someone who didn't exist, who couldn't possibly exist. It wasn't fun searching but never finding.

“We left our world without expecting to come back. We knew this would be a one-way trip – if it succeeded. I can’t believe it actually worked. I’ve wanted to travel my entire life.” Bill looked at the two walking off in the distance. “They seem good together. If you don’t mind, then I don’t mind.”

There was a saying: *it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all*. There is a reason for that. Both have the feeling of loss. However, the one who had never loved has no feelings to sustain them: no happy memories, no sad memories, no memories, period.

Bill told the queen about his life. He described how he appeared in front of his foster parents, naked and without memories. They adopted the five-year-old boy and raised him as their own. “As a child, my mother used to call me *My Little Prince*.”

Bill looked down at his foot. “Aren’t you tired sitting there?” Annie shook her head.

Bill told the queen how he married the daughter of a dictator of a foreign country for political reasons, and how he used those connections to improve the life conditions of the people and brought peace and prosperity to the country. That took three decades of hard work. He had eventually converted the country into a democracy, but he didn’t mention that. This was no time for discussing political theory.

The king nodded in approval without looking up from his paperwork. “Duty is important to a king. You did well.”

Bill felt happy at the praise, like a good little boy. “Thank you, Papa Jason.”

The king looked up at him. Bill blushed in embarrassment. He bowed his head. "I shouldn't be calling you that. After all, I'm old enough to be your grandfather."

King Jason smiled and kept on working.

Bill looked around and noticed his backpack was missing. "Your belongings have been moved to the master guest room in the Royal Suites. The belongings of your two grandsons have been moved to their respective rooms," a servant girl said. "I've been assigned to you as your personal servant for your stay here. Please tell me your needs." She bowed.

"Thank you my dear," Bill smiled at her. She blushed and hurried away to help clear the tables. *I wonder where the other three will be staying*, Bill thought. He looked at the sky. It was evening.

A servant approached the queen. "Your Majesty, do you wish to eat dinner inside or here?"

The queen looked at Annie and said, "Today is a good day, and I don't think my daughter wants to move."

The servants set the table. Garden lights turned on. "Come on Annie, it's time to eat." Bill patted Annie on the head.

Annie shook her head, "I'm not hungry."

"Come on Annie, why don't you eat with me? You can sit on my lap." Annie got up on Bill's lap but refused to touch anything.

"It's next to impossible to get her to eat. We've had to rely on magic to keep her stomach full," the mother apologized.

Bill held Annie tightly to him and stuffed food into her mouth. The queen stared in disbelief as Annie accepted the food. However, she

did balk at the broccoli. "Don't worry about the broccoli. We'll feed it to her intravenously," Mother said.

Bill decided to tease Annie a little. "You need to eat all your food or the demon might take me away from you."

"Noooo," Annie cried, with tears flowing down her face. She grabbed all the broccoli pieces she could find and rammed them in her mouth, and ended up choking.

Bill felt bad for teasing her. "I'm sorry baby love for teasing you. I promise you, no one will get me." He hugged her until she calmed down.

Queen Jenny looked worried. "Last year on her last birthday, a demon appeared and attacked Prince Mark. The demon disintegrated Mark with a fireball before anyone could stop him. We killed the demon, off course, but it was too late. Mark, Annie's destined one was gone."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," Bill apologized.

"The kingdoms of Rosette and Blears have been at war for decades. Seven years ago, our countries decided on a truce. Our kingdoms decided on a royal marriage to bind our countries."

The king sat back, thinking about the past. "The king and queen of Blears decided to have a son and we decided to have a daughter. At the time of their conception, we bound their fates together. It was quite a ceremony."

"It was really hard on Annie when Mark died. She refused to talk to anyone and she stopped eating. She also got nightmares," the mother continued.

A tear ran down Bill's cheek as the story reminded him of the emptiness he felt growing up, except he never lost anyone he knew

of. "I'm sorry baby girl," Bill whispered in Annie's ear. He hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek.

Mama Jenny looked at her husband. "It was selfish binding their fates like that."

"I know. Who would have thought that that demon could break through all those barriers? We will be paying for that mistake soon." King Jason looked at Bill. "Both our kingdoms are now on the verge of war. Blears blames us for the loss of their son, since he died on our watch. I don't blame them. We would be making war with them if our baby was killed while she stayed at Blears kingdom."

"Perhaps I can help. I have experience negotiating with various parties," Bill offered.

"Are you sure?" Papa Jason asked.

"I have no attachments," Bill replied, "Might as well be of service."

Papa Jason smiled in gratitude. "We'll be leaving for Blears in a month for a last try at negotiations. You have no idea how much their citizens loved Mark, or how angry they are at us. The only reason why we aren't currently at war is that they have been officially in mourning. That ends today on his birth and death day."

One of the ladies in waiting approached. "Princess Annie, it's time for your bath. It's almost bedtime."

Annie wasn't happy. "I don't want to take a bath. I want to stay with Grandpa," Annie pouted, holding Bill's hands tightly.

"Would you like to take a bath with Mark...I mean Bill?" Mama Jenny asked.

"Yay," Annie cried happily. She clapped her hands and bounced up and down.

Beyond the Gate

"Are you sure that's a good idea? You don't know me or what kind of person I am," Bill asked, concerned.

"I don't know why, but I trust you completely with our daughter. It's as if you're part of our family. Your grandson, I'm sorry to say, is a different story. Teenagers have a tendency to get into trouble. Where are your grandson and my beloved daughter?" The queen looked at a servant. "Send someone out. Tell them it's too late in the night to be out alone."

Mama looked at Bill and Annie. "Come on you two. It's time for a bath."

"Yes ma'am," Bill responded reluctantly. *Why is the queen treating me like a child? I'm old enough to be her grandfather.* He didn't say that.

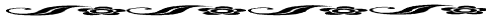
"I have a problem. I don't know how to give her a bath," Bill complained.

"That's okay. Annie's nanny, Susan, will help you out. That is if you don't mind being naked with her. Off you go." The queen dismissed them and left for her room.

That was a weird turn of events.

Bath Time

Nobility really do live
in a different world then commoners.



Alone with Susan and Annie, Bill commented, "I don't mind. However, I think Susan might." Bill ate a breath-mint and gave one to Annie.

"I'm used to giving baths to nobility. Please follow me, my Prince." Susan smiled at Bill and walked away, swinging her hips.

"Come on, baby love," Bill said and picked Annie up. He reluctantly followed Susan, knowing he would regret it. He never expected the queen to command him to take a bath with both a sexy young woman and a six-year-old girl. Bill felt like a pervert. The nobility really do live in a different world then commoners.

Bill stepped into Annie's bathroom. It was a Japanese style bathroom. A hot tub filled with bubblegum scented water took up half the room. Next to the tub was a shower with several stools. There were the usual toiletries. In addition, toys little girls liked playing with while taking baths filled the room.

"Okay, my Prince, undress Annie and place her clothes in that hamper," Nanny Susan said. Bill did as instructed.

"Now I'll undress you," Nanny Susan said and began undressing him. Annie tried to help.

"Wait a minute. I have equipment in my pockets. I think it'll be easier if I did it myself," Bill complained. Both reluctantly backed off.

Bill turned his back to them and hurriedly undressed. He left his clothes on the floor. Once done, he quickly went to a stool and sat down. He covered his junk as best he could.

Bath Time

Undressing in front of the two embarrassed him. He had no choice. Like everyone else, Bill had a slight reverence for royalty and had to obey.

"Would you like to undress me, big boy?" Nanny Susan asked in a sexy voice.

Not in front of a child. "No thanks, I'll let you do that," Bill said quickly, making sure not to look at her.

"You shouldn't be so shy, big boy," Nanny Susan said and stripped.

Bill couldn't understand how he got into this embarrassing situation. Being alone with Annie was fine, since she had no body. She was like a little disembodied head. Being alone with Susan would be fun, since she had a sexy body. Putting them together spelled trouble.

"It's time to give Annie a bath," Nanny Susan said and handed Bill the soap.

Annie spread her arms out and stared at Nanny Susan. She knew Nanny Susan was flirting with Bill and didn't like it. Bill washed Annie's arms and legs, back and front.

"Don't forget her pee-pee and bum," Nanny Susan said, sitting between the two.

"Are you serious?" Bill asked. You normally only do that to children under two years old.

"Off course," Susan murmured. "She's a princess, after all."

"Is that fine with you Annie?" Bill asked. Annie nodded and waited. She stared angrily at Nanny Susan. Bill reluctantly complied.

"Now it's time to wash Annie's hair." Nanny Susan handed Bill the shampoo.

Finally, something easy to do...

Annie presented her back to Bill. He focused his attention on her hair and washed it. While washing Annie's hair, Bill realized something important. Annie's hair was beautiful, but it was a pain to take care of.

Nanny Susan whispered in Bill's ear while Annie was distracted. "Now it's time for me to wash you, my Prince."

Nanny Susan washed Bill's back and he tried his best to ignore her.

Next, Nanny Susan washed Bill's chest in a sensual manner, rubbing her breasts against his arm. He couldn't ignore that. Bill's body reacted to Susan's closeness and strong feminine scent. Susan noticed it and smiled. "Not in front of the princess," she whispered huskily. "Perhaps we can do it after she goes to sleep."

Bill stopped washing Annie's hair. "Are you sure you want to do it with a wrinkly eighty-six-year-old fart?" Bill asked, wishing he could end the uncomfortable experience.

Susan looked down below. "Believe me, big boy, you're a lot nicer than many of the nobles I've done it with. You take good care of your body. One noble I met, I think he was wider than he was tall."

Susan guided Bill's hand to her breasts, expecting more than just a bath. Bill wasn't sure how to react. Nothing like this ever happened to him in his entire life.

"Grandpa, you're supposed to be washing my hair," Annie scolded Bill, with fists on hips.

Bill pulled his hand away, feeling guilty. He felt he had just cheated on his wife, and his wife had caught him red-handed. That was stupid off-course. His wife died decades ago. As such, touching another woman wasn't adultery. However, the feeling of guilt remained.

Bath Time

Bill remembered his former life. Although always faithful, Bill never thought of the mother of his children as being his wife. She was just someone who lived with him, and helped his political career. Making love to her was only for practical purposes. Even then, he felt like an adulterer.

"If you don't mind, I'll wash myself," Bill said. He got up and quickly showered. Nanny Susan was disappointed but didn't interfere.

Bill sat back down and looked at Annie's face. "I'm sorry, baby love," he apologized. He turned Annie around and resumed washing her hair. The tension Bill felt made his muscles sore.

"Would you like to bathe me, big boy?" Nanny Susan asked.

"No thanks. I'll let Annie do that for you," Bill said.

Nanny Susan frowned and washed herself.

Bill finished washing and rinsing Annie as per instructions. Susan said, "It's time to enter the hot tub."

Bill entered the tub and sat on a side seat. Susan tried to sit on Bill's lap but Annie beat her to it. Neither Annie nor Susan was happy about the situation.

Susan surrendered to Annie and sat beside Bill. She wrapped an arm around Bill and told him about the history of the castle.

Bill hugged Annie, wishing he had pants on. Maybe he should leave this perverted world and try another world. Then again, the demons waited for him. He knew he was vulnerable to them.

"It's time to get out of the tub," Susan said. Bill was grateful to exit.

Bill quickly dried himself and put on the provided pajamas. He dried Annie and dressed her, while Susan dried and dressed herself.

Susan led them to the family room, bowed and left.



Bill looked around. Annie's family was there – mother, father, brother and sister. Bill's two grandsons were there as well. Dara and Joseph sat next to each other, holding hands. "What happened to Larry, Peter and Joe?" Bill asked.

"Jerald found a place for them to stay. The last I heard, they went on a pub crawl," James replied.

Bill frowned. "They're underage. Their parents won't be pleased with me. I'm glad you didn't join them."

"Yes Grandpa," both boys said in unison.

Bill sat on the couch and Annie sat beside him, yawning. "Annie really loves you," Queen Jenny said, looking fondly at her daughter.

"I don't know why. It's not like I'm Mark," Bill said, with a little resentment. Secretly he wished he were Mark.

Bill yawned. He hadn't realized how sleepy hot tubs could make a person. He got bleary eyed and almost nodded off. "Can someone please tell me where I'm supposed to sleep? This old man is exhausted. That bath felt good."

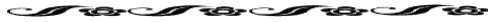
"Come on, you can sleep with me." Annie grabbed hold of Bill's hand and led him off. Bill followed without question. He wasn't awake enough to argue.

"Good night mum and dad, we both love you," Annie and Bill said in unison as they left the room.

Bill allowed Annie to lead him to a bed. He flopped himself onto the bed and was out like a light.

Vacation Time

Desire is what drives the Circle and moves the world



Bill woke up and found himself in a little girl's room. Dolls, makeup and things girls loved filled the room. Bill felt a tiny body pressed against him. He yawned, stretched and got up from bed. He hadn't felt this good in years.

He looked at a painting on the wall of a little boy with green hair and purple eyes. "Cute kid," Bill commented aloud. The child in the picture fit well in this anime-like world.

Where did the serving girl say his stuff was? It was the Moldova room. Bill stepped into the corridor. He took a left corridor, then a right corridor, and then stopped at a door marked "Moldova".

Bill opened the door of the master guest room. His backpack lay on a table near the bed. Bill took a whiz, shaved, brushed his teeth, and changed. Satisfied with his minty fresh breath, Bill stepped out of the room and headed for the dining room.

He found James and Joseph wandering the corridors. "Grandpa, we can't find the dining room." Being typical boys, they didn't ask the residents for directions.

"The dining room is down that corridor and to the left," Bill told them.

They looked skeptically at him. "How do you know where the dining room is? Did someone give you a tour of this place?" James asked.

"No I don't know where the dining room is, but it should be there. It's simple logic." They followed him reluctantly. Time proved Bill correct. The dining room was exactly where he assumed it should be. "See? I told you. This is how a palace should be built."

Just then they heard Annie screaming, "Grandpa, where are you?" She seemed to be in a state of panic. Bill took a deep breath and called out, "Here I am. I'm in the dining room."

A few seconds later, Annie crashed into Bill's leg. She cried her eyes out. "I thought the demon got you again."

"Again?" James asked. Joseph shrugged. Bill ignored them.

"I'm sorry love. I should have woken you up when I got up. Come on, time to change and brush your teeth." Bill guided Annie to her room.

A flustered lady in waiting followed them. Bill watched as Annie changed and brushed her teeth. He felt uncomfortable when Annie insisted he be present when she went to the washroom. She was terrified he would abandon her.

Hands washed, they headed to the dining room. They met the family there and everyone sat down for breakfast. The king sat at the head of the table, reading various documents.

The queen looked annoyed. "Dear, do you have to work during breakfast?"

King Jason glanced up. "This country won't run itself. Besides, we have a war we need to prepare for."

Bill looked at both. "Is there anything I can do to help you, Your Majesty? I am experienced in leadership and administration."

"Thank-you for your kind offer, but there's no need since you're our guest." The King sipped a cup of tea.

"Hey Grandpa, why did you call Dara's parents *Mum and Dad* last night?" Joseph asked.

Bill frowned at them. "I never called them *Mum and Dad*."

Vacation Time

"I remember you said, 'Good night Mum and Dad, we both love you'." The others agreed that that was what he said.

"Nonsense, I would never say that to someone half my age, especially to someone not my parents."

"Bill, you look younger than I remember seeing you yesterday," Queen Jenny commented. There were nods around the table.

"That's because I was exhausted yesterday. Dimensional transportation isn't easy, especially for an old man such as me. Besides, I had an incredible night's sleep. Also, I just shaved. Shaving always makes a man look younger." Bill realized he was justifying himself. He did seem younger to himself when he looked in the mirror. His complexion was better at least.

Bill looked at Annie. "Come on baby doll, you need to eat. You want to grow up big and strong just like your Grandpa, don't you?" Annie ate like an obedient child.

After breakfast, the queen suggested Bill take a tour of the capital. Bill got up and spoke to the queen. "I'm worried about Annie. I think she's getting too attached to me. I'm not sure if that's a good thing for her."

"I'm sorry if she is bothering you. She hasn't been happy since the incident. Yesterday was the first time she ate in a year. Please bear with her," the queen apologized.

"Don't misunderstand me. She's no bother. I mean, how could anyone so cute and lovable be a bother? I'm only worried about her welfare," Bill said, not wanting to offend the queen.

The head butler commented, "Pardon me for intruding. I have some experience in such matters. From my experience as a former grade school teacher, her attachment to the prince is only temporary. She

will treat you like any other member of the family soon enough, when she fully recovers from her trauma.”

Bill bowed to him, “Thank-you for your advice. I’m sure she will be sick of me soon enough.”

“Come on Grandpa, let’s go.” Annie grabbed Bill’s arm and pulled him towards the door.

Bill bowed to the king and queen, “Majesties.” He allowed Annie to drag him out the door.



“I need something from my bag before we go out,” Bill said and headed for his room.

In his room, Bill took out his net-book. “I need to check something real quick.”

Bill waited for the computer to find a network. The little spinning circle took forever to disappear. In frustration, he placed his hand over the keyboard and scolded the machine, “Come on already!”

Just then, the machine found a network. He sent a quick message to some friends telling them that he would be out of touch for an unknown length of time. He also sent the boys’ parents a message saying they were fine and having fun. He promised to send them pictures.

Bill put the net-book, camera, flashlight, folded staff, and a few other things into a daypack and headed for the door.

Where would Jerald’s lab be? Bill wondered. It didn’t matter. He’d find it soon enough. Being a man, he didn’t need to ask for directions.

Vacation Time

Bill negotiated the windings of the castle. He entered the door to a tower and climbed up several floors. Jerald stood in front of him, talking to an assistant.

Jerald looked at Annie, "Thanks Princess for bringing him. Prince Bill, I wanted to invite you on a tour of the city. I know the citizens would love to meet you. Your people are in the other room and ready to go.

"Oh, before I forgot, the king and queen have given you an allowance. Here it is." Jerald handed Bill a bag.

Bill opened it and found various forms of currency. "I need to thank the king and queen," Bill commented. "Can you please call me Bill? I find it embarrassing when people call me Prince."

Jerald smiled, "You'll get used to it Your Highness."

The others heard him and stepped into the room. Joseph called out, "I tried to find you but you were nowhere to be seen. Did you get lost? This castle is confusing."

Bill frowned. "I didn't get lost. I just decided to wander around the castle and eventually found myself here. I like this castle. It would be fun playing hide-and-seek here, don't you think baby girl?"

"Yup, Mark and I did that all the time."

"By the way, I sent emails to your parents, telling them you were going fine. I promised them plenty of pictures. Of course, I didn't tell them where we were," Bill said and paused. "Come to think of it, how did I connect to the network? We should be out of range. We can figure that out later. The important thing is that we have reception."

Jerald looked as if he was going to ask a question but changed his mind.

“Lead the way Wizard Jerald. Do you know what science is?” Bill asked.

They followed Jerald out of the wizard’s tower, out of the castle and down to the surrounding town.

Jerald muttered something under his breath, thinking deeply before answering. “Science is a methodology used to understand the world we live in. We have many branches of science – physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology, astrology, meta-physics, para-biology, meta-chemistry... The list goes on.

“As you know, the ancients were able to create dragonite and seed it into the molten mantle of the earth because of their mastery of meta-chemistry. Too bad we don’t know how they did that. It’s so difficult to find a good source of crystals. We must import most of it through Nexus.

“Then we have the applied sciences, which include the engineering disciplines. They use the knowledge of physical laws and various methodologies to create practical solutions to everyday problems.

“Then we have the magical arts. Just as technology is based on physical laws, magic is based on meta-physical laws.

“There is elemental magic, which includes fire, water, earth, air and void. Then there is healing, repair magic, transformational magic, creation magic... What else is there?

“Anyways, each of you has shown great potential for yielding magical power. You proved that by shattering the barrier between worlds and coming here. That, believe me, is an unbelievable feat. If everyone had that ability, we wouldn’t need Nexus. Then again, if everyone did have that ability, the fabric of reality would probably unravel. Travelling outside of Nexus is bad.”

Curious, Bill asked, "How bad?"

Jerald scratched his chin. "I don't know. It could open the door to demons at the least. I'm surprised people from Nexus haven't arrived to investigate your breech."

"Are we in trouble?" Larry asked. "Will some galactic cops come and throw us in prison?" Peter continued. "I don't like prison clothes," Joe finished. The three nodded.

"I don't know. They're a mysterious group. Even those within the organization don't know who the higher-ups are or what they think or do."

They entered the market area. Stalls lined with fruits and vegetables waited for customers. Vendors peddled household products. Others sold magical elixirs alongside TV sets and washing machines.

Being around 9:00 AM, people milled around. Shopkeepers sold their wares.

Jerald looked at the clock tower at the center of the square. "Why don't we meet at that fountain at noon for lunch?" They agreed and everyone dispersed into the crowd.

Bill wandered the market area. People stared at him and at the princess quietly following him. They stopped at a stall selling candies.

"I need breath-mints," Bill said. "Mine are over."

Annie ran into the store and brought out a mint dispenser shaped like a frog wearing a crown. Bill paid for it and they stepped out of the store.

Bill pressed a button. The frog went "Reedeep" and stuck its tongue out. He gave a mint to Annie and ate one. The mints were good. They reminded him of mints he ate as a child.

They returned to the common area. People filled the area. Many whispered. One old lady commented, "That's the prince who made our beloved princess happy."

Bill frowned. People could misunderstand that statement, although he knew their comments were innocent. Annie was just enjoying the company of someone she viewed as a lost grandfather.

Years of training took over. In a strange location, the first thing to do is to establish contacts. Bill walked over to the old lady. "You love the Princess, don't you?" He smiled at her.

"Hi, I'm Mark...I mean Bill." Why did he say Mark? Bill liked that name. Somehow, it seemed magical, representing something he yearned to be. Bill always used it for the main character whenever he wrote stories.

The old lady looked embarrassed. "Yes Your Highness. She's very precious to us. Everyone mourned with her when her prince passed away. Now she's happy again and we're grateful to you."

By this time, a crowd surrounded them. Bill secretly enjoyed being the center of attention, even though he found it tiring.

"Hi everyone, I'm Bill. I travelled here because I was bored with the place I was in before. I've been here less than a day, but so far, I like what I see. I can't wait to explore the rest of your world. I'm pleased to meet all of you." Bill bowed to them.

"Hey Mark, come here." A voice yelled from behind. Startled, Bill turned around. A woman called to a man and waved. The man waved back.

Bill turned back to the people. "Is there any place you recommend I visit while I'm staying here?"

Vacation Time

Several people gave suggestions. Nearby was a lake with a waterfall. People go there to hear the mermaids sing. In the city were the catacombs of an ancient civilization. Bill liked that.

“Do you have any guides? I would love to explore your underground city.” Bill looked around.

“That would be Randy. He knows the place better than anyone does, since he has almost lived most of his life down below. Come, I’ll lead you to him,” someone offered.

Bill was about to follow, when he remembered he was waiting for his companions. “Sorry, I can’t right now. I have an appointment to meet my friends at that fountain at noon. We can go after lunch.”

Bill talked to the town’s people to pass the time. He looked down at Annie. She was bored, or at least Bill assumed she was. “I wish there were children Annie’s age she could play with. She should be running around and getting into trouble, instead of hanging around with a boring old fart like me,” Bill said to no one in particular.

“Grandpa, you’re not boring,” Annie commented absent-mindedly.

“Note she didn’t disagree that I was an old fart.” The others laughed self-consciously, not sure how to respond. They didn’t think he was an old fart, but were not used to arguing with royalty.

Near noon, the others trickled in. Bill mentioned the underground tour and suggested they try it. “That’s not a bad idea. I’ve always wanted to do that,” Jerald said.

They headed over to a nearby restraint and ordered lunch.

During lunch James commented, “That waitress is cute.”

“James, Joseph that reminds me. I need to warn you, the ladies here are aggressive. Nanny Susan tried to seduce me in front of Annie. The

fact she tried to seduce me proves how badly she wanted to do it with a prince,” Bill said. That got everyone’s attention.

“That’s not true,” Larry said. “The reason she tried to seduce you was because you’re such a hunk,” Peter continued. “You’re a studly man,” Joe finished.

“Please boys, I’m older and more wrinkled than a pile of feta cheese. There’s no way anyone would want to do it with me,” Bill said.

“That’s not true. I want to do it with you,” Annie said. “Do what with you?” she asked, looking confused.

“Play hide-and-seek with me,” Bill said.

“I love playing hide-and-seek. It’s so much fun,” Annie said.

“You don’t need to be a prince to seduce these ladies,” Larry said. “You just need good looks and charm, which is what I have,” Peter continued. “And they’ll be putty in my arms,” Joe said. The three agreed they were studly, but not as studly as Bill.

Bill ignored the three. “Boys, I’m sure you’ve both been approached. I can’t prevent you from having fun, but please take precautions. You don’t want unintended pregnancies. Remember boys, we’re p...p...We have responsibilities that others don’t share.”

“I can solve that problem for you,” Jerald said. He produced three rings from his pocket and handed them to James, Joseph and Bill. Bill examined his gift. It was a tiny band of metal with writing too tiny for Bill to read. “Just place them on your left ring finger and you’ll be protected from STDs and unwanted pregnancies. Chastity rings for everyone.”

“Look, we have them too,” Larry said. “We got to use them last night,” Peter continued. “They’re the best friend a stud can have,” Joe finished.

Vacation Time

James and Joseph slipped them on. Bill didn't know what to do with his. He didn't need it, unless Nanny Susan tried to seduce him again. Bill remembered she also wore such a ring.

Annie noticed that she was the only one who didn't have one. "I want one too. I want a chastity ring also," she said, a little too loudly.

All conversation stopped and everyone looked at her. "I'm sorry baby love, but that's for grownups only," Bill tried to explain.

"But you have one. How come you have one and I don't?" she asked, pouting. She was so cute when she did that.

"Because he's a grownup, Princess Annie," Jerald said.

"No he's not," Annie complained. She looked down and crossed her arms in a classic anger pose.

Bill felt good when Annie called him young. He didn't feel like arguing. Instead, Bill handed the ring back to Jerald.

"Look baby girl, I don't have one. See," he said and showed her his hands. "Jerald you didn't give me a ring, did you?" Bill looked at Jerald and shook his head.

"That's right, Prince Bill doesn't have one," Jerald said.

"That's right," Larry said. "Only us grownups have then," Peter continued. "Bill is too young," Joe finished. The three laughed.

Bill felt like a little kid. He hated when others questioned his age or limited his freedom. "Remember boys, I carried you when you were babies."

"We were cute babies," Larry said. "Hot sexy babies," Peter continued. "With big muscles," Joe finished. They argued about how great they were as babies.

Lunch ended. The waitress went around the table, taking orders for dessert. When it came time for Bill to order, Annie piped in, "Strawberry ice cream."

Startled, Bill replied, "Err yes, strawberry ice cream."

"You always order strawberry ice cream. You're so boring. Wouldn't you rather have something like this?" James pointed at his chocolate sundae.

"Grandpa likes strawberry ice cream because it reminds him of me," Annie replied with a straight face. Annie ate mint ice cream.

Bill laughed and the others followed. "I don't think so baby girl. I've loved strawberry ice cream since long before you were born – decades, centuries, millennia."

Annie giggled, "You're not that old, Grandpa." *Maybe not, but sometimes it felt like that, especially when I have yet to achieve my childhood dream.* Bill winked at her.

Meal finished, Bill paid the bill. They formulated plans for the rest of the day. First, they would go sailing on a nearby lake, then go visit the Underworld.

Bill took out his frog prince mint dispenser and pressed the button. It went "Reedeep". He gave a mint to Annie and ate one.

The three friends saw it and had to comment. "Jerald, you were right for not giving him a chastity ring," Larry said. "He's too young for it," Peter continued. "Way too young, the little baby," Joe finished. The three laughed.

Bill blushed red. Those three were annoying sometimes. He got up and left the restraint. The rest followed.

Vacation Time

“Hey Annie,” Larry said. “Do you know how old,” Peter continued. “Bill is,” Joe finished.

“He’s six years old, just like me,” Annie said proudly. She walked beside Bill and held his hand. The three friends fell on the floor and rolled around, laughing. Even James and Joseph couldn’t help but laugh. Jerald tried his best to hide a smile.

The three laughed and teased him for the next five minutes. Bill endured in silence.

They left the town and followed a trail lined with flowers. Animals scurried across the trail. The creatures resembled animals on Earth, but most didn’t. A brown squirrel-like animal charged down a tree trunk and entered some grass. It turned green and ran off.

The trees too were unusual. One had diamond shaped leaves. Far off in the distance was a black tree with black leaves. “Shouldn’t that tree be further north?” Bill asked.

“Yes. It’s unusual to see such trees so far south. How did you know? Aren’t you new to this place?” Jerald asked, staring at Bill.

“I assumed since it was black, it would be growing in dark places. You would think there was too much light for it to survive here.” Bill walked on, enjoying the comfortable surroundings. The scent of freshly fallen leaves filled the air.

“Come on Annie, I’ll give you a piggy back ride.” Bill picked Annie up and placed her on his shoulders. Annie’s hair blew backwards like a cloud. Bill trotted out into the woods and the others followed behind. The fresh air, the sun, the soft earth all rejuvenated his soul. It felt like he spent his entire life exploring these hills.

“Please slow down, my Prince. I’m not as young as I used to be.” Jerald huffed, trying to catch up.

Bill laughed. "Stop talking like an old fart. I'm 30 years older than you, I'm carrying a little princess on my head and I'm perfectly fine. Boys, why don't you stay with the wizard? I'm going ahead. I have the intense urge to run."

Bill took off, with Jerald resting on a tree and holding his side. "I love this world," Bill shouted aloud.

The trail split. One path went straight ahead. This was well worn. The less used path headed to the left. It was little more than an animal trail. Bill chose the less used path and discovered why few people used it. Branches blocked the path. It was fine for people under five feet tall, but not for adults.

Bill put Annie down, bent over and scurried under a branch. He regretted taking the path after walking less than 100 feet. Branches constantly hit him in the head. That ended at a base of a cliff. They both scurried up the cliff, each finding hidden hand and footholds.

They arrived at a small ledge overlooking a crystal-clear lake. Far off in the distance were snow-capped mountains. Streams flowed into the lake. At the far end of the lake was the outlet, where a river flowed out towards the sea some fifty miles away. However, from here you couldn't see the sea.

Bill lay down on his back and gazed at the clouds. One cloud looked like a boat. Another cloud looked like a duck. A gentle breeze tickled his nose.

He glanced sideways at the girl lying next to him. He felt he lay beside a childhood friend that he could share everything with – someone to fight with, to laugh with, to cry with, and to depend on.

"Why don't we play a little prank on Wizzie?" he snickered.

"You always do that when we come here, Mark," Annie giggled.

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He slid down the hill, tiptoed quietly to the trail most people used, and hid behind a tree. He waited to pounce on Jerald when he passed by and say “Boo”.

Mark. Mark. He wasn’t Mark. He was Bill. He was an eighty-six-year-old man. He had no business playing pranks on anyone. Come to think of it, how did he get here? Bill felt disoriented and confused. Where was he? Where were the others?

The others emerged from the path. “Grandpa, how did you get here? How did you know where to go?” James asked.

Bill couldn’t answer that. He wasn’t sure himself. “Annie told me where to go,” Bill said, hoping they would believe and not question any further.

“That’s right, I showed Grandpa the way. Come on Grandpa, set’s go sailing,” Annie said.

Bill let Annie lead him, deciding that what happened on the cliff and before was just a figment of his imagination.

Behind him, Bill heard the three friends speak. “Is it my imagination,” Larry said. “Or does Bill,” Peter continued. “Look younger?” Joe finished.

“It’s your imagination,” Bill called back. Behind him, Jerald took out his tricorder and looked at it, but didn’t say anything.

They walked to the marina. Pleasure craft lined the piers. On the water floated a small sailing vessel with the royal insignia. Bill owned a similar craft and enjoyed sailing it. As a result, his five crewmates knew how to sail and fish.

“Okay boys, you know what to do. Yo Wizzie, do you have any fishing equipment aboard? It looks like a good day to fish. Larry, Peter, Joe, help me unfurl the sails. Joseph, untie the boat. James, take the

wheel. Let's head to that area out there. I think that's a good spot. Baby girl sit down with Jerald. I don't want you to fall."

They sailed out into the center of the lake and began fishing, along with the other pleasure craft.

The sun shone on the lake, causing the water to glisten like emeralds. Annie sat beside Bill with a fishing rod of her own and asked about his life – who he married, what were their children like, what they did for fun. Bill spoke about his family, his work in the sciences, and some of his political and philosophical worldviews.

He didn't mention his childhood dream. That dream was far from his mind at the time. It must have been the fresh air.

Bill recast and in seconds caught a fish. This whole world seemed like a fairytale, like a dream he would eventually wake up from. Bill was determined to enjoy every second of this dream before the alarm clock woke him up. Except there was one thing missing in his dream.

Why am I sitting besides someone who looks like a ceramic doll, instead of a beautiful woman? There seemed to be something wrong about the situation. Bill pushed aside the unpleasant thought, determined not to let the dream turn into a nightmare.

"Grandpa, if you were my Grandpa, James and Joseph would be my cousins." Annie waved at the two, "Hello Cousin James. Hello Cousin Joseph." They waved back.

Annie giggled, and then sang. Other boats approached, just to hear their princess sing.

Not surprisingly, they caught plenty of fish. After fishing, they had a barbeque on the beach.

Bill looked at one of the clouds partially obscuring the sun. "That cloud looks like a floating island."

Vacation Time

Jerald shaded his eyes and looked. “That is an island. Specifically, it’s the resort island of Pleasers. It’s a must see for those visiting our land. Even people from beyond Nexus visit it. We can get a ride from town.”

They headed for town.

They arrived at the station just as a snow sled arrived. The sled was at least 40 feet long and 10 feet wide. There was plenty of space for people to sit, walk around and view the sky. The back area was reserved for luggage. The creatures pulling the sled were similar to reindeer, except they had splayed out hooves like snowshoes.

Tourists stepped out with their luggage. Attendants helped them to other forms of transportation.

The gang stepped to the gate and Bill paid for transportation and a two-hour tour package. “I guess we need to leave the underground tour for another day,” Bill commented.

They entered the sled, along with twelve children near Annie’s age. Bill stood by one of the edge seats and held onto one of the poles holding up the canopy. Bill let his mind wander, feeling the breeze in his gray hair. Bill liked to travel. He liked to explore new and different things.

The sled moved forward on its runners. The woman responsible for the kids requested the children sit down. Most of the children obeyed, but a few wanted to run around. Bill ignored them and enjoyed the feel of a supposedly ground-based vehicle take to the sky. It was alike and yet unlike the feeling you get when a plane takes off from a runway. Bill watched the reindeer gallop on an imaginary road in the sky, dragging the sled along. *What an incredible mode of transportation.* Bill closed his eyes and imagined his hands spread out.

“Mark, sit down!”

He opened his eyes and sat down immediately. Just as his butt touched the seat, he noticed another kid sit down and realized his mistake. Bill quickly got up and almost fell.

The gang stared at him and he looked away, red-faced. Bill’s reaction amused his companions. Only Annie wasn’t in on the joke. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing, Princess,” Larry said. “No, Nothing,” Peter continued. “Nothing at all,” Joe finished. The three laughed.

The trip to the island was uneventful. There was no turbulence or discomfort. Bill felt a slight breeze coming from the direction of the sea. He looked in that direction and saw the vastness of the ocean.

The floating island was larger than Bill realized, covering several acres. The island had hotels, swimming pools, sunning areas, a casino, and the usual things found in a resort. The first part of the tour was a museum. It showed the history of the floating island as well as some of the history of Rosette Kingdom.

“Mark, there’s a bug on your head,” Larry spoke near Bill’s ear. Bill swatted at his head. The boys laughed.

The tour continued. They passed an area where they showed scenes of worlds beyond Nexus. Some of the worlds included water worlds, where sea creatures lived in coral cities. Other worlds had several suns. One world was a giant ship a hundred thousand miles long. A world even existed where giant brains floated in the clouds and tiny insects with baseball hats walked on the surface of ponds.

They stopped at a bar and the kids had soft drinks, while the wizard drank a beer. For a moment, Bill felt he was too young for alcohol. He

Vacation Time

hesitated for a moment and tentatively asked for a Piña Colada. The bar tender gave Bill the drink without a moment's hesitation.

Bill didn't really want an alcoholic drink but he was determined to do something adult.

The tour continued. They avoided the casino because there were under-aged people in the group. The next area contained virtual reality games. These games were supposed to be more realistic and better than life.

As they walked, Peter whispered in Bill's ear. "Bill, your shoes are untied."

That was the last straw. He turned towards his companions. "Will you please stop calling me Bill? I am Prince Mark," he shouted angrily. Nearby people turned around and looked at him. He paused. Bill... Mark.... Bill...

He was confused. He held his head, feeling disoriented. "I'm going senile." He looked at his hands, but that didn't help. His hands looked entirely too young for an eighty-six-year-old man. He was certain he was an old man – maybe.

There was only one way to solve this identity crisis. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his driver's license. The picture of a man named Bill looked back. He was without doubt Bill. Identity crisis solved.

Relieved, Bill took a deep breath and said, "You shouldn't torment old people. It's bad for your Karma."

The next part of the tour erased the aggravation of the kids' annoying pranks. This was the sunning area of the resort. Scantly clad women sunning themselves filled the area. Each was hotter than the next.

The alcohol in the Piña Colada got to Bill's head. The sight of the woman turned him on. They made him horny. A few of the women smiled at him. Playing with them would be fun. Off course, none of them was available, but it was nice to dream.

"Grandpa, stop looking at those woman. You have me," Annie grumbled, jealous.

Bill took a deep breath. Babysitting can be tiring, especially with a clingy child. How he became a substitute for her lost prince, he didn't know.

They ended the tour with a stop at the spa. Bill and the others got a massage and other pampering.

"That felt good. I feel ten years younger," Bill commented. Indeed, Bill's skin was thicker and less wrinkled than in the morning.

It was evening when they returned to the castle. Wizard Jerald dashed off the moment they arrived. The rest leisurely entered.

"I wish you could stay in the royal apartments with us," Bill said to Larry, Peter and Joe.

"No way, that wouldn't be fun. Besides, the rooms we have are comfortable," Larry said. "Also, we're thinking of joining the royal guard. We interviewed with the captain of the guard this morning. We impressed him with our level of physical fitness and skill with weapons," Peter continued. "I guess your training came in handy after all. Now where are our rooms? This castle is horribly confusing. I'm constantly getting lost," Joe finished.

"Perhaps Annie can help," Bill said. "Can you explain the general area you are staying at?"

"We're staying in the wizard's tower," Larry said. "With Jerald," Peter continued. "And his assistants," Joe finished.

Vacation Time

"That shouldn't be hard to find. Come on baby girl, let's show them the way," Bill said.

Annie and Bill led and the three friends followed. They arrived at their rooms. "You haven't eaten dinner, have you?" Bill asked.

"We'll eat with Jerald just as soon as Jerald finishes some work," Larry said. "He seemed pre-occupied with something and was determined to contact someone at Nexus the moment we arrived. He didn't say what about," Peter continued. "By the way, how come you're so familiar with the castle?" Joe finished.

That question bothered Bill. "Just because I have a better sense of direction doesn't mean anything. Please stop thinking strange thoughts about me," Bill shouted, angrily.

"Yare, but..." The three started.

"No buts. You all know I've spent all my life in the other world. I can't know anything about this world. Good Night," Bill fumed. He turned around and walked away. Why was everyone questioning his identity? The fact that the castle seemed familiar to Bill disturbed him, but he was determined not to think about it.

Bill and Annie arrived just in time for dinner. Bill formally thanked the king and queen for the allowance. The meal was uneventful, since the queen discouraged talking during meals.

After dinner, they adjourned to the family room. Shortly after arriving, James asked the king and queen for permission to stay with his friends. "I feel uncomfortable around royalty," James explained.

Bill wasn't surprised. There was more freedom in the common area and being with his friends would be more rewarding. Bill also knew that Joseph would want to stay because of Dara.

"How can you be uncomfortable around royalty, when you are yourselves royalty?" The queen's son, John, asked, confused.

"We know we're royalty because we're Grandpa's grandchildren," Joseph explained. "However, last week we thought Grandpa was a commoner like everyone else. This world is mega confusing for us – the strange plants and animals, the flying islands, the concept of magic, the idea we're royalty. It's all so confusing."

That's because you're in my delusion.

The queen looked at Bill. "Is this world also confusing to you?"

"I've always been a little crazy throughout my life. Also, old people tend to be a little senile. Please don't worry about me.

"Let James stay with Larry, Peter and Joe. They will have more fun together." Bill looked at Joseph. "You should do the same. Staying with people your own age will be good for your health."

Bill glanced at John and Dara. It was clear what he was thinking but he didn't say anything. After all, they weren't his kids.

"Yes Grandpa," both replied and got up and headed for the door.

"Remember, you can come anytime you want. This is your home," the mother called after them.

Queen Jenny turned to Annie. "What have you been doing today?"

Annie told them stories of their adventures, including the confusion Bill had with his name.

That no longer bothered Bill. "Old people get confused sometimes," Bill explained.

Queen Jenny looked at Bill. "How old are you Bill? You look younger than I remember from morning."

Vacation Time

"I'm eighty-six years old." Bill looked at the skin on his hand, which was no longer paper-thin. "You're right Queen Jenny. My complexion seems to have improved. It must be the spa we visited this afternoon."

The queen seemed doubtful. "You look at most fifty years old now, maybe forty-five. I can't believe you are eighty-six. What do you think dear?"

"You're absolutely right, love," the king replied without looking up from his paperwork.

"Do you mind at least looking before answering? Can you at least spend five minutes not working?" the queen asked the king, annoyed. "Anyways, it's time to go to sleep."

The queen looked at both Annie and Bill. "Remember to take a bath before going to bed." She knew Bill hated to take baths unless forced to do so. He didn't question how she could know such things.

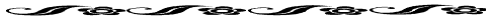
"I'll come with you," Nanny Susan offered. "No!" both Bill and Annie said in unison. Bill's experience with Susan was too awkward to bear repeating.

Annie, on the other hand, didn't want to share. "Grandpa knows how to bathe me. He doesn't need help."

"All-right, have fun. I'm going to bed." The queen walked away. Susan left as well, disappointed.

Tripping

When going on imaginary trips,
Remember to take an umbrella



Everyone left to their respective rooms, leaving Bill alone with Annie. He thought back on the day and the impossible events that transpired. He outran someone 30 years his junior, and with a princess on his head no less. He went through woods and meadows exactly to his destination without knowing the way. Not only that, but he didn't feel tired or sore. Even the branches that hit him in the face, when he was going to the emerald lake, were more annoying than anything. Yes, this was definitely a dream.

Bill recalled the day they stepped onto the magic circle. A fundamental principle in meta-physical thought was that consciousness creates reality.

Bill knew from books such as *The Adventure of Self-Discovery*, by Dr. Stanislav Grof, the profound effects that shamanism and psychotropics such as LSD, had on consciousness. According to his research, you could travel to other worlds by controlling your consciousness. The Books never mentioned Dragon crystals.

Before the experiment, he never expected anything to happen. After all, LSD, shamanism and hypnotism never had an effect on him.

Until now...

Bill ate a breath-mint and handed one to Annie. He didn't want to bathe Annie with stinky breath. He picked Annie up, carried her to her room, and stepped into the bathroom.

Physical strength, endurance, accelerated healing, profound changes in consciousness, loss of identity or identity confusion. These were indications that Bill was under the spell of the drugs he ingested. Not

Tripping

to mention, he was now a prince in a fairytale world – talk about delusions of grandeur.

Bill undressed Annie. He turned around, got undressed and quickly showered.

Bill recalled the hot girls at the resort he was currently *not* with. He looked at Annie, who obviously represented something profoundly important he needed to discover.

According to Groff, all explorations into consciousness produced incredible insights into oneself. However, the journey could sometimes be painful. Most journeys involving mind drugs and shamanism gave people terrifying and painful trips. Those who endured them grew spiritually.

He recalled the previous night with Susan. That was a nightmare. In principle, that was a learning experience. What he was supposed to learn from her, he didn't know.

Bill sat on a stool. Annie ran around the bathroom and collected toys. She brought them back to Bill and went to collect more toys. Toys buried him. Annie talked non-stop about Life, the Universe, and Everything. Bill found it impossible to keep track of what she said, but enjoyed her antics.

This made it difficult for him to bathe her. Bill grabbed her around the waste and tickled her until she giggled. He then washed Annie as per instructions and rinsed her. Her monologue continued non-stop.

No longer having to compete with Susan, Annie enjoyed her alone time with Bill.

Bill recalled Annie's parents. They not only allowed, but also insisted he take baths and sleep with their daughter. Nowhere in life would that happen.

That wasn't true. In Japan, family members would bathe like this. He knew this from watching Japanese anime, like the G-rated movie *My Neighbor Totoro*.

Psychotropics, shamanism and other such things didn't know anything about ethics or morality. They took people to unknown and uncontrollable places. That was why orthodox religion and most governments banned them.

Bill and Annie entered the tub. Bill sat down and Annie swam in circles. She gave Bill toys so they could both play. Bill played with a rubber ducky.

Maybe they really did think of him as Annie's long lost grandfather. Annie did treat him as such. In his life, the children of strangers have approached and shown affection for him. The parents have always behaved in a likewise manner, accepting him fully.

Bill felt intense affection for Annie, with her blue eyes and hair the color of strawberry ice cream. It was obviously his paternal instincts, he assumed.

Bill hugged Annie. Annie giggled as she enjoyed the attention of her favorite person.

Bill looked at Annie's face and felt like kissing her with the back of his throat. He wanted to bite her face, to consume her, mind, body, and soul, until their flesh became one. Only then could he be complete.

He always had those cannibalistic thoughts, except then the girl of his dreams had no identity. That girl was always someone he would never meet.

That was his dream. To meet the perfect girl, so his life could be complete. Unfortunately, his life had made a detour, yet again. He

Tripping

would need to postpone his journey to find the perfect girl until his obligations here were complete.

Certain songs and movies would cause him to think of the mystery girl of his dreams. He would then feel the crushing pain in his chest that made him feel like crying. This only served to renew his determination to fulfill his dream. Only by consuming the mystery girl, or at least merging her body with his own could he feel better.

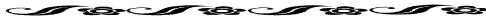
This intensified his determination to improve himself so that he could be worthy of that perfect girl, his soulmate.

Bill carried Annie in his arms and kissed her. If he really was under the influence of drugs, then he and the others were back in Australia, sleeping under the stars.

Released from the burden of reality, Bill finished his bath with Annie. They went to bed. For the first time since coming here, he fully enjoyed being with Annie.

Underworld

What stirs below
one can never know



There was a knock on the door. "Prince Bill, breakfast will be served in half an hour."

"Thank-you," Bill called back. That was a good sleep, but he felt groggy.

Bill got up and dressed himself and Annie. Teeth and hair brushed, they entered the dining room. Bill felt guilty when he saw the king and queen. He was no longer qualified to take care of Annie. Unfortunately, he didn't know what to tell them.

Jerald was there, talking to the parents. Bill overheard part of the conversation. "It's hard to believe he's thirty-seven now. Are you sure?" the queen asked.

"Who's only thirty-seven years old? Good morning Majesties. Good morning Jerald."

"No one, my Prince," Jerald replied. "Have you made plans for today? We still haven't taken the underground tour."

Bill sat down and a servant placed food in front of him. "Thanks Benny," he said to the servant. The king and queen looked at each other but said nothing.

Annie ate without prompting today. She looked happy.

"Jerald, aren't you going to eat?" Bill asked.

"I've already eaten, Prince Bill." Jerald replied.

Jerald leaned down and whispered to the Parents, "I've told the others and warned them not to say anything. The Nexus rep said he'll be here tonight."

Bill pretended not to hear, but he knew they were talking about him. The talk about Nexus made him nervous. He had done many things he could get in trouble for. Bill hated consequences. Karma was a pain in the butt.

"I'll see you at the Wizard's tower when you finish eating. Please take your time." Jerald nodded to the king and queen. "Majesties," he said, and stepped out.

The Parents looked at Bill, but seemed unsure what to say to him. The queen noticed that he was troubled. "Is anything wrong?" the queen asked.

"I think that Nanny Susan should resume her duties of taking care of Annie. My decision is final. Please accept it," Bill said. Bill ate mechanically.

"Okay Bill," the queen said. It was clear that they wanted to ask why but fortunately, they didn't ask.

A maid brought a glass of strawberry milk. That made Bill's day. "Thanks Janice," Bill said and smiled at her. The girl blushed, bowed and left.

Bill savored the sight and taste of the milk. He felt his troubles drift away as he drank. He loved strawberry everything. He loved the color pink, but he kept that a secret from everyone. Real men don't associate with the color pink.

Mind clear, he finished breakfast. Bill closed his eyes and rested a few seconds until Annie finished eating.

Bill walked to the Parents and gave them a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "See you later Mama, Papa."

Bill waited for Annie to do the same. Bill left the room, vaguely aware that he may have greeted the king and queen inappropriately.

Bill greeted everyone as he walked down the hallway. Annie did the same as she skipped along. Bill grabbed his day backpack in his room and headed for Jerald's place. They arrived at the wizard's tower.

"I recommend we visit some historical areas, eat lunch, and then go to the underground tour. The main tour is at 12:30PM."

The first stop was the temple to Rachael, the patron goddess of the city. The goddess turned out to be a lot like Athena of Greek mythology. There were some variations, but nothing Jerald said was surprising. They donated to the goddess and continued.

The next stop was the museum of transportation. The museum displayed all the modes of transportation known to Rosette Kingdom.

First in the tour was self-transportation such as walking and running. They passed this quickly, using their own form of self-transportation.

Next were self-powered transports such as the bicycle. This area included a model of a child in a little car, propelling himself down the hall. They got a chuckle out of that.

Animal transportation, such as the horse and dragon was there. "Have anyone been horse riding?" Jerald asked.

"Horse riding is boring," Larry replied. "We know how to ride horses," Peter continued. "What we're interested in is dragon riding," Joe finished.

Jerald looked confused. "But dragons are a common form of transportation. The tamer ones are used everywhere."

Underworld

Bill had to explain. "In our world, dragons don't exist except in stories. There's no scientific evidence for their existence." There were dinosaurs, but Bill didn't want to confuse the issue. Dinosaurs weren't dragons.

"We can go tomorrow. The best time to ride dragons are in the morning. It's most enjoyable then," Jerald replied.

Bill, feeling like a moocher, had to add. "I need to get a job and do honest work. I would join the palace guard like the boys, but I'm way too old for such work. This old body wouldn't be able to keep up with you young ones."

The others looked at each other but reframed from saying anything. It was clear to everyone that Bill wasn't aware of his bodily changes, or pretended not to notice. "You're not old, Grandpa," Annie voiced the thought the others were afraid to say.

"Thank-you baby girl, but I'm eighty-six years old." Bill messed up Annie's hair, the color of strawberry ice cream. Bill's sisters hated it when he patted them on the head, because it messed up their hair. Annie didn't mind.

Animal powered vehicles came next on the tour, with the reindeer being one of them.

Internally powered machines followed. These included locomotives, cars, and trucks. None of these vehicles looked anything like their counterparts in Bill's home world. Bill found this world, mixed in with both hi-tech and low-tech stuff, and with modern and ancient architecture and ideas fascinating.

Vehicles powered by the elements followed. This included water and land sailboats. This also included hot-air balloons, blimps and other strange machines. Ether-powered ships that sailed the ether streams

of the Universe followed. Travelling the vastness of space sounded like fun, but was probably boring.

Finally, there was the section on dimensional travel. There were three known ways to cross dimensions. The first was the magic circle, which Bill and his crew used to enter this world. This was discouraged, since it weakened the barrier that separated dimensions. A weakened barrier could break and worlds would collide. At worst, the damage could result in the complete annihilation of both worlds. Demon attacks were the forerunners of the event.

The second method was what demons used to enter worlds. They would seek out weak spots between worlds and infiltrate them. In addition, they would ride on the trail of people using the first method.

Bill broke out in a cold sweat. "I messed up, didn't I? Knowledge of the magic circle exists in my world, no thanks to me. I documented everything and made it public. I didn't know it would be so dangerous."

"You didn't know, Your Highness," Jerald tried to reassure Bill. "The representative of Nexus will be arriving and will analyze all your actions from the time just before you left your world to now. They will reveal everything. There's no need to worry."

But Bill was worried, and not just because of the illegal entry. Bill was getting too close to Annie. He didn't want anyone to find out just how close they were. Bill adjusted his daypack, and then put his hands in his pockets.

Lastly, the exhibit showed the third method of dimensional travel. This was Nexus. Unfortunately, there were no pictures to show, since something seemed to block the process. Every picture taken was unrecognizable.

The official description read: “Nexus, a system of inter-connected relations within the possibilities, that bind times and places within one reality to another reality, semi-reality, non-reality, or other dis-junct, allowing for easy and clear transport, without fear of temporal, spatial, physical, spiritual, etc. anomalies.”

“What the hell does that mean,” Larry asked. “I don’t know. Maybe someone’s smoking something,” Peter continued. “The good stuff,” Joe finished.

“It means that we would have avoided a lot of problems if we had used Nexus, instead of what we did to get here. Those months of preparation and all that hard work was for nothing,” James explained.

“Worse than nothing – I think we’ll live to regret it,” Bill said sadly. *At least I will.* Bill’s premonition was right on the money.

Lunchtime came and they went to eat. Bill encouraged everyone to try different foods. Bill loved watching the show, *Bizarre Foods*. The host of the show had a saying: “If it looks good, eat it.” The problem was, Andrew would eat anything, no matter how disgusting it looked.

After watching the show, Bill made it a point of trying different ethnic foods. Most foods tasted good. Some things, such as silkworm grubs, were just too disgusting. Even fried, they were impossible for Bill to eat.

For dessert, Bill ordered pink cookies with blue sprinkles. Bill made sure no one saw him take out a breath-mint. He didn’t need any snide comments from the trio. Unfortunately, he couldn’t hide the reedeep sound his mint dispenser made. Fortunately, no one commented.

Meal complete, they headed for the main event of the day.



The entrance to the underworld was an un-spectacular rundown building, built maybe a century ago.

Randy guided them in, through several doors and down to the basement. One of the walls had a hole in it, the entrance to the old city.

They entered and walked down a narrow passage. Bill was about to take out his flash light, but then realized he didn't need to. Light filled the passageway. This light followed them as they descended. It seemed everyone knew how to do magic in this world. Instead, he took out his staff and used it as a walking stick.

Bill had watched the TV series, *Cities of the Underworld*. This place was just like that.

Far ahead the passageway stretched. The air was damp and musty. Mould covered parts of the walls. On the left and right, passageways snaked off into the distance. Debris filled half the passageways and clogged the main passage. Bill always wondered where all this stuff came from, that always filled underground places.

Annie walked by Bill's side, unafraid. She held Bill's hand and hummed to herself.

Randy gave them a running commentary. "This passageway was part of a government building built over eight-hundred years ago, when the city of Grandor existed here. At that time, the country of Badoglio tried to conquer the world. Badoglio destroyed this city when it invaded the country.

"Badoglio was eventually defeated, but not before tens of millions of people died in the fighting. Millions more were murdered in concentration camps and dozens of countries were almost destroyed. Decades later, people considered the king of Badoglio to be one of the most evil people on the planet."

Randy looked at Bill, “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

That question sent chills down Bill’s spine. That was way too close to one of the delusions he had as a young adult, when he read a book on twin flames and reincarnation. “Why do you ask?”

“Ha-ha. I’m not accusing you of being that person. I’m just fascinated about the concept of reincarnation. Where do souls go when people die? Where do souls come from when we’re born? Is there such a thing as twin flames, people bound together through time and space?

“I’m only asking because you come from another world, so I assume you know about such things. You need that knowledge to travel, don’t you?

“Nexus reps don’t like talking about the spirit world and souls. They claim we need to learn our spiritual lesions without interference. Spirit guides can be a pain in the butt,” Randy complained.

Bill thought a moment before answering. “You don’t need a great deal of knowledge to travel, just an overwhelming desire to travel. Beyond that, you need a pentagram and some dragonite, or Dragon crystals. Desire is what drives the circle and moves the world. In my case, it was my desire to fulfill my childhood dream.”

“If you need to travel, you should use Nexus. The costs are much lower, and it doesn’t leave the door open to demons. I wouldn’t be surprised if demons have now overrun Prince Bill’s world. Hopefully Nexus is doing something about it,” Jerald said solemnly.

“That’s horrible. If I had known, I wouldn’t have opened the gate. My childhood dream isn’t worth putting an entire world in danger.” Bill looked at Jerald. “I need to go to Nexus. I have to repair the damage I caused.”

"The closest gateway to Nexus is in the country of Nadine, over 4500 miles away." Noting the worry on Bill's face, Jerald added, "Time flows at different rates in different worlds. When the time comes, Nexus will take you to the place where you need to be. It doesn't matter how long it takes to get there."

"Aren't you afraid of getting arrested or something," James asked?

"We must all accept the consequences of our actions. Karma isn't something you can get away from," Bill said solemnly.

The group crossed a stream in a large cavern. The echoes were eerie and disorienting. People had used this cavern during the war with Badoglio. Evidence of occupation was everywhere. Rocks, building materials, garbage and other assorted treasures from the past covered the floor. Bats flew overhead.

"Grandpa, I'm scared," Annie whimpered.

Bill retracted the staff back to its two-foot size and placed it in its sleeve in the backpack, all in one motion. He picked Annie up, kissed her on the cheek, and carried her in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. He hugged her close to him, enjoying her warmth. Holding a baby in your arms is one of the pleasures of being an adult. They walked on.

The next stop was an abandoned dragonite mine. A previous civilization had mined out the area thousands of years ago. It was one of the richest mines in the area in ancient times.

"Prince Bill, I have a question for you," Jerald spoke. "How common is dragonite in your world? I notice you have very high quality crystals."

"To my knowledge, dragonite doesn't exist in my world. I discovered the secret formula in a dream. It took me decades to produce my first crystal. I named it after dragons, the creatures that symbolize power.

Underworld

By the way, dragons don't exist in my world. Neither does magic. Plenty of people claim they have psychic abilities, but careful examination proves they're always lying."

"Do you have any idea how the Ancients seeded the dragonite into the earth? Is producing it expensive?" Jerald asked.

"I can imagine how dragonite can be produced by seeding a volcano. Theoretically, the process can produce larger quantities of dragonite more cheaply than I can produce them in my factories. Unfortunately, we don't have the means of doing that. I produce it in the lab in a process similar to producing diamonds, just harder. I mean more difficult.

"I know it taps into zero-point energy, the energy of the universe. Well I assume it does, but I've only been able to extract a tiny amount of power. Considering the high cost of producing it, the only practical use of it is jewelry. Most scientists think it's a hoax and that I'm a charlatan."

"Your crystals are the real thing. It's an incredible feat being able to produce those crystals. So how did you know you could use them to gate to another world? How come you didn't use Nexus?"

Bill adjusted Annie to prevent her from slipping. "We have fairy tales about magical creatures and places that connect to other worlds but no rational person believes such things."

"The Bermuda Triangle," Larry said. "Easter Island," Peter continued. "The Scottish Highlands," Joe finished.

"The scientific community of my world believes that matter is primary. They believe that physical forces and deterministic laws can explain everything. Consciousness is just the byproduct of the brain.

“Some people believe that consciousness is primary and matter is the product of consciousness. If you have a strong enough image in your mind, and if your desire is strong enough, you’ll be able to alter reality.

“Over the years, I amassed a great deal of evidence to suggest that there is more to the world than meets the eye. Unfortunately, none of it is very scientific.”

Some of the evidence found was in books such as *Forbidden Science*, *Forbidden Archaeology*, and *the Adventures of Consciousness*, to name just a few.

“According to a branch of science called Quantum Mechanics, elemental matter, the stuff the world is made off, won’t exist unless someone observes them. By extension, the world won’t exist unless someone observes. A Kōan asks, ‘If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?’ A better question would be, ‘does it exist?’

“Sorry. I’ve been pondering the meaning of existence since I was twelve. To make a long story short, I got my two grandsons and three of their friends to help me in my crazy experiments. The use of the dragonite was just on a whim.”

“Can you show us how to grow dragonite? Dragon Crystals are a desperately needed resource?” Jerald asked.

“Sure I can show you, but I don’t want to disrupt the political-economic conditions of this world. I’ll need to think about it.” Bill paused a moment. “They’re going to change my world when someone figures out how to really use them. I hope I haven’t created a monster.”

“You worry a lot about consequences, don’t you?” Jerald asked.

Underworld

"Off course, all actions have consequence. People can be rash and do things without thinking, causing a great deal of suffering to themselves and others," Bill said thoughtfully.

Bill knew all about doing stupid thing. Eighty six years of living hadn't made him wiser.

They entered a corridor and continued walking. "James, could you please take some pictures? My hands are a little indisposed now." Bill handed James the camera.

James took a picture of Bill, with his face surrounded by a cloud of hair the color of strawberry ice cream.

They entered a shrine to some unknown deity. This section of the underground was ancient. It dated back over two thousand years, maybe more. Disintegrating statues lined the wall. The floor tiling was in good condition. It showed geometric patterns, but the colors were fading. The walls had images of worshippers and demons devouring human sacrifices.

The next room had more images. They foretold a time when demons would infect a world. The ones responsible would call forth demons. This world would then be in danger of colliding with another. The rest of the images were too faded to read.

Randy described the images casually, not taking any of it seriously. "Aren't you tired of carrying the princess? We've been walking for over half an hour and over very rough terrain." Randy looked at Bill with a slightly worried look, as if to say old people shouldn't exert themselves. Bill agreed about the over-exerting part, but carrying the angel wasn't tiring.

"Grandpa can't get tired because he loves me," Annie replied to the question with a serious expression. *Like all grandparents like and*

want to protect their grandchildren, Bill thought to himself. It's like how he felt when he carried his first grandchild for the first time.

The tour continued. They left the catacombs and entered a valley. It wasn't a valley as such. It was more like a giant sinkhole over a thousand feet in diameter. Entrances to the catacombs lined the walls of the sinkhole. A lake filled the center of the valley. A grove of fruit trees stood beside the lake. There was a farmer's market near the lake. People milled around, working, drawing water, socializing, and in general being busy.

"This little valley is centrally located in the city. It's a convenient location for people to meet. Legend has it that the water of the lake has curative powers. Whether that's true is a different story. If you like, we could have a break before completing the tour." Randy walked to some food stands and the rest followed.

They stopped by a park table. Bill put Annie down on the bench. He removed his backpack and sat down beside her at the end of the table. Annie sat to the right of him.

Randy sat opposite Bill. "Why does Princess Annie call you Grandpa? Aren't you too young for that? Shouldn't she call you Uncle instead?"

Bill ate some strawberry ice cream Annie ordered for him. "I've always looked younger than I really am. Bars and other places carded me all the time, even after I turned forty. Then my hair and beard started turning a little white and that eventually stopped, fortunately."

Bill hated people carding him, because he felt they were infringing on his freedoms. That's the problem with youth – not enough freedom. "It's not surprising I only look fifty or sixty years old. However, I assure you I'm eighty-six years old. My grandsons James and Joseph are proof of it." Bill smiled at his grandchildren.

A bunch of children ran past the table. Two parents chased after them.

Randy looked uncertain. "That's hard to believe. You look only thirty-five at most. Did you take any special rejuvenating treatments?"

"I went to the spa on the floating island resort, but other than that, nothing. I don't know why my skin is so much healthier than before. Off course, my insides are the same."

"I know why Grandpa is getting younger. It's because of me," Annie said.

"Dear, I'm not getting younger. I'm only getting healthier," Bill answered. Bill turned to Jerald. "Wizzie...I mean Jerald. Is it possible for Annie to have special healing powers? I can understand why she would want to use them on me." Bill didn't relish the idea of being a substitute for anyone, especially not a dead prince.

Jerald considered that. "The ability does exist but it's unusual. The Princess has never displayed healing ability. I think I mentioned the representatives from Nexus are arriving this evening. We can ask them about it. You said you could understand why she wants to make you younger. Why is that?"

"It's her childhood dream, to unite with the one she loves. Unfortunately, she's using me as a substitute. I wish she could choose someone her own age. I'll try to find someone to keep her company, but I don't expect her to start dating until she's at least sixteen."

"No Grandpa, I don't want anyone else. I want you," Annie complained, looking at Bill with her baby blues. Bill knew children form attachments to adults in that way. He also knew she would outgrow it. He still felt the need to say something.

"I'm sorry, baby girl. That's not possible. There are laws against that. You have to find someone else. Don't worry. Everything will work out for the best. Finish your ice cream before it melts." Annie pouted but said nothing.

They continued eating in silence. "Let's share childhood dreams. I love listening to childhood dreams and finding out which dreams came true," Randy said, breaking the silence. "I'll start first. My dream has always been to travel and explore. I'm thinking of one day entering Nexus. It's both scary and exciting. You never know where it will take you."

"You're already an explorer, aren't you? So your childhood dream has been fulfilled," James said. Randy agreed that was the case.

"Our dream is to learn magic and become great wizards," Larry said. "We would then go on quests, where there's plenty of fighting, treasure and women," Peter continued. "Don't forget the beer and women," Joe finished.

Bill had to remind himself they did have excellent grades.

Both James and Joseph expressed their interest in exploring, as well as the sciences.

All five had the desire to explore since they were children. Bill chose them and trained them for this and other reasons.

Jerald told everyone he wanted to become a wizard. That wasn't surprising.

"We all know that the Little Princess' dream is to marry Prince Bill," Randy laughed. "Now there's only one person left. Okay, Your Highness, spill the beans. What was your childhood dream?"

Underworld

Bill looked into Annie's hypnotic eyes and felt the urge to tell the story he always kept close to his heart. "My childhood dream, ever since I was six years old, was to meet the perfect girl."

"You were interested in girls when you were six years old? I'm impressed. I only got interested in girls when I turned eleven. I always thought that was young, but you trumped me. Losing your virginity at that age – incredible," Randy laughed until beer came out of his nose.

"You misunderstand me," Bill tried to justify himself. "I wasn't interested in girls the way you are. At age six, I used to have nightmares. I would pretend my teddy bear was a cute girl. Her job was to protect my back from demons."

Annie got up on the bench and hugged Bill's back. "Like this?"

Bill thought back eighty years into the past. "That's it exactly. She was my protection."

Bill looked at the empty ice cream cup. "I became interested in girls when I turned twelve. Unfortunately, unlike Randy, I was a very shy boy. I was never able to meet anyone. Do you want to know something odd? People my age tended to ignore me when I was growing up and as a young adult. Only children and old people were attracted to me."

And one teenage boy – in high school, a boy from the neighboring class invited him to his house. When he got there, the boy dropped his pants in front of both his sister and Bill. Bill found the sight so disgusting that he had to leave. Bill left, wishing the sister were the one who had dropped her pants.

"In my early thirties, two teenage girls almost threw themselves at me." Bill looked at Randy. "No, I didn't do anything to them since they were under-aged." A neighboring lady on the bus found it cute.

"In my late forties, I travelled the world, trying to get people to accept my ideas on political science. One woman, aged twenty-five got interested and helped me put forth my ideas. She turned out to be the daughter of a dictator of a foreign country. People started calling us a beautiful couple, even though dating was the farthest thing from my mind. I married her for practical reasons. Her father threatened to kill me if I didn't. We had children and eventually James and Joseph were born.

"I'm eighty-six years old now. Eighty-six years old and I still haven't been able to achieve my childhood dream. I never will." Bill looked at Annie. She stood on the bench, left hand on Bill's shoulder.

The conversation had attracted a large audience. People are always interested in royalty.

Bill sighed, gazing into Annie's eyes. "I'll never meet the perfect girl, the only one I can truly love."

"But you have met the perfect girl. You've met me," Annie replied with complete sincerity.

Randy laughed until he choked. He took a sip of beer. People in the audience whispered and chuckled. The princess' answer amused everyone.

"That's so cute," a lady said.

"We're talking about romantic love, where lovers kiss and hug, and touch each other, bathe together and sleep together," Randy explained, censoring his words. He was enjoying himself as his perverted nature took over.

Bill got nervous. He knew where this conversation was going.

Annie spoke the dreaded words. "We are lovers. We kiss and hug all the time," she replied happily.

Underworld

All conversation in the area stopped. People turned to look at Bill and Annie. Bill felt his face turning red with embarrassment.

“We even take baths together. Grandpa loves giving me baths. It’s fun,” Annie continued.

The words kept pouring out. Bill could do nothing to stop it. He felt confined and unable to move.

People stared at him.

“During baths, does he, you know, play with you?” Randy grinned evilly, watching the pervert sitting opposite.

The audience whispered. Bill felt hot. His mind pushed against the confinement of the situation. He needed to escape.

“Off course he does. We’re lovers, after all,” Annie said proudly.

Bill’s desire to escape increased. Everyone thought he was a ped, a pedo, a pedop... Bill couldn’t say the word. If the king and queen found out...The consequences were too scary to think about. Sweat poured down his forehead. He mind pushed harder against the constraints of the world.

He now understood why most countries banned psychoactive drugs. He wished he were back in the Australian Outback. He wished he could wake up from this nightmare.

Except this wasn’t a dream. It was real life. He remembered a time he went to a public event. He looked at the hair of a redhead girl. The mother freaked out and accused him of being a pervert. That situation was embarrassing and he was grateful when it finally ended.

This was much worse, since he had physical relations with the girl – he gave her a bath. While bathing, he had kissed, hugged, and touched her inappropriately. He had impure thoughts.

There was no way he could justify himself. This would destroy his social standing. He would have to live with shame for the rest of eternity. All his hopes and dreams would end. He would never meet his destined one.

Bill's desire to escape overwhelmed him. His mind pushed against the restraints of the universe. He felt something give.

"Did he stick his...?" A leaf blew in Randy's face and interrupted his perverted ramblings.

The winds picked up. Swirling clouds formed overhead.

"Grandpa," one of his grandsons said, staring at him, obviously disgusted. "He touched the princess," someone said. He sickened them all.

Bill thought of every embarrassing situation in his life and on TV. He had to get away. He felt something shatter.

The wind strengthened and fog rose from the ground. The people got agitated, staring at him in scorn. Tiny dust devils formed, kicking up debris.

Bill got up and stepped away from the bench. "Where are you going Grandpa?" Annie asked.

"Someplace I won't hurt you," Bill replied.

The winds made strange sounds as Bill walked away, spiraling around him. Annie tried to follow and Bill started running. *I have to get away. I have to leave. I can't allow myself or anyone else to hurt the Little Princess.* Annie tried to keep up, but Bill was too fast.

The air around Bill shimmered. Near the ground at Bill's feet a green light appeared. It paused a second, then zoomed around him, making a green circle. Other lights appeared, zooming around Bill, making

intricate patterns. The magic circle was forming. The Gate was opening.

It was an illegal gate, filled with negative emotions. The color of the circle was unhealthy. It was the color of sewer scum, bile, monster blood, and other disgusting things. This is what demons waited for.

People screamed behind him. Bill stopped running and turned around. The magic circle remained centered around him. Out of the cave entrances circling the valley, demons poured out.

Annie was in trouble. It was all Bill's fault. He had opened the Gate. He couldn't believe he had done something so foolish. Bill had to go back. He had to protect the Little Princess, even at the cost of his life. The magic circle disappeared, along with his desire to escape. He was ready to face the consequences of his actions.

Bill ran back towards the group. The five surrounded Annie and fought demons. People screamed and ran around. Demons laughed and chased them. Images of the painting from the underground tour flashed in Bill's mind.

The demons ignored Bill since they knew they had him. Bill grabbed the staff from its resting place, attached weights to both ends and extended it. He plowed into demons. That had little effect. Bill pressed a button and blades extended from both ends of the staff.

The design of Bill's staff was relatively simple, but ingenious. It consisted of two one-foot segments. Each segment had a motor and battery in it in one end. The other end housed a collapsed blade, segmented in three parts, like tent poles. Pressing the button extended the blade and locked the segments in place, to produce a knife slightly over a foot long. The motor caused the blade to vibrate, like a jigsaw blade. The segment could telescope to three feet. Together, you got a six-foot long staff with two one-foot blades on

each end. The body of the staff was made of carbon fiber and titanium. The blades had ceramic edges for extra sharpness. This custom-built staff was expensive but well worth the cost.

Bill spun the staff overhead like a baton. He attacked the demons with a vengeance. They in turn attacked him. Heads flew as Bill decapitated demons. Bill's guilt drove him into frenzy.

The ground got slick with demon blood. Green slime covered everything. Bill looked towards Annie. The fighting had separated her from the others. An extra large and ugly demon held Annie and licked her head. Snot covered her hair. She cried.

The demons weren't killing any of the non-combatants. They were just tormenting them. It wasn't in the nature of demons to kill. They preferred torturing people for as long as possible. Eventually death would follow, when the body could no longer deal with the torment.

This didn't register in Bill's head. Even if it did, he didn't care.

Bill got a perverse pleasure out of killing the demons. He enjoyed the sight of pain on their faces. The demons fed this sadistic aspect of Bill. They were happy to let Bill kill them, since they were in essence immortal.

Bill headed towards Annie. The closer he came, the greater the resistance he felt. Bill felt a sharp pain in his back. It felt surprisingly good. He deserved that for putting the Little Princess in danger.

He didn't realize he was being masochistic. Demons love negative emotions. They indulged Bill by shredding his body, but still he fought.

The area became too crowded to fight with a double-bladed staff. Bill shrank the staff and dethatched the segments to make two swords. The blades hummed.

Underworld

Bill realized that he needed to fight more defensively or he would be unable to protect Annie. Only strength of will kept him upright.

The big demon looked at Bill, lifted Annie's dress and played with her butt. Annie continued crying. It was clear he was trying to provoke Bill. The provocation worked. Bill renewed his attack on the demons.

Bill finally reached the giant. In one shot, he decapitated the demon. He proceeded to cut the rest of the body up until pieces flew everywhere. There was however no time to indulge in meaningless sadism. There were more demons to kill. He was so into the battle, he didn't realize a demon had cut his left arm off. Still he fought.



Jerald fought the demons with his magic, calmly and without anger or hatred. He had already informed the palace guard.

Jerald knew that Nexus was working to close the breach Bill created and drive the demons out. It was only a matter of time before they acted.

The palace guard arrived. They helped the victims and fought the demons. The battle turned in the soldiers' favor. Even so, the tide of demons was endless.

A soothing breeze blew through the valley, followed by a fresh scent in the air. The scent was different for each person who smelled it. One farmer smelled the moist earth of the farm. A soldier smelled the perfume of his wife. Jerald smelled the cookies his mother baked for him. The scent freed everyone who smelt it from the demon infestation within them.

The demons touched by the breeze lost cohesion. They dissolved into thin air. The green mucus dried up and blew away. Only wounded

soldiers and victims remained. Medical personnel arrived and tended the wounded.

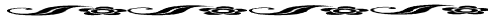
Demons still possessed Bill. He ran around, chasing soldiers.

Jerald took a deep breath and yelled, "Princess Annie is safe. The demons have been vanquished. Your little girl is safe." Slowly Jerald's words sank into Bill's berserker brain. Bill slowed down and stopped. He paused for a second, and then collapsed.

Jerald walked up to Bill as medics arrived to tend Bill's wounds. "Make sure Prince Bill doesn't wake up. Keep him sedated until I tell you otherwise."

Judgment

We must all suffer for our sins -
both real and imagined



"I'll have him executed – Guards!" King Jason shouted.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a voice behind the king spoke.

Annie cried, hugging her mother. "It's my fault this happened."

"And just why not, may I ask?" The king turned around to find a man and woman in their early twenties. They didn't seem like royalty, nobility or peasantry. They had an otherworldly appearance to them.

"My name is Rufus and this is my partner, Sabrina. We are representatives sent from Nexus, to help you with your dimensional instability problems, as well as this issue you have before you." Rufus nodded with his head to where Bill lay.

"King Jason, Queen Jenny, if you wish, we can show you the actual footage of the event for you to judge. You will experience the event as he did. All will be revealed," Rufus said.

The king and queen looked uncomfortable. "What do you suggest we do Master Rufus?" the king asked.

"The situation has already been analyzed. Here are the results." The Spirit Master pulled out his tricorder.

The machine spoke in a robot voice. "Prince Bill undressed Princess Annie. He then turned around, undressed and showered. Following that, Prince Bill washed Princess Annie as per instructions from Nanny Susan. He had problems bathing her since she kept running around. He grabbed her around the waste, tickled her under her chin, and finished bathing her.

“They entered the tub and played with toys. He hugged her and gave her a soul kiss.”

“What exactly is a soul kiss?” the king interrupted.

The machine replied, “A soul kiss is the type of kiss you give to someone you love on a spiritual level. This has nothing to do with physical attraction, but can be confused with that. This kiss doesn’t require physical contact, as when two people look at each other in the eyes. The two people don’t even need to be in the same room, and may not know that the other exists. This is common for bonded souls. In many cultures, this has been called the kiss of life...”

Rufus interrupted the lecture, “That explanation is sufficient. Please continue with analysis of the prince’s actions.”

The tricorder resumed where it stopped. “After the bath, the prince dried them, put on pajamas, and went to bed. The prince cuddled with the princess and kissed her. He fell asleep twenty-seven seconds later. He slept without waking the whole night. At the breakfast announcement, he got up and dressed himself and the princess. He then brushed his teeth and made sure the princess did the same.”

By this time, the king was getting impatient. Fortunately, the story was almost finished. “He then brushed her hair and went to the dining-room to greet you.”

“So nothing inappropriate happened,” the king said.

“Prince Bill didn’t do anything inappropriate according to your or Queen Jenny’s definition,” Rufus said. He reframed from mentioning Susan’s behavior. He wasn’t here to judge her. That would come later, when she met her own spirit masters after her incarnation had ended.

Judgment

Annie's parents gave Bill permission to bathe her. He never did anything else. Everyone in the room knew he did nothing wrong – everyone but Bill.

We are often our worst enemies.

There was a long pause as the words seeped in.

The two grandchildren interrupted the silence. "That means," "our grandfather" "is" "the prince" "that was killed" "one year ago..." they said, each completing the other's sentence.

"This makes complete sense. I was wondering where all his knowledge of the palace and city came from." Jerald paused a second. "Prince Mark was the only one to call me Wizzie. I did find it strange when Prince Bill started calling me that."

"Do you know why Grandpa always called you 'Wizzie'? James asked.

"I've always assumed because I'm a wizard. Wizzie the wizard," Jerald replied.

"Bill has been treating us like Mark always does." Queen Jenny looked at her husband. "Do you think this really is Mark?"

King Jason scratched his chin. "I don't know. I think it's best we don't jump to conclusions. He looks nothing like Mark. Also, Bill was born decades before Mark and has grandchildren. No, I don't want to say anything to King and Queen Milford. Not until we know for sure. It will only make it harder to make peace if we are wrong."

"I just thought of something. Mark and the Little Princess are betrothed to be married, aren't they? Since both Mark and Grandpa are one and the same, if Grandpa marries the Little Princess, would we have to start calling her Grandma?" James asked.

Annie found that so amusing, she stopped crying. She hopped off her mother's lap and looked at the nearest grandson, in this case Joseph.

"Come on Grandson. This old lady is really old and feeble. She needs to be carried." Annie raised her hands up and Joseph picked her up for the first time.

"Yes Grandma," Joseph replied, amused. "Grandma, are you ticklish?" Joseph tickled her until she giggled. In the other room, Bill smiled while still unconscious.

"If he didn't do anything wrong, why is he in that state?" the mother asked, confused.

This time Sabrina spoke. "To his way of thinking, he is a complete stranger and a commoner. He has no right to hug and kiss your daughter, much less bathe her. He isn't Annie's grandfather.

"In his past, in the other world, a niece asked to sleep with him because she wasn't used to sleeping alone. He found that awkward. He quickly left the bed when the child went to sleep. He can't deal with embarrassing situations."

Sabrina told them about the incident when Bill was unjustly accused of being a pervert. The mother had thought he was looking at her daughter's breasts, when in fact, Bill wasn't aware of anything other than the girl's hair and face. The girl could have been a disembodied head for all he cared.

"In Bill's world, he's nothing special. He married the daughter of the ruler of a country, but only because circumstances dictated it. However, that ruler wasn't royalty and neither was the daughter. He changed their government into a democracy, and then left the country to others to take care of it.

Judgment

“Bill believes that with the type of training he gave himself, anyone could do what he did. His diagnoses of a learning disability, his inability to express himself, and his lousy grades in school reinforced this belief. I could go on, but that’s not important.

“Now you, royalty and rulers of an entire nation, treat him as an honored guest and insist he take care of your daughter. Your daughter has abandonment issues and has transferred all her feelings of loss she had for Mark to Bill.

“This made him feel obligated. What’s worse, he does love her with all his heart, mind and soul. This is making him feel guilty, in a way you can’t understand. His moralistic upbringing is making it worse.”

Rufus took over. “Ever since he entered this world, he’s been having identity issues. You’ve noticed how his personality keeps changing. One moment he treats you two formally, as king and queen. The next, he treats you like his second set of parents, the way Mark always did.”

“His relationship with Annie keeps shifting too. One moment he treats her like a granddaughter, and the next he treats her like a childhood friend,” Sabrina added, referring to the trip to the lake.

Rufus continued the story. “Then there’s the incident at the farmer’s market, where everyone felt he did something inappropriate to your daughter.

“His fears, the embarrassment of the situation, and his desire to protect the princess forced him to try to flee. This opened the door to the demons waiting to come in.

“He was forced to come back and correct his mistake. He went into berserker mode and attacked the demons without regard to his safety. He would rather die than face Annie’s parents.”

"This is why none of the treatments are working on him. He's fighting us. Jerald, you were right in sedating him. That's the only thing that's keeping him alive right now," Sabrina finished.

Annie hugged her newfound grandson and whimpered.

"Is there anything we can do?" the mother asked worriedly.

"We lost him once. We don't want to lose him again," the king added.

"There is a way, but it will require Annie's help. Bill's soul is in Tartarus now. Annie will need to go there and bring him back," Rufus said.

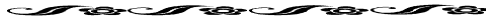
"Don't worry. Annie is in no danger. Being pure and innocent, the underworld can't touch her. In fact, the only thing she'll see will be Bill's soul. She'll then have to call the soul back to its body," Sabrina reassured the queen.

"How will Annie know what to do?" the mother asked worriedly.

"That's not a problem. She'll know when the time comes. Now the only thing remaining is parental consent," Rufus said.

Hell

You can't know compassion – unless you know Sin,
deep down within your whole body



Bill stood in front of a judge for the crime of being a pedophile. One by one, people he knew came up and testified. In the jury box were the king and queen, as well as his grandchildren. They had nothing but scorn for him.

The aura of shame, guilt and embarrassment was oppressive.

Larry, Peter and Joe were the guards.

Annie was the prosecutor. She wore diapers, sat in a high chair and sucked on a pacifier. Annie pointed a rattle at Bill. "Bill is a bad man. He needs to be punished."

The judge looked at the jury, "You've heard the evidence. What is your verdict?"

"GUILTY!!!" The jury called.

"GUILTY!!!" The audience echoed.

The judge banged his gavel, "Guards, take him away."

"Perverts should get what for," Larry said as he moved towards Bill. "What's that?" Peter continued. "Not what's that? What for," Joe finished.

The three guards wrapped chains around Bill and dragged him away, down the corridor. People pointed and laughed.

Half way down the hall, Bill had the intense urge to relieve himself. They led him to an elevator and pushed him in. The doors closed. The elevator ascended. After a few seconds, the elevator made a U-turn

and headed downwards. The U-turn had caused the elevator to turn upside down. Bill now stood on his hands, with his legs in the air. The position wasn't tiring, just disorienting.

The elevator doors opened to a toilet. Bill stepped out, correctly oriented.

Brown stuff smeared the walls. There was an inch of water on the ground. Unspeakable things floated in the water.

Bill just had to go. He stepped towards the toilet stalls. The toilets overflowed with brown stuff. The stalls were angled at 45 degrees. This meant you had to sit almost sideways when you did your thing.

Bill dropped his pants and a piece of meat fell out. Feeling nauseous, Bill went for what seemed like eternity.

Finally the torrent stopped. Bill tried to wipe his butt, but there was no toilet paper. He pulled his filthy pants up while being forced to stand at a 45-degree angle.

Bill navigated himself to the sink, avoiding the rats and rotting meat floating in the muck. There was no water or any towels. Bill used his pants, but only got his hands dirtier than before.

Many people think of hell as a place full of fire and brimstone. That was a naïve notion, as Bill could testify.

Bill headed back to the elevator. The elevator made the U-turn. The doors opened and the guards escorted him to the courtroom.

Bill looked around the courtroom. The audience looked more demonic, less human. Prosecutor Annie's face was unusually hairy. Bill looked again.

It wasn't Annie. It was Randy. He wore a frilly dress. His hair color was hot pink – the color of red-light districts, prostitution, homosexuality,

and sexually transmitted diseases. It was moldy and things crawled in it.

Bill had no objection to homosexuals. He knew that sexual preference was biologically determined and fixed at birth.

The problem was that Bill felt that the male anatomy was the most disgusting thing in the universe. There was a time when he was eight years old, when he saw a man taking a shower. That sight traumatized him for the rest of his life.

Randy smiled at him with missing teeth. He stuck his tongue out and waved it at Bill.

Randy lifted his dress. What hid below looked like the marriage between a piece of doggie-doo and a tumor. In other words, it wasn't much different from every man's junk. Randy pointed at his thing and said, "Do you want a piece of this?"

The judge sentenced Bill for being a pedophile, and the guards dragged him away.

He entered the elevator. This time the elevator took him to a men's bathroom. Naked men surrounded him with the biggest and most disgusting dongs he could imagine. Bill felt even more unclean than when he was in the toilet.

Bill recalled stallions and bulls. To Bill, they always looked as if they were perpetually going to the toilet.

Male dogs were also disgusting. After living decades, Bill could tolerate being with them for almost ten minutes. After that, the sight of their rear ends with their wagging things forced him to leave the room. For that reason, Bill only liked female dogs, horses and other animals. One friend said male dogs had better personalities.

Personality wasn't the issue for Bill. He never explained this to his friend because Bill knew the friend wouldn't understand.

Only females were beautiful. Only females were divine.

There were no females in Bill's hell, only men.

Bill stepped into the elevator and rode the U-tube. He was back at the court.

People testified. Bill felt even more guilt, shame and embarrassment than before.

Bill waited for the verdict.

Everyone waited.



Above the courthouse appeared a tiny point of light. The light flowed down, at first weak. The light intensified as the source moved downwards. The courthouse wavered and became indistinct as the light touched it. The demons filling the courthouse gradually faded with the touch of the light.

The grime on Bill's clothes and body dried and blew away.

Bill smelt freshly picked strawberries.

He looked above. Descending was an angel. She looked like Reese Witherspoon in the movie *Little Nicky* and the Little Mermaid, mixed together. She had glowing white wings, a halo and the mantle of a goddess. Floating around her head like a cloud was her hair the color of strawberry ice cream.

The angel was eighteen years old. She smiled at the sixteen-year-old boy below her.

Hell

The boy looked up in awe at the girl. He felt peace fill him as the demons left his mind, body and soul.

The angel landed in front of him. The sixteen-year-old boy couldn't believe his luck. He had always attracted girls too young for him. Finally, to meet an older woman whom he could love unconditionally was a dream, come true.

The angel hugged the boy to her breasts as he hugged her. He closed his eyes and rested in the arms of the girl of his dreams.



Bill rested unconscious in bed. Besides him on another bed was Annie. Both had their eyes closed. Sabrina placed magic circles on the forehead of both, and then mumbled something under her breath.

The royal family watched Bill's face. He looked like a man possessed. Demonic images rose to the surface and faded. This took place for almost an hour, as the process purged hundreds of demons. Finally, his face took on an angelic expression.

"Look at the monitor," Rufus indicted the screen above the bed. In the screen was an x-ray of Bill. His injuries were visible, including his missing left arm.

Then the miracle started. The family watched as bones and internal organs mended.

"You see that number on the top right side? That's his approximate biological age," Rufus indicated the screen.

Everyone looked. At first, the number indicated 37-243-14-37. "He has the biological age of 37 years, 243 days, 14 hours and 37 minutes. This has nothing to do with chronological age, although most of the time they are the same. People can speed ageing by abusing their bodies and slow it down by healthy living," Rufus continued.

By now, all physical injuries were healed save for the arm. The plaster cast on the stump of Bill's arm bulged. Seconds later the end of the cast cracked and split open. The arm regenerated as they watched.

"This is an incredible sight. Enjoy it while you can," Sabrina told them. "Very few people in the outer world have this ability."

"Look at that," Joseph pointed at the monitor. Bill's age indicator spun backwards. The minute and hour indicators were a blur. The day indicator ticked backwards. It went to zero, and then the year indicator switched to 36.

The family counted down the years. "35-34-33-32..." Everyone enjoyed the game.

"Look everyone, his arm is fully regenerated," John said.

The three boys compared their hands to Bill's left hand. Bill's left hand looked like it belonged to a sixteen-year-old boy. The right hand and the rest of his body were still at age twenty-seven.

Mama Jenny looked worried. "When will this stop?"

Rufus laughed. "He won't disappear. All this is telling us is that Annie has found Bill's soul and has made contact with it. Eventually he will return to a place he would have been had he never left this world."

James and Joseph looked at each other. "What about us?" James verbalized what Joseph was thinking. Dara held Joseph's hand.

"Don't worry. Nothing about you will change. You'll just have a grandfather that is younger than you, which is odd if you think about it," Sabrina reassured them.

Rufus nodded. "Even though time as such doesn't exist, from a practical point of view it does. Time travel is impossible, yet the

appearance of time travel is evident in your own story. Oh-oh..." Rufus said.

Rufus ran to Bill's side, grabbed a tube and stuck it in Bill's mouth. There was a rattling sound as the tube sucked up teeth. "Bill's teeth are falling out. I need to collect them or he might choke. Hair and teeth aren't alive in the way the rest of the body is. Since they can't take part in the regeneration process, they need to be replaced." Rufus reached into Bill's mouth and removed the last of his old teeth. "See that, the new teeth are already sprouting? You know, he did have a remarkably good set of teeth for an old man."

"But he still has old man hair," Dara said, as fashion conscious as always.

"His body has no need to shed his old hair and isn't aware of its existence, since hair is dead. From now on, his hair will grow like it did when he was..." Sabrina looked at the monitor.

The counter went down until it reached 18. At this point, the clock slowed sown. Finally, it stopped at age 16 years, 2 days.

"I believe the process has completed for now." Rufus pointed to Annie, who was stirring.

Annie opened her eyes and looked around. Mama Jenny sat beside her daughter. "You did well, dear."

Annie looked at everyone and said, "What happened? I don't remember anything."

"That's okay Annie," the father said. "The important thing is that Bill is back to normal."

Annie took that information in stride, surprising everyone. Annie nodded, "I know."



Bill opened his eyes. The trip to the underworld faded like a dream. Bill looked at the king and queen. He wanted to say, *I am sorry*. Instead, he said, "I accept any and all punishment."

The king raised his eyebrows, "Even corporal punishment?"

Bill nodded, "Not in front the Princess."

Bill looked at Annie. She was playing with two little-sister dolls. One had pink hair. The other had green hair. Bill hoped the green haired doll wasn't him. He wasn't a girl. Being a boy had its privileges. Only a boy could truly love a girl.

Queen Jenny looked sternly at her husband. "Bill dear, no one blames you for what happened. The demons are gone, Nexus has restored the barrier, and no one died. The citizens are unharmed. The soldiers are healing nicely." Queen Jenny chuckled. "They are all boasting how brave they are."

Bill looked at the queen with a pained expression, "Please stop calling me Bill. I'm not Bill and never will be. I'm not her..."

Bill paused, realizing he messed up again. "Can everyone please call me Grandpa from now on? I am a senile old coot. I can't handle all these things. Besides, I'm old enough to be the grandfather to all you young whippersnappers." Bill looked at Jerald, "Except you. However, I am old enough to be your father, so please have some respect."

Bill paused. "And Wizzie, if you ever call me Prince, I swear I-will-kick-your-ass."

That was the last stray. Bill threw a tantrum. Arms and legs swung wildly. One arm cast went flying, since it was now too big for his arm.

"I know. I know. What's his name called you that all the time." Bill was about to cry. His upper lip quivered.

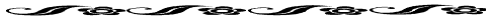
"We should let the old man rest. Everyone knows how senile and cranky they can get," Rufus said, humoring Bill. The royal family left the room, leaving Bill alone with the attendants.

"I'm eighty-six years old. I have a right to be senile and cranky." Bill closed his eyes and went to sleep.

While asleep, the attendants cleaned him and dressed him in hospital clothes.

Coming of Spring

With time, most people grow older
However, some become younger instead



Bill awoke refreshed. He adjusted his sheets and accidentally looked at his hands. He quickly hid them under the covers. Those hands didn't fit his self-image.

Bill looked around. How could he prevent himself from seeing his hands? Gloves – that would maintain his self-image.

The nurse entered. "Good morning Grandpa. How are we feeling?" the nurse asked, opening the curtains. "Breakfast will be served in a few minutes. Remember to eat all your vegetables. Old people need their fiber."

"Thanks dear," Bill said. "Can I please have a pair of gloves?"

The nurse left and returned with leather gloves. They fit like a second skin.

Bill enjoyed his meal and the strawberry milk. He felt like his old self with the milk.

"Where is everyone?" Bill asked the nurse.

"I'll call them in Grandpa," the nurse replied and left the room.

Bill got out of the bed and went to the washroom. He rearranged the gown so the opening was in the front and relieved himself. He then brushed his teeth, intentionally not looking at the mirror. Minty fresh breath was important.

Bill heard someone enter. "Please give me some normal clothes. I'm eighty-six years old. I can't handle these drafty gowns," Bill grumbled. No one can handle hospital gowns, not just old people.

Coming of Spring

Attendants brought clothes. They dressed him and left.

Bill walked to the window and looked out. It was a beautiful day. Bill had the urge to run.

The family entered. Bill felt good. "Good morning Majesties. Good morning kids."

Bill looked at Annie. The morning sun shone on her hair the color of strawberry ice cream, making it shimmer, causing Annie to look like the angel she was. "Hello angel."

Annie handed him his breath-mint dispenser. "Thanks baby love," Bill said. He put the frog into his pocket and smiled at her.

"Come on Grandpa. Let's play." Annie grabbed Bill's hand and pulled.

Bill looked at the king for approval. Both the king and queen looked relieved.

"Go ahead Grandpa. Have fun. I need to get back to work. I don't know where all that paperwork comes from. A king is nothing more than a glorified pencil pusher," the king said.

The queen smiled at Bill. "I'm glad you're feeling better Grandpa."

Bill let Annie drag him out of the room. They left the hospital. Along the way, people greeted him. "Good morning Grandpa." Bill waved at everyone with his gloved hand.

Behind the castle, Annie and Bill played catch. Bill then took Annie to the library and helped her study. That night Annie bathed with her nanny and slept in her own room. Bill bathed by himself and slept in his own room. This relieved Bill but he was secretly disappointed.



Two weeks passed. Bill no longer had a constant escort. Annie would often bug Bill's grandchildren. She loved playing with them, as well as her brother and sister. To Bill's mind, that was as it should be. Bill was now free to pursue his lifelong dream. If only Annie had someone her own age.

Bill walked to the palace guard's training-ground. He had been training the guards on the use of the double-bladed staff. They loved it, especially after watching how Bill used it in battle.

Unfortunately, it was getting harder to train with the soldiers. For some reason, the world seemed to be getting bigger. It didn't occur to him that he was shrinking. If he were shrinking, his clothes would get baggy. His clothes always fit.

What Bill didn't realize was that the Parents were changing his clothes to keep up with his shrinkage.

Bill met Larry, Peter and Joe practicing with the other soldiers. They ran to him and boasted about getting commissions in the Rosette military. Thanks to their intelligence and training, but most importantly their connection to Bill, they were now 2nd lieutenants. The impending war and Jerald's recommendation helped. Bill already knew this since he was their legal guardian and he had to give permission.

They talked about the officer training they were forced to undertake. "It's like going back to school," Larry said. "I hoped to avoid school by coming with you," Peter continued. "What a bummer," Joe finished.

Bill was happy. The military would be good for them. Bill looked at James and Joseph. They too were 2nd lieutenants. That wasn't surprising. The nobility here had to do military service and Bill gave permission for them as well. Bill of course was too old. Besides, he did service in the other world.

Coming of Spring

Both James and Joseph were training the recruits in the use of the double-bladed staff. They had taken over from Bill.

"I won't keep you. Have fun," Bill told them. He waved at his grandkids and left.

Two days later, to Bill's horror, he started losing teeth. Bill spat the teeth into his gloved hand and ran to the Wizard's tower. He shoved his handful of teeth at Jerald.

Jerald looked down at the nine-year-old boy standing in front of him, with old man hair and black roots on his head.

Jerald took out his tricorder, pretended to do something, and then said. "Grandpa, you're an old man. It's normal to lose teeth at your age. I can replace your teeth with false teeth, but first I'll need to remove your broken-down teeth. You don't want to get an infection and die. Don't worry, Grandpa, you'll be happy with the new set I'll give you. You should have them by tomorrow morning."

Jerald reached into Bill's mouth and removed the remaining teeth. Already baby teeth showed. Jerald felt like giving the boy a hug, but reframed. "Okay Grandpa, go play...I mean get back to work." Bill soon forgot about his teeth.

Bill found Annie and played hide-and-seek with her. He then carried her on his hip to the library to help her study.

Throughout the castle people secretly stared at him. They loved the sight of a nine-year-old boy carrying a six-year-old girl, and pretending to be an old man. It wasn't pretend for him. The nine-year-old boy fully believed he was eighty-six years old. He had the memories and the grandchildren to prove it.

Bill looked at the little girl he carried. He loved her, in a parental way off-course. He kissed her on the cheek and said, "You're a good girl."

That night, during family time, the king announced that the nobility of Rosette would be arriving to discuss how to handle the impending war.

Bill offered to help. The king decline, citing he was too old to help.

"I'm sorry Grandpa. Most people can't relate to people as old as you." King Jason stopped to consider. "You're eighty-six. Almost no one lives for that long. Please let me handle the nobility. I know the situation better than you do. In private I'll accept your council. Would that be acceptable?" The truth was the opposite. The nobility wouldn't relate to someone who had the appearance of a nine-year boy, despite his hair.

"You are the king, Your Majesty. I will accept your decision," Bill replied, as formally as ever. That was the only way he knew to prevent him from calling the king 'Papa Jason'. Bill did love the king and queen, and thought of them as his second set of parents. He wouldn't admit this to anyone, especially to himself.

Bill was comfortable with his identity. He knew he was an eighty-six-year-old grandfather. He had grandchildren. "Will there be anyone Annie's age coming? I wish Annie had a playmate, someone who isn't an old fart."

The parents looked at each other and shared a secret.

"Grandpa, I need to ask you a favor. Would it be okay for you to move to Prince Mark's room temporarily? We need the guest rooms for the people who are coming," the king asked.

"That's fine with me," Bill replied. He didn't mind staying in Mark's room. He found it to be the most comfortable room in the castle. He had been spending increasing amounts of time in that room. The previous day he had moved his backpack and computer there. He was considering sleeping there tonight. "I can move tonight."

Coming of Spring

"Thank-you Grandpa, we appreciate it. We're sorry for any inconvenience," the king apologized.

"Good night Mama, Papa," Bill said and then paused. He just had to ask the question that had been on his mind for a while. He looked at the king and queen. "Does it bother you when I call you that? No matter how much I try, it just comes out."

The queen looked fondly at him. "It doesn't bother us dear. I hope it doesn't bother you if I call you 'Dear'."

"No it doesn't bother me." Bill walked to Annie. "Give your Grandpa a hug."

Annie got up and walked towards Bill. Bill held her shoulders and finally realized just how big she was. "You're growing up really fast. It seemed like only last week that you were this high." Bill indicated a place about his waste. "Now you're almost as tall as me."

Annie giggled. "You're funny Grandpa." Annie gave Bill a hug. "Goodnight Grandpa." Bill waved behind and left the room.

Bill walked to the guest room, grabbed his clothes, and brought them to Mark's room. He then hung them up in the closet. He looked at Mark's old clothes and wondered if he could fit into them. He went back for his toothbrush and razor and other toiletries. A third trip made sure he didn't forget anything.

Bill sat at his desk and opened the laptop. He spent several hours watching anime. Yes, some adults like watching cartoons. Some, like him, watched too much. They also collected figures from the shows and went to conventions. The Japanese term was otaku. This literally meant, 'someone with obsessive interests, especially with anime (cartoons), manga (comic books) and video games'. Bill knew he wasn't an otaku, but he knew people would label him as such if they found out.

Bill jumped into bed without bothering to take a bath. Taking baths were too much trouble. He didn't know why people were so obsessed about them. If a person isn't dirty or stinky, then what's the point?

He looked around the room. If he were a kid, this is how he would decorate his room. It was strange how the whole castle seemed too big, except this room. This room was perfect. Bill went to sleep, not realizing the room was changing him.

That night Bill dreamed he played hide-and-seek with an unknown person. They would change their appearance and go out into the world. Following that, they would seek each other out until they met. They would then make passionate love with each other. The game would continue.

The next day at breakfast he informed everyone how comfortable the room was. "It's incredible how relaxing that room is, although I feel a little guilty for using his room."

The queen smiled at Bill, "Grandpa dear, we know that he would be happy to let you use his room. He was a good, loving boy, whom everyone cherished."

Those words made Bill feel sad, "I'm sorry for bringing up such sad memories." Bill hugged Annie and kissed her on the forehead. "I really wish there were something I could do. I feel so powerless. I've changed the course of a nation, but I can't change the life of one little girl."

Queen Jenny tentatively asked Bill, "Grandpa, is it okay if I hugged you? Young ones like hugging their elders whom they care for."

Bill smiled at the queen, "Of course." Bill raised his hands and the queen hugged him with all the feeling she was holding back for him.

Coming of Spring

"I think Jason needs a hug too from Grandpa," the queen said. Bill happily obliged.



The guests arrived a little after noon.

King Jason worried about Bill. The king knew Bill was emotionally fragile. He also knew that Bill had unbelievable spiritual strength. The incident with the demons was proof enough.

This was like dealing with a nuclear bomb that could go off at any time and destroy his kingdom. He couldn't send Bill away through Nexus, since destiny linked Bill and Annie. He just had to wait until it played out. Part of the advice the Nexus Reps gave them was to indulge Bill.

The king primed the castle staff to block any awkward questions about his guests. Jerald helped him on this matter.

As for the arriving nobility and military brass, he sent a letter to all, with the royal seal.

It read:

Greeting honored guests.

I have three royals from beyond Nexus. The three are James, Joseph, and a third person whose identity I don't know. According to the rules of their world, we must refer to this third person as 'Grandpa'. Please reframe from asking them any personal questions. They consider it impolite in their culture and it could cause an incident. I appreciate your help in this matter.

The first two have the appearance of teenage boys. The third has the appearance of a child of around six to nine years old. Please don't refer to the third's apparent age.

I would appreciate that you comply with these requirements.

Sincerely,



The royal family formally greeted the nobility and high-ranking military personnel as they entered the castle. First, the guests greeted the king, then the queen. They then greeted Prince John, Princess Dara and Princess Annie in turn.

Larry, Peter and Joe stood as an honor guard near the king. They looked sharp in their military dress uniforms. Later, the three friends helped serve the guests.

Annie was near Bill. He stood behind her and gave her emotional support. James and Joseph stood beside Bill and just observed. The boys were in civilian clothes. The king thought that best. They were here now as representatives of their own world. As such, the three were dressed in expensive clothes. The guests looked at them but said nothing.

Bill spotted a blond kid Annie's age and on impulse walked up to him. "Hi, I'm Bill. What's your name?"

"I'm Adam. What country are you from?" the kid smiled at him.

Bill instantly liked him. Perhaps he could make a good partner for Annie. "I'm from a world beyond Nexus. Annie has been showing me around."

"Hi Annie, I'm happy you're finally making friends," Adam said, noting how close she was to Bill. "It's hard for us to get her to play. She just sits around doing nothing."

Adam looked at Bill. "So what's your world like? How does it feel travelling through Nexus?"

Coming of Spring

Bill considered his answer. How do you describe something you know nothing about? "I was asleep during the trip. I woke up shortly after I arrived."

"That's too bad. Come on, let me introduce the others," Adam said and led them to a group of kids Annie's age. There were around eight kids of noble descent.

They asked Bill about his world and his country. "In my world, there are no dragons or flying islands. It's so boring. I went to a resort island when I arrived here. The flying dragons are cool. I wanted to fly on one of them but didn't get a chance. You're going to fly with me, aren't you baby girl?"

"Yes Grandpa," Annie replied.

"What else did we do?" Bill asked.

"We went fishing on Lake Wiley, Grandpa. Then we took the underground tour."

"That's right. I forgot about that."

One girl named Flora asked, "Why does Annie always call you Grandpa?"

Bill replied, "Because I'm her Grandpa." He smiled and winked at the girl. Everyone laughed.

Flora wasn't happy with the answer. "No you're not."

"She calls me Grandpa because I'm eighty-six years old and am a feeble old man." Bill demonstrated by walking around, hunched. He cupped his hand to his ear and said, "What's that you're saying sunny? I can't hear you." This was too funny for everyone.

Flora got angry and stomped away. She didn't like people making fun of her. After that, the kids started calling him Grandpa.

"You put her in her place," one kid said.

"She's always boasting because she's so pretty and her parents are so rich," another kid replied.

All in all, Bill was satisfied with Annie's friends. If only they were to interact more on a regular basis. The problem to him was that the children of the nobles were home-schooled. He assumed they were. Perhaps he could get a school built for them. That should improve their level of education as well. He would need to speak to the king about that eventually. Bill forgot Annie was too young for primary school.

Attendants served dinner. Bill and his grandkids sat at their own table as foreign dignitaries. Singers and dancers entertained the guests. After dinner, the guests retired to their chambers or their own ships.

During dinner, Bill had a revelation. He had shrunk. One moment he was full grown, and now he was barely taller than Annie. He couldn't figure out when that happened. The same thing happened when growing up. One moment he was shorter than his sisters, and the next moment he was taller than them.

Bill hunted Jerald and asked him about his height. "Jerald, I have a problem. I just noticed that I am short. I think I fooled a bunch of kids into thinking I was their age. The fact that my clothes fit is proof that everyone knows. I want to know why I have shrunk."

Jerald looked at Bill. The king, queen, and he had spent hours discussing this question. Bill's self-denial couldn't hide his physical changes forever.

Coming of Spring

“Grandpa, you seemed to have caught some infection when you passed through the gate and entered our world. It’s not contagious. The good news is that it has almost run its course. Soon you’ll be back to normal, I assure you.” Jerald didn’t bother to clarify what ‘normal’ meant.

“So I’m not going to disappear out of existence, age reverse into nothingness?”

Even Bill couldn’t hide his age reversal from himself forever. However, he tried his best to do so, which was why he stopped looking at himself in the mirror. He had no idea what he looked like.

If he did think about it he would have to believe in a conspiracy, where the king, queen and others were manipulating him, forcing him to take on the likeness of someone he wasn’t.

“Don’t worry. You’ll return to what you should be soon enough.” That was cryptic, Bill thought, and left.

Bill went to bed. He remembered to take a bath so Mama Jenny wouldn’t scold him. It’s not easy taking a bath while not looking at yourself.

The next few days were pretty much the same. Dignitaries discussed stuff behind closed doors, kids ran around and played, and wives gossiped.

Bill’s age reversal process had finally stopped at Annie’s age. This was good news, since Bill’s body and spirit were no longer under the intense pressures it had been during the changing process.

Fundamental changes of the type Bill was undergoing can’t be instantaneous, or the connection between body and soul would fray and cause insanity. Anyone who experienced their identity shift would understand.

Identity is anything people use to identify themselves with. This includes self-professed race, gender (both physical and otherwise), the age we view ourselves, appearance, viewpoint, memories, etc. Decades ago, some doctors gave one African-American an opportunity to lighten his skin. He refused because he considered it too much like dying.

For Bill, the only thing that wasn't changing was his gender. That was small comfort. He was turning into another person. The old Bill would be gone forever.

The best way to cope is to cling to the only thing that never changes, and realize that that is the true YOU. It is that which says, I AM. A person can cope with anything in life by anchoring to this rock. Without this, we are just floating pieces of jetsam. With this, we become the center around which everything turns. It brings about a peace and stillness that nothing in the world can match.

Bill wasn't conscious of his changes – he just felt them in a vague sort of way.

During the night, when the rejuvenating process ended, his old hair disappeared. Someone must have cut it, since there was no hair on the pillow. His new hair sprouted nicely.

He now looked the same as when his adoptive parents found him, but one year older. He now had fully grown jet-black hair and dark brown eyes. His hair was in the style he had throughout his life, so it was easy to ignore.

The new stability in Bill pleased the king. This meant demon gates wouldn't be opening by accident. With one less worry, the king was able to focus fully on the peace negotiations taking place in a few days.

Coming of Spring

This was the last day of planning at the castle. The next day, everyone would head towards the neutral country of Nadine, the home of this world's only gate into Nexus. Nadine had agreed to sponsor the negotiations.

The trip itself would take three days by ship. Formal negotiations would start the day after they arrived.



Bill entered the room where the people gathered. He spotted the children and walked towards them with Annie besides him. "I want you to talk to the other kids," Bill whispered to Annie. "I don't want you to grow up alone. Believe me, it's not fun."

"Yes Grandpa," Annie replied. She was used to his lectures. She knew he loved her, even though he never said so.

Bill considered talking to the adults, but they seemed to be shunning him. He also felt a certain distance between them and him, perhaps because of his height or lack thereof.

Kids, he could relate to. He always thought of himself as being a kid at heart. His mother always accused him of that, when she would catch him watching cartoons, even at the age of thirty or forty. *Sailor Moon* was a good show.

Two girls stood together. Flora and Brittany discussed important world events. "That prince is so cute. I'm glad he no longer has that ratty hair," Flora said. Brittany agreed.

Bill ignored the conversation. It didn't relate to him.

Bill joined the kids, making sure they were okay. He also made sure Annie mingled. Annie talked to the other noble kids, for which Bill was grateful. He loved it when he saw her happy.

Flora complimented Bill's hair. "I like what you did with your hair," she said. He no longer had skunk hair, with black on the bottom and old man gray on the top. He was now the only person in the castle with black hair, and very healthy black hair at that.

"Thanks, I combed it," Bill replied.

Flora had pink hair, but to Bill, this pink looked boring and dreary compared to Annie's hair, which was the color of strawberry ice cream. Bill knew others would disagree with his assessment, since Flora had won numerous beauty contests, both nationally and globally. She was proud to explain that to everyone who would listen.

Flora loved her hair and constantly played with it. She asked about Bill and pretended to be interested. Bill found it difficult to answer those questions without revealing his true age. He didn't want to alienate the kids. Only as an insider could he help Annie.

Flora looked at her mother and her mother encouraged her on. Bill was experienced enough to know what was going on. Mother Mosey must be desperate to get an inn with a prince, to consider him as a suitor.

Flora made Annie jealous. Annie didn't like other girls flirting with her Prince. Annie grabbed hold of Bill's arm in obvious jealousy. Bill found that adorable, but his arm was hurting.

Bill guided Annie to a private location and spoke quietly to her. "Baby girl, don't get jealous. You know I'm not interested in her. You know that, don't you?" Bill wanted to mention age differences, but considering who he was talking to, that didn't seem appropriate.

Annie seemed unsure. Everyone said Flora was cute and she would make a good wife for a prince, because of her heritage.

Coming of Spring

Bill sighed. If only Annie would associate with boys her own age, such as Adam, and not fixate on him. But to Annie, boys her own age weren't worth looking at. They didn't have the emotional strength she needed.

Strength of character is important to woman of all ages. They need it. Too often, they mistake it for aggressiveness, causing them to enter into abusive relationships.

Bill tried again. "I am eighty-six years old. I've spent the last eighty years looking for the perfect girl. Do you really think I would settle for someone like her?"

Annie seemed relieved. "No," she said.

"That's my girl. Now go play," Bill said. He stood on tiptoes and kissed Annie on her forehead. Annie was his height.

Lunchtime came. The kids sat around a table their size. Bill decided to sit with Annie to keep her company. Bill noticed that when she was alone with her family, she was fine. That changed in strange places and around strangers. Then she clung to Bill.

Bill looked at the sitting kids. "Okay everyone, remember to eat your vegetable," he told them. He took a bite of his broccoli and almost spat it out. He closed his eyes and grimaced at the taste.

That was strange. Yesterday he was fine eating broccoli. Now it tasted like crap. Of course, yesterday he had old-man hair and today he didn't. He didn't know it, but he was now the proud owner of a brand new six-year-old baby body. Six year olds don't like broccoli.

One of the kids noticed his expression. "Hey Grandpa, don't forget your greens as well." They laughed. He deserved that.

Lunch ended. As usual, Bill ate strawberry ice cream and Annie ate mint ice cream. The children discussed things all children loved talking

about. Bill didn't pay much attention, except to make sure Annie joined in the conversation.

Everyone got up to leave the table for the play area.

Bill pulled out his froggie without thinking and took out a breath-mint. It went "Reedeep". Everyone looked at him – a grown man playing with a child's toy.

Bill's face turned beet red. "Okay, I'm a baby," Bill said a little too loudly and looked down. The adults in the area turned and looked at him.

"Easy Grandpa, no one thinks you're a baby," Adam said. "See I have one as well." Adam showed Bill his rabbit mint dispenser. The other boys had them as well.

That was small comfort coming from a cute little boy. Adam and the rest were still babies.

But I'm not like you. I really am an adult. He couldn't say that. No one would believe him.

When Bill was young, people sometimes told him not to act like a child. It's not possible to argue against that and not look like a child.

The boys discussed the popular line of toys the frog dispenser belonged to.

"So Grandpa, what's your favorite episode of Dragon X?" Adam asked.

"I'm sorry but I've never watched the show. Annie bought this for me when I came," Bill said.

"Okay then, let's watch the first episode," Adam said and everyone followed. They spent the rest of the day watching anime.

Coming of Spring



During family time, both James and Joseph confided in Bill that Mosey tried to arrange a marriage between him and her daughter.

She told them how perfect the marriage would be. Her Dukedom had a rich supply of dragonite and other natural resources. They had a strong industrial base, and good farming. Her family had a rich and long heritage. The girl was pretty and she would produce beautiful children when she turned marriageable age.

In a world where countries arrange royal marriage before birth this was natural. However, both found it awkward to discuss marriage arrangements between their grandfather and a seven-year-old girl.

“What did you say to her?” Bill asked.

“We told her that you were already in an arranged marriage back home, beyond Nexus,” Joseph said.

“She left, but I don’t think she’s through with you,” James said.

“Grandpa, Larry, Peter and Joe are having a party. Is it okay if we went?” Joseph asked.

Bill looked at his two beloved grandchildren. “No drinking, you’re still too young. Don’t stay up too late. Give your Grandpa a goodnight kiss.”

The two bent down, gave the little boy before them a hug and kiss on the cheek, said “Good Night,” and left.



That night, Annie had bad dreams of girls stealing Bill away from her. She went to Bill’s/Mark’s room. “Grandpa, I can’t sleep.”

Bill smiled at Annie. She was so cute in her PJ's. "Come on, baby love," Bill said and walked Annie to the room's balcony. It was a beautiful cloudless night. Stars covered the sky.

Bill sat on a swing couch, the type you find in backyards. He motioned Annie to lie down with her head on his lap. Bill stroked her hair and thought of the day everyone went fishing on the lake, shimmering like emeralds. It was like an emerald bay.

There was a lullaby about an emerald bay, with a boat and a little girl...Billy Joel's *Lullaby*. How did it go?

Goodnight, my angel
Time to close your eyes
And save these questions for another day
I think I know what you've been asking me
I think you know what I've been trying to say
I promised I would never leave you
And you should always know
Wherever you may go
No matter where you are
I never will be far away

Goodnight, my angel - Now it's time to sleep
And still so many things I want to say
Remember all the songs you sang for me
When we went sailing on an emerald bay
And like a boat out on the ocean
I'm rocking you to sleep
The water's dark
And deep inside this ancient heart
You'll always be a part of me

Goodnight, my angel
Now it's time to dream
And dream how wonderful your life will be
Someday your child may cry
And if you sing this lullaby
Then in your heart
There will always be a part of me

Someday we'll all be gone
But lullabies go on and on...

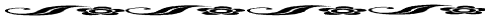
Coming of Spring

They never die
That's how you
And I
Will be

Bill probably destroyed the song. That didn't matter. Annie was asleep. Bill picked her up and carried her to her room.

Towards Destiny

People treat us differently based on appearance,
yet our true self stays the same through every stage of life.



Bill got up early. He couldn't wait to get aboard the ship Papa Jason had said would take them to the peace talks. He didn't know what it was. Papa Jason refused to tell him. He only said it would be a surprise. Bill just had to wait.

He ate breakfast quickly and headed for the castle's ship dock. Bill considered offering the king his help, but he knew it was useless. Everyone seemed to be treating him like a child, even though he was eighty-six years old.

However, he was an adult. He had to deal with it.

"Come on Annie. I can't wait to see the ship we'll be sailing in. I hope it's a clipper. I love those ships. I think they are the coolest of all of them." Bill dragged Annie along by the hand.

"I know," Annie replied. Annie enjoyed it when her Prince talked about ships and other things he loved.

They raced to the west tower, the highest tower of the castle. The tower was 600 feet high and 200 feet in diameter. It contained four docking stations, which were currently empty.

Bill walked around the tower, impatient for some action. The rest of the kids joined them. Bill entertained them while they waited, telling them stories of sea monsters.

"Do you know what ship we'll be sailing in? I tried to find out but no one would tell me," Adam asked.

"Papa Jason said it was a surprise."

Adam looked curiously at Bill but said nothing.

Flora wouldn't let it slide. "Why do you always call King Jason *Papa Jason?*"

Bill went through several explanations before choosing one he liked. "I don't know. I guess that's how my parents told me to address them."

Flora wasn't satisfied. "Why did they tell you to address them that way? You only address in-..."

"I don't know," Bill answered, annoyed.

"Parents are strange creatures. They always do and say strange thing," Adam responded, coming to the rescue.

"Like taking baths every day," one boy shouted from the back.

"Like eating your broccoli," a girl cried.

The kids had fun discussing the crazy things their parents and nannies insisted they do. Bill couldn't stay out of the conversation. Even Annie joined.

"The ship is coming," Adam shouted. He ran off to the railing, along with everyone else. Bill stayed where he was and watched the kids.

Far off in the distance, everyone saw a tiny dot. It resolved itself into a clipper. The clipper had white sails and a wooden hull.

"That's a strange sight, a ship floating in the sky. I thought ships floated in the sea," Larry said. "Only fishies float in the sea, unless you mean submarines," Peter continued. "Speaking of sandwiches, I'm hungry," Joe finished. They were on duty, helping with security, but they were more interested in eating.

Bill didn't think the ship was weird until the trio spoke. He then realized how freaky it was. The clipper moved as if it were sailing on a river. The sails billowed in the wind. As the ship neared the tower, it made an arc, making its side visible. The side of the ship had the words, "Prince Mark".

Bill felt a hand on his shoulder. "That's the official transport of the royal family. We use it for all diplomatic and state events. I named her after Annie's Prince. He always loved clippers."

Bill felt a thousand emotions flood through him as he heard Papa Jason speak. Bill reached around and hugged his waist with one hand.

Bill said quietly, "I really wish I were him."

"I know son." The king patted Bill on the back. "Come on Grandpa. It's time to board the *Prince Mark*."

The king and Bill boarded the ramp and ship officers promptly saluted. The king shook hands with the captain. "I would like someone to give Grandpa and his friends a tour of this ship."

The captain nodded at an officer. "Please follow Ensign Jane."

Jane stood to the side and waited. The noble kids surrounded her. Bill wished he wasn't the only adult in the tour. He felt out of place.

Mosey indicated to Flora to hold Bill's hand. Flora didn't like others telling her what to do, but complied. Mosey turned to James and Joseph. She started her pitch about a royal marriage between her daughter and their ward.

Mosey made sure the king and queen weren't around before starting. "You have to admit. They look cute together. What better partner could you possibly find for your baby brother?"

Bill rolled his eyes. *I may look young, but baby brother? That's ridiculous.*

Bill didn't have time to think about such things. He was currently in a tug-of-war between Annie and Flora.

The tour began. "The king named the ship after the late Mark Milford of Blears.

"It was ordered a month after his death, and was commissioned two months ago. It's currently the largest private vessel in the country. It's capable of carrying 1200 passengers and crew.

"In addition to the winds, the *Prince Mark* can travel the ether streams."

Bill's ears picked up when he heard that. "I need Papa Jason to take me on one of those trips. I have a picture of ships travelling through the stars," Bill whispered. The paining was *The Ether Stream*, by Rodney Matthews. Bill turned to Annie. "How about that, doesn't that sound like fun?"

"Yes Grandpa," Annie replied.

"You can come on my ship anytime you want. It will be yours if you marry me. You don't have to ask anyone's permission," Flora said. That was a sweet offer. However, Bill didn't like the girl.

"My dad's ship is bigger than yours," Annie challenged.

"Your dad's ship is a state ship. He can't use it just for the fun of it. My ship is for personal use," Flora countered.

Annie couldn't compete with someone who manipulated people since before she could talk. Flora was a demanding child.

They passed the ballroom, dining room, and kitchens before going to the interesting places. These included the swimming pool, play rooms filled with video games, toys and stuff, and other fun places.

The *Prince Mark* was the symbol of the Rosette Kingdom and its monarchy. As such, it was as glamorous as any cruise liner could be. Just like the floating resort, *The World*, it was for VIPs.

They entered the engine room, where the devices for catching and riding the winds were located. A special material coating the bottom of the ship helped the process.

Bill wanted to ask about the engineering principles involved, but didn't want to bore his companions to tears.

Up aboard, they examined the sails. They could catch class 3 ether winds, impressive for a private vessel.

"I have a question. This ship can travel through the universe, between stars. Am I correct?" Bill asked.

"That's correct Prince – Grandpa," Jane corrected herself. "Level-1 streams can take us anywhere within this solar system in a few weeks. Level-2 streams can take us to the nearest stars within months. The *Prince Mark* can ride Level-3 streams. This means that we can travel anywhere in the galaxy within 1-2 years."

"I come from a world beyond Nexus. In my universe, there is no air in outer space. Instead, asteroids and galactic radiation fill space. Is that the same here?" Bill asked.

"That's correct P – Grandpa. We have special energy shields for keeping the air in and space debris and solar radiation out. We can pass through the sun's corona without harm."

"How about solar flares – aren't those dangerous?"

Jane gained new respect for Bill. “This ship will be destroyed if hit with a powerful enough solar flare. Don’t worry. We can avoid them.”

“Also, in my universe, nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. Are wormholes involved in the travel process? Are ether streams the movement of space itself? Why do you need something that looks like a vessel designed for water travel? Does it involve quantum-mechanical processes, perhaps Bose-Einstein condensations?”

Jane looked at Bill in surprise. “How old are you?” Jane asked. She then covered her mouth when she realized her mistake. “I’m sorry. I’m not supposed to ask that question.”

Bill smiled. “There’s a reason I’m called Grandpa. I’m older than the moon and younger than the stars. The two everyone thinks are my big brothers are in fact my grandchildren.”

Bill paused. He then spoke in a serious voice. “Please don’t tell anyone what I just told you. It could have political repercussions. This is especially important now because of the peace negotiations.”

Bill looked at the other kids and knew they would never keep their mouths shut. “Just joking – In my world, we have a device that makes kids learn real fast. I put the device on my head and go to sleep. When I wake up, I know stuff.”

Bill looked around, “Is it time for lunch? I want some ice cream. I also want to play that video game. What more fun things are there on this ship?”

“You fooled me Grandpa. For a second I thought you really were an old man,” Adam chuckled. The rest of the kids laughed as well.

Jane wasn’t sure. She pulled out a tricorder and looked at it. Adam asked, “So what’s his actual age?”

"He's almost six years, one month old," Jane said.

That sent cold chills down Bill's back. That's something he didn't want to hear. "What did the king tell you?"

Jane realized her error. She bowed to him. "I'm sorry Grandpa. I know I'm not allowed to look into your history. Please forgive me."

Good. That's the proper attitude. Respect your elders. "Only if you buy me some ice cream," Bill smiled.

"Strawberry ice cream, because it reminds him of me," Annie said smugly.

By now, it was lunchtime. "Okay everyone, time for lunch." They headed for the dining room.

The food was good and the ice cream was excellent. Bill held a spoonful of ice cream up and compared it to Annie's hair, which was off-course the color of strawberry ice cream.

For some reason, Annie's hair looked tastier. "What's the matter, Grandpa?" Annie asked.

"I was wondering which was tastier, this ice cream or your hair," Bill replied.

Annie threw her head back and laughed, "You're being silly again." Perhaps he was.

That afternoon, Larry, Peter and Joe entertained the kids. They did a Three Stooges skit. It was a big hit. The kids loved it. Bill had to admit they were funny. After that, the trio led the kids in various games. The adults were grateful for their hard work.

"You'll make great baby-sitters. I'm too old to have kids, but if I did have them, I would choose you three," Bill told them later.

Bill left for the library. He wanted to find out how the ship worked. He started with the children's books. They illustrated the fundamental principles. There was no magic involved, but an understanding of physics that people on earth didn't possess.

He looked for the more advanced books. There were the usual books on string theory and quantum mechanics. He found some of the books too advanced for him. They contained mathematics he never learned. He knew what the Calculus and the Fourier Transform was, but what the hell was a *unimodular lattice of rank 8*?

The ether streams were literally space itself moving. The Universe was like a giant hot spring, with updrafts, down drafts and currents. The surface of the spring was the Universe. The updrafts represented cosmic inflation, the general expansion of the Universe, and the downdrafts were gravity.

Einstein described the universe as the space-time continuum. This was wrong. Time wasn't an actual dimension but the unfolding of something more fundamental. It wasn't possible to fully define the process.

Another book explained why ether ships looked like watercraft. The only requirements were sails and a flat surface. The ships just happen to look like watercraft for historical reasons.

The sailing process had something to do with the fact that the everyday 3-dimensional universe was actually 2-dimensional, like a sheet of paper. From the outside, the universe looked like the surface of a pond in the rain. Ripples entirely covered the surface.

As with holograms, the third dimension was an illusion. The ships were somehow able to ride on this 2-d surface. The process was mathematical and almost impossible to visualize.

Bill considered the world he was in, with its strange mixture of advanced and ancient technology. Arthur C. Clarke once said 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' That certainly applied here.

Bill got up and looked for a book on dragonite. There were several. Mathematical equations filled one book. Another described how the crystals resonated with neutrinos coming from the sun, and how it affected the strong and weak nuclear forces of atoms.

Bill put the books down. This knowledge was rewriting everything he knew about science. He hadn't touched on books explaining Nexus and his brain was drowning.

"Grandpa, Princess Annie got hurt and is calling for you." Bill got up and followed the attendant. The attendant led him to the kid's corner.

Bill hesitated a moment before entering. Bill was Annie's guardian, so it was okay to enter.

Bill ran to Annie and gave her a hug. "It's all right baby love, I'm here." She had scraped her knee. He kissed it.

"That's so cute," someone said. Bill ignored that.

"Can someone please bring me a bowl of mint ice cream?" Bill called.

Someone spoke in the back, "Gross, how can anyone eat mint ice cream?"

Annie screamed back, "Don't make fun of mint ice cream. It reminds me of..."

"Hush. You don't need to explain." Bill fed her ice cream, helped her get up, and got her to start playing again.

An attendant looked at him. "You're good with children."

Bill smiled back, "Thanks. I've raised a few." The attendant looked confuse but didn't say anything.

Nighttime came. It was surprising how fast time flies when you ride on a cruise ship.

Bill went to bed after playing video games for only one hour.

While lying in bed, Bill thought about what Jane said bout his age. According to the rules of this universe, the body he was currently residing in had the biological age of six years, the same as Annie. It took Bill several tries to get those exact words.

Bill scratched his butt. Yes, that was a baby butt. A thought came into Bill's head. *If I played with myself, would that make me a pedophile?* For whatever reason, he had no interest in playing with his or anyone else's butt. Butts were just for sitting on and kicking.

All the philosophical, emotional and ethical questions the situation forced him to address gave him a headache. Who exactly was he? Did he have the right to be with Annie and eventually marry her? After all, they were both biologically the same age – or were they?

Would people who remembered previous lives as children have the same moral dilemmas he faced? Was that comparison even relevant?

Bill went to sleep without finding any answers.



The next day aboard the *Prince Mark* was pretty much the same as the previous day. The rivalry between Annie and Flora continued. Flora wanted to become a princess. Annie wanted her friend and protector.

Bill stepped out on the sun deck. The three friends were helping an aristocrat with her chair. She complained that her husband had left her.

They passed Bill while going to another errand. "Friends are like chickens, they sometimes fly away," Larry said. "Chickens don't fly," Peter continued. "Neither do friends," Joe finished. Bill waved to them and they waved back.

Bill looked around. Joseph was making out with Dara. *Young love*. Bill thought back to his youth, but had no experiences to compare. He never knew young love.

"Mark, come here. I want you to see something," Annie called.

"Okay Annie," he replied and ran to where she stood. They both looked down at the clouds the clipper cut threw.

The clouds spread out like an ocean of white. The clipper sailed the clouds like a water boat on a lake. Swimming through the clouds were creatures that looked like fish with wings. They were multi-colored and the size of whales. Each had two sets of wings: one set in the front and one in the back.

The perpetually hovering Flora asked, "I thought your name was Grandpa."

Bill glanced at Flora and looked back at the fish. "I am Grandpa."

"But Annie just called you, 'Mark'."

Bill looked at her with slight annoyance. "Annie didn't call me Mark. She called me Grandpa."

Flora turned around and confronted Annie. "You called him Mark. Don't deny it."

Annie smiled at her. "No I didn't. You must be getting senile."

Flora walked off in a huff, looking for someone to flatter her.

Bill looked at the bow of the ship and decided he wanted to pull a Leonardo DiCaprio. Everyone needed to do it at least once in their life.

Bill grabbed Annie's hand and pulled her towards the bow. "Come on Annie, I want you to do something." Bill positioned Annie at the bow of the ship facing forward and told her to hold her hands stretched out. Bill held her securely from the back. The breeze felt good.

They both got down and headed back. The cruise directors had plenty of events planned for the kids. The first was a treasure hunt. Bill was reluctant at first, but Annie and Flora dragged him into it. He helped Annie win, no surprise there.

Next, they had a sing along. They sang kiddy songs similar to *the wheels of the bus go round and round*. Everyone sang, except for Bill. This caused everyone to try to get him to sing. "There's a reason why I'm called Grandpa," Bill complained, but finally joined.

In the end, he admitted he enjoyed it a little. The songs were from his childhood memories. He had no problem singing them.

That night they had a concert for the adults. Annie insisted he sing, *when the moon rises*. The rest agreed since he had a beautiful singing voice. "I haven't sung that in ages," he complained. The directors assured him he would be fine.

Bill felt nervous stepping on the stage. He didn't get time to practice. Bill looked at the king and queen and almost ran off the stage. Fortunately, he spotted Annie.

Bill focused on Annie's hair, the color of strawberry ice cream and felt relaxed. He took a deep breath and started singing. Bill's fears were

groundless. He sang beautifully. It was as if he had only learned that song last year.

The king and queen gave him a standing ovation. Bill felt proud. He bowed and stepped off the stage.

Eventually came Annie's turn to sing. She didn't know what to sing, so he reached into his memories for a song. "How about singing '*the little rose*'?" he suggested.

After the song was over, Bill ran to her and gave her a hug. "You sang that song beautifully, baby love. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks Grandpa," she said, and they sat down.

That night, while lying in bed, Bill had to admit he had enjoyed himself. He couldn't believe he remembered all those old songs. Pretending to be a kid was fun.

Bill considered tomorrow. That was the last day of the journey. That night they would arrive at Nexium, the capital of Nadine.

The next day he would see Mark's parents. Mark's parents – he didn't relish meeting them. What kind of people were they? They were willing to go to war over something that was nobody's fault.

Bill didn't like people abusing political power for selfish reasons. So many people were going to die, just to justify their feelings of loss. It was so senseless. Bill hated it. What could he do? He was a political nobody.

These worries were giving him nightmares. He thought of his childhood, when he had nightmares. He pretended his teddy bear was a cute girl. Her job was to protect his back from demons.

Bill took one of his pillows and placed it against his back. It wasn't as good as the real thing, but it would have to do. Bill fell asleep, feeling the pillow was his imaginary girl.

Bill woke up to find Annie pressed up against his back. "Good morning, baby girl," Bill greeted Annie.

"Good morning, Grandpa," she replied and rubbed her eyes.

They changed, ate breakfast in the royal suite's dining room, and left for the play area. The kids were there and making a nuisance of themselves.

The three friends helped babysit. They didn't enjoy this but they were soldiers and had to obey.

Bill went to the bow of the ship and looked at the sea of clouds. Above, the sky was blue and cloudless. The breeze was cool. This was a good place to think.

Bill went through scenario after scenario, but nothing worked. No matter how he thought of it, there was no way he could change the future course of events.

Bill looked up and saw thunderclouds off in the distance. The sails billowed in the wind.

The storm approached. Bill could see lightning and hear thunder. The clouds knew war was approaching and wanted to get in on the act.

Bill loved storms, but this storm made him nervous. It reflected the turmoil in his heart.

The *Prince Mark* sailed serenely through the clouds and towards destiny.

Storm clouds surrounded the ship. Lightning flashed everywhere. The sound of thunder was loud, but much softer than Bill expected. Rain fell, but none touched the sails or the ship.

Despite the intense winds, only a soft damp breeze touched Bill. This had all of the advantages of a thunderstorm but none of the disadvantages.

"You love thunder storms, don't you," a voice spoke from behind.

"Yes baby girl. I love the power of storms. It reduces all human struggles to insignificance." Bill moved to the left to let Annie stand beside him.

They both leaned on the railing, enjoying the spectacle.

A voice from behind interrupted them. "What are you guys doing?"

Bill glanced back at Adam, "Just enjoying the storm. It's incredible that we aren't affected by the storm."

"I know. These ships are incredible. Did you know clippers were Mark's favorite? Mine too. We would play with models all the time." Adam joined Bill at the bow.

Bill reached around Annie's back and held her right arm near the shoulder, to make sure she didn't feel left out. Bill's left arm held the railing.

"I saw the model of the *Lady of the Skies* in Mark's room. I had a ship just like that when I was a kid."

"You always talk as if you're an old man," Adam laughed.

"What do you think will happen tomorrow?" Bill asked Adam.

Adam looked at Bill. “No point worrying about things we have no control over. It’ll be a different story when we grow up. We are kids. We need to enjoy it while we can.”

Words of wisdom from babies, as the expression goes.

Adam was a good kid. Bill liked him. Adam was the type of friend Bill wished he had while growing up.

“Now you’re the one talking like an old man,” Bill said. They both laughed.

“Do you want to play video games?” Adam asked.

Bill looked at Annie, unsure. “It’s okay Grandpa. Go play,” Annie smiled.

“Thanks baby girl. You go play as well.” Bill and Adam walked away.

“Why does everyone call you Grandpa?” Adam asked.

“Cause’ I’m older than the moon and younger than the stars. Come on, I’ll race you.” Bill ran off and Adam followed.

Bill spent the next few hours with someone who felt like his best friend. Too soon, an attendant interrupted them with a call to lunch. During lunch, they discussed why the clipper was the best of all the ether ships ever built.

Back to the arcade they went. Not surprisingly, Bill was better than Adam. Bill had spent decades playing video games, not that he was an otaku or anything. Bill helped Adam with his technique. They both had fun.

An attendant called, “You have only a half-hour to play. Then you’ll need to get changed for dinner.”

"I hate formal events. They're all so boring. All they do is talk and clap. Most of the time, I have no idea what they are talking about. I also hate those formal clothes. I always have to be so careful."

"You sound like Mark," Adam laughed.

Bill suddenly felt depressed. "Come on, might as well change. I'll see you in the dining area."

Bill walked back to his room, thinking about tomorrow. He didn't relish the coming storm.

Bill quickly showered and changed into the clothes left for him. For the first time in weeks, he looked in the mirror. He chose not to look at his face, but just his clothes. He was afraid of what he would see.

Bill had to admit, the clothes looked good. The color green suited him well. It made him look like a foreign prince. The saying was true. Clothes do make the man, or whatever he was.



It was dinnertime, the last meal aboard the *Prince Mark*. The ship would dock in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep. The next day the delegates would head for the talks.

Bill sat at the head table with the royal family. He took the leftmost seat. Annie sat to the right of him. James and Joseph were next. The king, queen, John and finally Dara followed.

The three friends stood as honor guards at the doors, making sure only those invited could enter.

During dinner, there were the usual boring speeches. Every few seconds, people would clap. Then there were the standing ovations. Bill always hated these events. Unfortunately, he was at the head table, so he couldn't leave.

Bill took it on himself to entertain Annie. He would make silly comments about the people around the hall and Annie would giggle.

Finally, the old fogies finished their speeches. Desert was served. People got up and mingled.

Flora left her seat and approached Bill. She loved speaking to VIPs. "Mum said we're going to add a new wing to our mansion," Flora boasted.

"I'm sorry Flora, but I'm not in the mood right now." All those sales pitches were getting on Bill's nerves.

"But don't you want to hear about my mansion? It's more luxurious than Annie's dusty castle," Flora replied.

"Tomorrow they'll be starting peace negotiations. If that fails, we'll be going to war," Bill spoke patiently.

"Who cares about such things? I would rather have fun."

Bill turned and stared at Flora, "Who cares? WHO CARES?" Bill raised his voice. He was sick of the bratty girl.

"Both our countries are going to war, and you don't care? You have no idea the horrors of war," Bill shouted at her. Bill took a breath. "If you want to marry me, speak to my brothers. They decide who I'll marry."

The entire room went silent with that outbreak. Everyone stared at Bill. Bill realized he had put his foot into his mouth. He needed to apologize. The king whispered to an attendant. The attendant ran off.

Someone commented, "Did he say 'Both countries'?"

Bill got up and spoke to the audience, "Okay so I am a foreigner. This is none of my business."

Bill stepped to the front of the table and faced the king. Bill formally bowed, "Please forgive my outburst. It was uncalled for."

Bill turned around and bowed to the audience, "Sorry for disturbing you." Bill walked back to his seat, sat down and looked at his plate. Annie held his hand.

Seconds later, Mosey went up and dragged Flora away.

Finally, the dinner ended. People filed out. Only the honor guard and attendants remained. Bill walked to the three friends. "I hate formal events. They're all so boring."

The three nodded. "That's the way the ball rolls," Larry said. "That's bounces, not rolls," Peter continued. "Rolling, bouncing, it's all boring," Joe finished. They argued about the relative merits of rolling and bouncing balls.

Bill smiled. He liked those three. They always raised his mood. They understood the important things in life.

"Good night you three, don't party too hard." That sent them off on a discussion about the proper way to drink beer.

"Yo Grandpa, do you want to have a beer with us?" Larry asked. "We'll give you a small beer because you're small," Peter continued. "Grandpa will probably drink us under the table," Joe finished.

"No boys. I won't be able to do that. My body is... I'm too..." Bill didn't know how to continue. Despite his actual age, he had a child's body. He was both old and under-aged at the same time.

Bill changes tracks. "You know your parents are going to kick my ass if they find out about your drinking."

“Don’t worry Grandpa, we won’t tell if you don’t tell,” Larry said. “Mum’s the word,” Peter continued. “That’s dad’s the word, since he’s a dad,” Joe finished.

Bill waved goodnight.

Bill and Annie headed for the royal suites. He changed into his green PJs, brushed his teeth and stepped into the family room.

The family was there. Joseph and Dara sat together. Everyone discussed mundane things, avoiding talk of tomorrow’s storm.

Bill didn’t feel talkative. He sat in a chair with a sulky expression.

“You’re afraid of tomorrow, aren’t you?” Annie asked.

“Yes girl,” Bill replied.

“Would you like me to protect your back tonight?” Annie looked at him with concern in her eyes.

Bill looked at the king and queen for permission. Both looked at each other. The queen spoke. “It’s okay dear.”

Bill looked at Annie and spoke in a squeaky voice, “Yes please.”

“Go to sleep you two,” Mama Jenny said.

“Good night Mama, Papa,” Bill said and gave them a hug and kiss. He yawned, headed for the bathroom, then his room.

Bill went to bed immediately. Seconds later, Bill felt a warm body pressed against his back. No demons would get him tonight. Annie protected him.



Bill woke at the breakfast call. He got up and visited the little boy's room. He changed, stepped into the dining room and greeted everyone.

Bill sat at the table and looked at the food in front of him. He couldn't eat. Instead, he just played with is food. Mama Jenny asked, "What's the matter Grandpa?"

"I'm nervous about meeting Mark's parents. What am I supposed to say? What am I supposed to do?" Bill got up.

"Hi, guess who people think I am? Please overlook the fact that I'm a crusty old *fart*, or the fact I have two grandchildren with me." Bill demonstrated, emphasizing the word *Fart*.

"I know how they will react. 'Guards, take that imposter away.' " Bill did a throat slashing motion.

Papa Jason nodded. "I have no intension of introducing you to them. I put some serious thought into leaving you behind. I still don't know if I did the right thing bringing you."

The king took a breath. "Officially, Prince Mark is gone. He will never be coming back. I will deal with the situation. Please don't feel obligated."

"The thought of just being in the same room and seeing their faces terrifies me. I have no idea how I will react. I've always dealt with situations in a logical rational way. Logic isn't helping now. I mean, look at me."

The queen sympathized. "We really are sorry for putting you in this awkward position."

"We are in Nadine. The Nexus gate is walking distance from the docks. You are free to leave if you choose. I'll cover all costs. Just tell them to bill me," the king said, freeing Bill.

“No, I don’t want Grandpa to leave,” Annie cried, throwing her arms around Bill’s neck.

Bill hugged her back. “You are an angel that fell from the sky and your parents had the good fortune of capturing. You don’t need a crusty old fart. Good bye, baby love.”

Bill kissed Annie on the forehead and then left. Mama Jenny held Annie back and hugged her.



Bill stepped off the *Prince Mark*, wishing he had his backpack or at least his net-book. Bill felt reluctant to return. He didn’t want to face Annie or her family.

Bill looked back at the ship. It was better this way. Even so, he still missed Annie and her shining light.

Bill took out his breath-mint dispenser and looked at it. He loved his mint dispenser. Bill could identify with the little frog prince. People expected so much from him, and yet he was just a frog. Bill thought of Mark’s green hair. It was an appropriate color for a frog prince.

“Come on froggie, you’re my only friend,” Bill said.



Bill looked around to get his bearings. The docks stretched at least a mile on both sides. Like docks on earth, these docks rested on the edge of a body of water. The *Prince Mark* floated on the water, a very strange sight.

It was a standard dock with cranes, piers and docked vessels. Dragon drawn wagons traveled side by side with modern trucks. Strange creatures flew overhead. People, both human and otherwise walked, ran or moved purposefully to their destinations.

There was a clipper similar in size to the *Prince Mark* docked two piers away. It was the *Lady of the Skies*. Bill headed towards the ship and stopped. That was the official transport of the Blears royalty. King Ramsey and Queen Arial were aboard. Bill didn't want to meet them. He didn't even want to see their faces.

Thankfully, Mark's room didn't have pictures of his parents. That wasn't surprising, since kids that age aren't interested in family pictures, or at least he wasn't at that age. They were more interested in pictures of ships, strong fighters, dragons and other cool things.

As for parents, you could always see them when you called them at night, so pictures were a waste of wall space. The next year you lived with them, so what's the big deal?

Bill turned around and faced the city. Skyscrapers, both futuristic and medieval in appearance, filled the city. Some had private docks.

A park encompassing several acres separated the city and docks. It contained paths, benches, food stores and other stuff. It also contained various buildings.

To the right was a building that looked like a conference center. It was in the Romanesque style with plenty of modern touches. Bill thought of taking pictures, but remembered he didn't have his camera.

To the left was a strange looking building. It looked like a piece of modern art.

The building had a circular base. From this base streamed upwards...Bill didn't know how to describe what he saw. Broadly speaking the building looked like a circular wooden lattice. Overlapping strands of spaghetti-like things composed the lattice. They streamed up from the base like – seaweed? Each noodle shimmered like silk with multiple colors and seemed to move independently of each other. The whole structure seemed to bulge

and undulate as the strands moved around like worms. Bill couldn't decide if the building was moving or if that was a figment of his imagination. Bill tried to follow one strand of spaghetti but had to stop. It made him dizzy.

Just then, people stepped off the ship and headed towards the conference center. The other ship was also disembarking. It was time for Bill to leave.

Bill decided to take a tour of the city. He was in no hurry to leave. He passed a food stand and felt hungry, since he hadn't eaten breakfast. Unfortunately, he had no money. He ate a mint.

Bill walked aimlessly around for half an hour according to his watch. He felt slightly tired. He assumed it was because he forgot to eat. After awhile, Bill decided he was through with sightseeing. It was time to leave.

Bill felt his hunger was getting to him, since he was losing his clarity of mind. Also, he felt a slight pain in his chest. Bill ignored the pain. After all, the tricorder said he had a good body. He ate another mint.

Bill wandered for another half hour but ended just getting lost. Finally, a bit of good sense told him to ask for directions. The nearest person pointed him towards the docks, where he came from. After walking another half hour and speaking to several people, he finally arrived at the docks again.

Bill's chest felt weighted-down, like elephants were standing on it. He thought of food, but no longer felt hungry.

There in front of him was the spaghetti building. He should have realized the Nexus gate would reside there.

Bill walked towards the building, feeling sluggish. It didn't matter. He would soon enter the portal and head for home.

Bill vowed, once he awoke on Ayers Rock in Australia, he would never again play with mind-altering substances or the occult. He would be content with his life and live like a normal person. These trips were too much for him.

Bill's muscles now ached. It didn't matter. Bill massaged his arms and walked on.

Finally, he reached the building. The structure itself was at least 1000 feet in diameter. There were many openings near the base for people and trucks to pass through.

Bill entered and an empty space greeted him. There was no roof above him, but no sky was visible. For some reason, the tentacles seemed to stream upwards to infinity.

Bill didn't care. He was not a happy camper. He felt his life draining out of him. Looking around at the people, he realized the place was only affecting him. People laughed, milled around, talked and did other mundane things that people normally do at any train station or airport.

At the center of the Nexus gatehouse was a granite pedestal around 800 feet in diameter and one foot tall. A magic circle etched upon the pedestal glowed red.

In the center of the magic circle was a wall some 200 feet long and 80 feet high. Abstract designs similar to a stereogram covered the wall.

People walked towards the wall and merged with it. Other people oozed out of the wall and walked away.

Bill tried to follow the process, but it made him cross-eyed. A similar effect happens when you look at some 3-d pictures. Your eyes don't know where to focus.

The whole process seemed simple enough. It had to be. All those people did it, and with luggage, no less. Even trucks passed through.

Bill stepped on the pedestal and stared at the wall.

Stereograms were strange things. They looked like abstract art, but if you defocus your eyes in a certain way, you saw 3-d images. It always felt to Bill as if he could step into the 3-d world of the picture. Perhaps that's how the gate worked.

Bill defocused his eyes to make the stereogram image. A tunnel appeared in the wall. People and trucks entered and exited the tunnel.

Bill walked purposefully. Finally, the nightmare would be over.

He reached the mouth of the tunnel. At the last second, his eyes refocused. Bill slammed hard into the wall. He was so not in the mood for this. He just wanted to go home and sleep.

Bill tried several more times, but his eyes wouldn't cooperate.

The pain in his chest got unbearable. It felt like a hand was crushing his heart. He also had a stomachache. The pain made him feel like crying. Just like the guy in the painting by the artist, Edvard Munch, *the Scream*, Bill felt like screaming until the building shook itself to pieces.

Bill staggered a few steps and keeled over.



Bill awoke in the arms of Annie. Annie looked at him with deep concern. "Please don't run away from me," she said. His head was clear. There was no pain in his chest. He was back to normal.

Bill looked around. He was still in the gatehouse. People entered and exited the Nexus gate as before.

"Annie told us that you were hurt and needed help. I had to carry her because she seemed in a great deal of pain and was crying. I felt sorry for the little one," Joseph said. "When she saw you, she almost jumped on top of you. A few seconds later, she calmed down. You then opened your eyes."

"We came just in time to see you collapse. What happened?" Joseph asked.

"What happened is that I can't leave," Bill said calmly. "If I do, both of us will die." Bill looked into Annie's blue eyes. "I'm sorry baby girl. I didn't know our hearts were connected."

Sometimes it takes a kick in the ass to see the truth that's right in front of you.

Bill got up and helped Annie get up. "It's time to face my destiny. No more running away. It's time to meet the parents...Easier said than done."

Bill held Annie's hand and slowly headed for the exit. Half way there, Bill spoke. "I'm so nervous. What kind of people are they? How will they react to me? How will I react to them?"

They stepped out of the gatehouse. "You're acting as if they're your parents that you are meeting for the first time," Joseph said.

"They are my parents. I think. I hope. I'm not sure."

They walked in silence. "Boys, if I'm correct, then you'll be meeting your great grandparents. The problem is I have no memories of them. I don't have...What color hair do I have?"

"Black," James replied.

"You two saw the paintings of Mark on the ship and everywhere. Do I have any resemblance to him?"

Both boys looked at their grandfather. "You don't look anything like him. Didn't you see yourself in the mirror?"

"No. I tried not to. I didn't want to see Mark staring back at me. Call it old fart syndrome. Now I need to know what I look like." Bill looked around. "Lady, may I please borrow a mirror?"

Bill looked at himself in the face for the first time since the hospital incident. Bill saw a six-year-old boy looking back at him. "I'm cute," Bill mumbled to himself. He returned the mirror and thanked the lady.

"Now I understand why everyone has been treating me like a child." They walked on.

"I somehow feel as if I'm awakening from a dream where I dreamt that I was an old man, but I'm still wrapped up in that dream."

Bill looked at the *Prince Mark* and the *Lady of the Skies* to the right and the conference center to the left. Around the conference center was a large group of people. Some stood while others lounged in chairs around tables.

Somewhere in that group was Mark's mother. *No, my mother*, Bill corrected. *Will she accept me even though I don't look like him, act like him, or have his memories?*

Feet away from the crowd, Bill stopped. He turned around and ran – tiny feet scampering across the grass.

James charged after him, grabbed him around the waste, and picked him up. Bill's legs kept running for a few seconds. "Grandpa, you always told us to face our responsibilities."

“Big talk coming from a little guy, I know,” Bill sighed. James put him down and Bill once again faced forward.

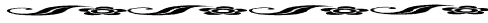
“It’s time for me to change the destinies of two countries. I am a grown-up. I won’t shirk my responsibilities.” Bill stepped forward.

“Hold my hand,” Bill said timidity. Annie held his left hand and James held his right. They stepped into the crowd.

Bill saw Queen Arial for the first time. Memories flooded his brain.

The Little Boy

The transition between the Land and the Sea –
the movement between worlds –
is challenging and can't be understood
by those who've never tried it.



“Mama, MAMA, *MAMA*,” a child’s voice called.

Queen Arial turned around. She recognized the voice she hadn’t heard in over one year.

There, standing near two teenage princes and Annie, was a little boy with green hair and purple eyes. The queen recognized the boy. She should. She gave birth to him.

Queen Arial bent down, and opened her hands towards the boy, tears flowing. The six-year-old boy ran towards the mother and threw himself into her arms. Arial picked up the boy, hugged him tightly, and showered him with kisses.

“I’ve missed you Mama,” the boy said once he could talk.

“I’ve missed you too, son. This has been the longest year of my entire life,” the queen cried.

The boy smiled at his mother, “It has felt like over eighty years to me. That’s how much I’ve missed you.” Both mother and son snuggled.

“Prince Mark has been found,” someone screamed. Sounds of celebration followed. There was no longer need for war. This interrupted the peace negotiations and brought the delegates out.

King Ramsey negotiated his way to his son. The people parted for him. Ramsey spotted the green-haired boy sitting in the arms of his wife.

The boy saw him and reached his arms towards his father. The king scooped up his son and gave him a hug and kiss. "Have you been a good boy, son?" the father asked.

"Yes I have. You'll be proud of me," the little boy said and hugged his father again.

There was commotion about. Everyone wanted to know where the Little Prince came from and what he did during the previous year.

James and Joseph stood by Annie. Both boys looked uncomfortable, feeling out of place. They owed their existence to a tragedy that befell two kingdoms.

Mark turned around and looked at Annie, his childhood friend. He remembered why he called Jerald 'Wizzie'. Annie mentioned how Jerald made wheezing sounds when he slept. He heard it. It was funny. It was an inside joke between Annie and himself.

He remembered the time he fell and scraped his knee. He remembered how Annie fed him strawberries to make him feel better. He remembered how they fought over toys and laughed at stupid things.

He remembered the scent of Annie's hair. She loved swinging her ice cream colored hair around, just so she could hit him in the face with it. Annie found it funny, but Mark found that annoying.

Mark thought back to the dream he had where he played hide-and-seek with an unknown person. Going to another world and then returning was definitely one extreme game of hide-and-seek. Now the only thing remaining was the lovemaking.

"Demons are attacking!"

"*Skunks!* Sorry mum." Mark squirmed and his father put him down.

The Little Boy

Mark ran towards his namesake. The trip to his room was painfully long. Mark rummaged through his stuff and grabbed his staff, tossing clothes all over the room.

Mark arrived just in time to see the demons attack. One demon grabbed an elderly man around the waist and hugged the man. The demon recounted the man's numerous sins from his entire life. The man tried justifying himself to the demon, but it was useless. The man covered his face and cried. The demon flowed into the man and disappeared. The man lay in a fetal position and refused to move.

People screamed and ran. One woman tried to commit suicide by jumping off a balcony. A demon ran under her, only to have his head crushed by her weight. The woman was unharmed, except demon brains covered her. She screamed and ran aimlessly around. Despite being unhurt, she seemed in anguish.

The remaining people huddled together, for once in their life, disregarding rank.

Soldiers from both countries flooded into the reception area. For the first time in memory, Rosette and Blears kingdoms fought side by side.

Mark turned on the power, feeling the staff vibrate in his gloved hands. He swung the staff at the nearest demon, slicing the demon cleanly in half. Demon blood sprayed everywhere.

The fighting between demons and humans was intense, but the humans were winning. Demon bodies piled up. Blood soaked the ground.

Mark fought the demons with a vengeance. Dead and dying demons covered the floor. Many were in horrible agony.

Demons were disgusting creatures. They seem made entirely of brains, intestines, blood, vomit, feces, and every other disgusting thing the human body contained. A good description for them would be, walking bags of filth and corruption. Even intact, they looked repulsive.

You can't fight demons with swords.

Demon blood flowed away from the fighting, bubbling and steaming. The brains and intestines decomposed by the second, emitting green and brown gasses. These gasses rose into the sky to form clouds.

The evil clouds drifted towards the city. Greenish-brown rain fell on the unsuspecting citizens. Where the slimy liquid fell, demons arose. Those demons ran after people and barfed on them. Throughout the city, barf-covered people ran and screamed. Once captured and fondled, they had their sins recited for them.

Eventually the demon storm would spread throughout the world, corrupting everything.

Mark fought the demons relentlessly. The demons complied. Demons only fight with those who wanted to fight. His desire to protect Annie was intense, but his hatred for the demons was more so.

You can't fight demons with hatred.

The fighting continued. The wizards were in full swing. They blasted dozens of demons at a time. The demons retaliated with their own fireballs.

The forces of Rosette and Blears fought side by side. The three friends fought in unison, fighting their hearts out.

The three friends were the only ones who weren't covered in green slime and brown mucus. No matter how much the soldiers around

The Little Boy

them fought, no matter how much blood covered everything, nothing touched them.

They seemed conspicuous in their purity.

Larry, Peter and Joe sang an old camp song:

Great green gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts,
Mutilated monkey meat,
Rotting brains and smelly feet
Fried eyeballs,
With vomit covered demon snot
And I forgot my spoon

"This is no time for singing and having fun," someone shouted at them.

"We aren't singing or having fun," Larry said. "This is our battle song," Peter continued. "You need a battle song to fight demons," Joe finished.

They knew what they were doing, since they were the only ones having luck with the demons. Their swords caused demons to disintegrate and blow away. Everyone else just sprayed demon brains and guts everywhere.

The three friends were the only ones untouched by the Spirit of Evil.

Mark was just feet away from Annie. He was soaked in mucus. The slime suffocated him and intensified his hatred. The hatred was overwhelming.

One demon looked directly at Mark with a sadistic expression. He held a fireball in his hand. The demon waited for Mark to realize what he was up to, and then tossed the fireball casually at Annie. Annie exploded in a shower of golden light.

Mark was furious, both at himself and at the demon. He wanted to slice the demon into ribbons, while still keeping him alive. Death was

too good for him. Mark wanted to make that demon suffer for the rest of eternity.

Anger is the tool of the Devil.

Mark took a step towards the demon. Before he could act, a fireball disintegrated the demon, quickly and without pain.

Someone had stolen Mark's meat. He wanted to attack the wizard that killed the demon, but he had no idea who did it. The battle raged on. The horde of demons was endless. Exhaustion was apparent everywhere. Mark's anger sustained him, but it was just an exercise in futility.

Only one thing can defeat demons.

Mark looked around. Demons defeated the soldiers one by one and sexually molested those too injured to fight. Demons don't kill – they torment.

Only one thing can defeat demons.

Mark tossed his staff to the ground. He no longer needed it. He looked up into the sky, raised both hands up to the heavens and said a silent prayer. *Please God, get rid of these creatures.*

There was a gentle breeze, followed by the scent of freshly picked strawberries. The breeze touched the demons, dissolving them. The stench of the demon blood faded from the air. The slime covering everything dissolved. The breeze reached the city and beyond, purifying everything. Only the injured soldiers and huddled civilians remained.

If only Mark had prayed sooner.

Mark stood there like a sad little boy. His mother reached down and hugged him. Mark said in a quiet voice, "I never got a chance to say 'I love you'."

The Little Boy

People milled about, not knowing what to do. This was a tragedy. The Princess was dead.

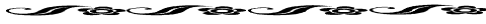
Mark felt King Jason's presence. "Papa Jason, you're not going to wage war on...are you?" Mark asked in a trembling voice.

"No Mark. It's my fault for not protecting my daughter. I will take full responsibility," the king reassured Mark.

Those simple words restored peace to both kingdoms. No one celebrated though.

Aftermath

It's easier to see our faults
than our virtues.



The kings and queens of both countries sat on nearby lawn chairs and faced each other. Mark sat on his mother's lap. James and Joseph hid behind some people off to the left.

"Papa, why did you want to make war with Papa Jason? Did you think it would make me happy?" Mark scolded his dad.

"I'm sorry Mark but you're too young to understand. When you grow up and have children of your own, then you'll understand."

Mark looked at Papa Jason. The king smiled.

"James, Joseph, get over here," Mark yelled. The two arrived and stood in front of him.

"Mama, Papa, I would like you to meet your great-grandchildren. That's James and Joseph; both aged sixteen. They are dear to me and I love them very much. James. Joseph. Give your great-grandparents a hug and kiss."

Mark jumped off his mother's lap. He grabbed the hands of James and Joseph and pulled them over. "Come on you two, introduce yourselves to them."

Papa Jason said, "Mark, I think you're jumping the gun. I think they should know about your history first before you introduce new members of the family."

"That would be a good idea," Papa said.

Mark got back on his mother's lap. Attendants brought two chairs for the boys. Everyone got comfortable.

Aftermath

How should he describe his life? How should he describe his first memories? He settled on speaking in the third person.

“Eighty years ago in a world beyond Nexus, a little boy appeared in front of a young couple. He was naked and without memories. They fell in love with him instantly and adopted him as their own son...”

The story of Bill’s entire life slowly unfolded. Mark wanted to keep it short to prevent anyone from getting bored. Instead, everyone enjoyed listening. People kept asking questions, such as why did he get married so late in life?

Mark described Bill’s arrival in this world.

“The fog cleared away and Bill stood in front of the Rosette royal family. Then his eyes were drawn to Annie, the cutest creature in the entire universe. You have no idea how much he wanted to hug her.”

He described all the events leading up to this morning.

“By the way, I have pictures,” Jerald said. “I took them while Bill or Mark wasn’t looking.” He produced the pictures from his pocket and handed them to Mark’s mother.

“This is what I looked like a few hours ago. By the way, what color hair do I have?” Mark asked.

“Green off course,” replied his mother.

“I was so terrified of meeting you I tried to run away. I only ended up hurting Annie. Bill then knew that he was Annie’s destined one. That could only mean that he was your child. He had to see you, even if he didn’t want to.”

“Why didn’t you want to meet me, son?” the mother asked, sounding hurt.

“How would you have reacted in my place, meeting someone who wanted to start a war? Bill didn’t want to meet you because he didn’t look like me and didn’t have my memories. You were people who were determined to avenge your son’s death, even though it wasn’t Papa Jason’s fault. How would you have reacted if this boy in this picture came up to you?” Mark made sure to speak calmly so as not to upset anyone. He knew he probably said too much.

“I know son, we were being selfish. But it wasn’t just us. Everyone in Blears wanted revenge. You have no idea how much they loved you,” the father tried to explain.

“The people of Rosette loved Mark as well. Papa Jason named his ship after him. Can you please apologies to the people of Rosette? I would really appreciate it. Sorry for scolding you.”

Mark’s father rose from his chair, faced Papa Jason, and bowed. “Please forgive me and my people for causing so much trouble. I’m sorry for what has happened.”

Papa Jason rose up and extended his hand. “I understand how you feel. I would have done the same thing in your place.”

Mark was grateful for his father’s actions. It removed a weight from his heart. “Thank-you Papa for doing that,” he said. “I love you Papa.”

Mark tried to turn and look at the *Lady of the Skies*, but couldn’t. “Papa, I have a big favor to ask you.”

“What is it son?” the father asked.

“Can you please rename the *Lady of the Skies* to *Princess Annie*?”

“I was planning on doing just that.”

Mark sat up again. “I just realized something. Where are Sister Artemis and Brother Luke?”

Aftermath

"We are right behind you, Mark," Artemis said.

"That's right, you old fart," Luke replied and hit him on the head.

"Mama, Brother Luke is bugging me again," Mark complained, rubbing his head.

"Luke, stop that. You know Mark hates it when you hit him on the head," the mother scolded.

James laughed and Joseph followed. Mark was happy that the two were relaxing. It was time for his next, and hopefully, last speech of the day.

Mark had put some thought into his next words. "Mama, Papa, when we were coming here, everyone thought of James and Joseph as being my big brothers. Would it be okay if we made that official? Any other relationship would be awkward."

Papa and Mama looked at each other. The father nodded.

"Off course Mark, we would love to adopt them as our own children," the mother said.

"I believe they are younger than Luke and Artemis?" the father asked.

"Yes Majesty, by a year," Jerald replied.

"Perfect," Papa replied.

Mark looked at his new big brothers. "Okay boys, time to give your new parents a hug and kiss."

"Yes Grandpa," both boys said in unison.

"Don't call me Grandpa. I'm now your official baby brother." Mark smiled at them. "From now on I'll try not to talk like an old fart."

Mark got up and grabbed the boys by the legs. "Come on big brothers, time to greet OUR parents."

Mark spotted Adam standing nearby. "It's time for me to pretend to be a kid and greet my best friend."



The excitement of the day ended. It was dinnertime. As expected, dinner was a formal event. Mark had to dress up in his princely clothes.

Mark always hated formal dinners, but this was the worst by far. It felt like he was back in hell. Unfortunately, Mark couldn't escape. He was the guest of honor. Because of him, two countries were now at peace.

Mark desperately wanted to go back to his room on the *Prince Mark* and play video games on his computer. All those fools were so happy. Everyone was so excited. Everyone wanted to make meaningless speeches.

This was no time to celebrate. This was a time for mourning. Only Annie's parents and some others shared that feeling. It would take time for the tragedy to sink in for everyone.

Mark played with his food that looked like plastic and made him feel like gagging.

An attendant saw he wasn't eating and asked him if he needed something.

"Can I please have a glass of strawberry milk? Also, I would like a tiny pink blanket. I know that's girly, but I don't care. Call it a brat's prerogative."

Aftermath

The attendant brought him the items. Mark wrapped the blanket around his neck like a superman cape. He didn't care if he looked like a baby. He was six years old.

Mark drank his milk – the only thing he could swallow.

After an eternity, dinner ended. Mark looked around and found Larry, Peter and Joe hitting on some cute girls. He brought them to Papa Jason.

"Papa Jason, may I please have Uncles Larry, Peter and Joe? I really like them," Mark asked.

"Off course Mark, I'll have them honorably discharged from the army," the king said.

Mark looked at the three friends. "I hope you don't mind transferring to the Blears military. I hope you don't think I'm being selfish."

"No problem, Your Honor," Larry said. "You mean, Your Holiness," Peter continued. "I think that's, Your Princeliness," Joe finished.

"Just call me Bill, like you always do. I'm no longer confused by who I am." Mark smiled. They made the room a little less oppressive.

"You look so cute in that blanket, I feel like hugging you," Larry said. "Like a little baby," Peter continued. "I guess this is what it's like to enter your second childhood," Joe finished.

"I guess it is," Mark said and raised his hands to them. They each carried him like a baby.

Mark continued his rounds of the room, as was his duty. He found the room, filled with people walking around, bumping into him, and making so much noise, suffocating. This was going to be a long year.

Nexus

Luke spotted Mark. “Yo Mark, you look like a girly man with that blanket, you old fart.” Luke hit him on the head, and then laughed.

Yes, this certainly was going to be a very long year.



Mark sat on the stone railing of the balcony of his room and looked at the full moon.

Mark sang, slightly off-key, sounding strangely like the mouse in *An American Tale*.

*Somewhere out there beneath the paaale moonlight -
Someone's thinking of me and loving me tonight*

In another world, someone joined in on the duet, with a mature feminine voice.

*Somewhere out there someone's saying a prayer -
That we'll find one another in that big somewhere out there*

*And even though I know how very far apart we are -
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star*

Mark stood up and faced the moon.

*And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby -
It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky*

Both Mark and the woman in shadows raised their hands towards moon, singing in unison.

*Somewhere out there, if love can see us through -
Then we'll be together somewhere out there -
Out where dreams come true*

Mark listened to a tiny voice in his heart.

*And even though I know how very far apart we are -
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star*

Aftermath

Mark answered the voice.

*And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby -
It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky*

Both the mystery woman and Mark bowed their heads together.

*Somewhere out there, if love can see us through -
Then we'll be together somewhere out there -
Out where dreams come true*

"Come on in Mark, it's time for your bath," Mark's nanny called. Mark entered the room and let himself get undressed.

"Tomorrow is your birthday. You'll be seven years old. Aren't you happy?" Nanny Jamie kissed him on the forehead.

"Tomorrow I'll be eighty-seven years old. Another birthday won't make a difference."

Nanny Jamie looked lovingly at the little boy. "Yes dear. Wash your pee-pee."

I get no respect, Mark sighed, doing a good imitation of Rodney Dangerfield.

THE OLD WOMAN

Love –

The bond that connects heart to heart



Mark made a wish and blew out the birthday candles. He looked up and waited for something wonderful.

The previous year was unbearable. They say it's better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all. They were talking nonsense. Someone who has never known Heaven can't possibly know Hell.

Having found Annie after looking for ages, then losing her, the loss was unbearable. Mark now knew his former life as Bill Charming was much more pleasant than now. Then, he didn't know what he lacked. This was like some versions of hell, where the sufferers can see the heaven they will never again reach.

Mark blew out the candles, praying for the return of the internal organ he was currently missing. If only he could have that bright light back.

Mark hated his current body. It couldn't handle the stress. Being a kid is harder than most people realized. Their brains and bodies didn't have the coping mechanisms adult brains and bodies do.

The possibility that Mark's condition had nothing to do with his physical body never occurred to him.

His depression affected the entire country, causing everyone to be in a constant state of stress and mourning. It was incredible how much a country loved its monarchy. Mark never could understand this. He knew what his responsibilities as a prince were, but he couldn't change his behavior.

The Old Woman

“Okay baby brother, it’s time for your noogies. You’re eighty-seven aren’t you, you old fart? That means I get to give you eighty-seven noogies,” Luke said, resting back on his chair with feet on a nearby table.

“Can you count that high?” Mark mumbled under his breath.

“What did you say, you little runt?” Luke got up.

Mark covered his head with his hands. “I said you’re the greatest brother in the whole world.”

“That’s better, you old fart. Now prepare for your noogies.” Luke approached Mark. Mark waited for the pain. There was no use running since it was always worse when he did.

“Luke, do you have to torment your baby brother? It is his birthday after all,” Mark’s mother said.

A gentle breeze caressed Mark’s face. Mark looked up to see swirling clouds above the castle grounds.

“Mama, Papa, everyone, look,” Mark said, pointing at the sky.

The winds picked up. The clouds thickened and descended in a form of a funnel. Mist rose from the ground. The twister touched down on the grass some 200 feet away from the family.

The walls of the twister looked as if they were composed of mini twisters, shaped like spaghetti noodles. These noodles wiggled around the twister like worms. Colors appeared in the noodles composing the walls of the twister, giving the noodles the impression that they were composed of silk. The entire twister bulged and undulated. The air around the twister shimmered.

Mark received the impression that something wonderful approached at breakneck speeds. He stared in wonder at the twister.

As anticipation reached its peak within Mark, the walls of the twister exploded outwards.

The sky was again cloudless and sunny.

The twister left something behind. It was a circular granite pedestal. On top of the pedestal were five teenage girls and an old woman. The woman had snow-white hair that shone in the sun.

Two girls gripped wands with Dragon crystals on the ends. Three girls yielded swords with the crystals embedded in the hilts. The old woman held a staff with the jewel at the tip.

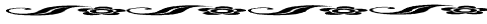
The instruments of power resembled the equipment sold by *Charming Adventures Inc.*, Mark's old company in his former life as Bill Charming.

Mark looked at the old woman in the center. A lifetime of sorrow, struggle and hardship etched her face. Her face also contained incredible strength and courage. Overflowing like an aura was love, wisdom and compassion.

She was someone you go to when you were in trouble, or if you just needed a hug. She was someone who would bake cookies and tell stories. She was the perfect grandma.

A New World

People try to escape the world,
But end up only trying to escape themselves



“We are where we need to be,” Mildred chanted, following the instructions found on the internet to the letter.

Travel to another universe? According to leading scientists, that’s impossible. The effort would require more energy than existed in the entire universe. It had something to do with the fact that normal matter can’t leave the universe, or as string theorists call our visible universe, banes (short for membranes). Falling into a blackhole or a wormhole or travelling faster than the speed of light *might* do it, but that wasn’t an option here on Earth.

Perform occult rituals? Ingest semi-legal substances? Stand on top of a mysterious platform? Only idiots would try something so stupid.

Mildred Flanders was that idiot.

The five ladies surrounding Mildred joined in the chant. “We are where we need to be.”

After awhile, the swirling moved to their will. The red light pulsed in harmony. Just as Mildred thought she couldn’t stand the pressure anymore, the fog exploded outward, revealing a bright sunny day.

It was a hard journey for Mildred. She spent her entire life striving to fulfill her childhood dream. After a lifetime of looking, she finally realized the world she grew up in didn’t contain what she searched for. She decided to look elsewhere.

Mildred gazed around. The granite pedestal with the magic circle she stood on was the same as the one found on Ayers Rock in Australia. Everything else was different. They had arrived in a new world.

A stone castle stood in front of Mildred and the others. Surrounding them were manicured lawns, pathways, statues, fountains, a stream with a bridge, and other thing belonging to the estate of royalty.

“Teleportation is cool. Beam me up Snotty,” friend Susan said. “You mean Scotty,” friend Samantha continued. “You mean the tissue paper?” friend Sara finished. They argued about Star Trek and leaky noses. Mildred ignored them. They always did that.

Mildred gave a silent prayer of thanks. The instructions worked.

A family in front of the castle drew Mildred’s eyes. The mother and father looked like the queen and king of the country. The children included two teenage boys, a teenage girl, and a child.

The child stood in front of a cake with blown-out candles. He was the cutest thing she had ever seen in her entire life. He looked as if he had known a great loss. Mildred’s heart went out to him.

Servants surrounded the family. Joining in on the celebration were three teenage boys in military dress uniforms and a middle age man in wizard’s clothes.

Only seconds passed since the fog disappeared, revealing the new world. The king and the wizard approached the pedestal. The three teenage boys in uniform accompanied them.

Following twenty feet behind was the rest of the family. The little boy walked on the left of the mother, with the daughter to the right. On the left of the little boy was one of the sons. The other son remained behind. They were in a festive mood.

“Girls, put your swords away,” Mildred commanded. The three complied and the six waited.

“What strangely colored hair they have. Maybe that’s a fashion statement,” granddaughter Jane commented.

Mildred didn't notice until now. The entire royal family had strangely colored hair and eyes. The king had blue hair and purple eyes. The queen had fire engine red hair and blue eyes. The daughter to the right of the mother had blue hair and red eyes. The son to the left of the child had golden yellow hair and light purple eyes. The son leaning back on the chair had the fire engine red hair of the mother and the purple eyes of the father.

Mildred looked at the little boy again. He had hair the color of mint ice cream and purple eyes.

Strangely colored hair and eyes weren't restricted to the royal family. The entourage also had them. However, they also had normal hair and eye colors as well, as found on Earth.

"That's strange. Only the king and the princes have purple eyes," granddaughter Leslie commented. "I wonder if my children would have purple eyes if I married one of them."

"Grandpa...I mean, Mark, that looks a lot like your staff. I still haven't gotten used to calling you that," the blond son commented.

I wonder why he addressed the boy as Grandpa, Mildred wondered. That was none of her concern.

"I'm fine thinking of you as my big brother." The little boy wasn't paying attention to his big brother. He stared wide-eyed at Mildred. He looked slightly scared or worried.

"Young minds adapt more easily, Prince James," the wizard said.

That conversation didn't make any sense to Mildred. She learned to take things slowly. She would wait for everything to become clear.

"You don't see that every day, do you," the left officer said. "Your right, those three girls are cute," the middle officer continued. "Let's hope they're single," the right officer finished.

Mildred looked at the approaching king and glanced several times at the little boy. He was so cute. Susan, Samantha, and Sara looked at the officers in uniform. Leslie and Jane looked around.

“What do you think?” the king asked.

The wizard waved a wand and mumbled something under his breath. Satisfied, he took a device that looked to Mildred like a Star Trek tricorder out of his pocket and took some readings. “We have guests. They seem to be safe. Shall I free them from the circle?”

“Maybe we should call the guard first,” the king said cautiously.

“NO,” the child with hair the color of mint ice cream called out.

The father glanced back at his son standing beside his wife. He considered his son’s words. “Okay, no guard. Larry, Peter and Joe should be enough.”

The wizard approached the pedestal and moved his hand above the magic circle. There was a flash of light. Mildred felt slightly disoriented as the pressure equalized.

“Good afternoon, highnesses. I am court wizard Caldor. This is his Majesty King Ramsey Milford. That is his wife Queen Arial. Sitting over there is their eldest son, Prince Luke.” Caldor pointed at the boy with red hair leaning back on his chair with his legs on the table. He looked bored.

“The young lady there is Princess Artemis and that is her younger brother Prince James,” Caldor pointed at the two siblings standing nearby. Smiling at the child, Caldor introduced the final member of the family. “Finally that’s the Little Prince Mark.”

“Please to meet you. My name is Mildred Flanders. These are my granddaughters Jane and Leslie. These are their friends Susan,

Samantha, and Sara. I'm sorry for interrupting your son's birthday party."

"Please to meet you, Highness," King Ramsey smiled. "Welcome to our humble kingdom. What brings you here may I ask?"

"Please don't call me Highness. I'm not royalty," Mildred complained, feeling embarrassed.

The king frowned. "You're not royalty? Off course you are. Caldor, please explain."

The wizard addressed Mildred. "Princess Mildred, in our world, we have the ability to tell a person's status in life at a glance. You and your two grandchildren appear to us as princesses. Your other three companions appear to us as commoners. In a few days, you too will gain that sense. This sense is infallible. You are royalty," Caldor explained.

"That's impossible. My parents were..." Mildred trailed off.

"You don't know who your parents were, do you?" Mark spoke in a quiet voice. He continued staring at her. It was as if she was his entire world.

Mildred felt chills running down her spine. She felt as if the child could read her soul with those big purple eyes.

Mark's eyes were wise but his behavior was childlike. He acted like a deer in headlights. Mildred didn't know if he wanted to run forward, backwards or just run away.

"Hey look. The little boy has the same tacky green hair color as your pants, Grandma," Leslie whispered to Mildred.

Mildred turned to scold her granddaughter but Mark interrupted her.

"Don't make fun of Grandma. That's her favorite color," Mark shouted. He quickly retreated behind his mother when Mildred looked at him.

"Majesty, would it be okay if Larry, Peter, and Joe showed the friends of our royal guests around?" Caldor asked.

"That's a great idea," King Ramsey said.

The three officers seemed pleased. "I'm Larry. Come on ladies, I know some excellent bars we can visit," the first officer said. "I'm Peter. They have good food," the second officer continued. "I'm Joe. There's plenty of dancing," the third officer finished.

"That sounds like fun," Susan said. "I've always liked men in uniform," Samantha continued. "With big muscles," Sara finished.

"If you like muscles, you'll love mine," Larry said. "You call those muscles? Look at mine," Peter continued. "My guns are the biggest. Look," Joe finished.

The six teenagers walked off the platform and headed town. "No drinking you three. You're still underage," Mildred called after them.

"If you don't need me, I'll be taking my leave." Caldor bowed and left.

"Jeeves please prepare rooms for our guests," the queen said.

"Of course, mum," Butler Jeeves said and snapped his fingers. Several attendants came up and took Mildred's and her grandkids' belongings and left.

"Please Mildred, girls, join us in celebrating our son's birthday," the queen smiled, greeting Mildred like an old friend.

The royal family headed back for the party area. Mark constantly glanced back at Mildred while walking, and almost tripped. He seemed unsure of himself.

"Where will the girls be staying?" Mildred asked, following.

"Don't worry about that. Jeeves will take care of them when they return," the queen reassured her.

"As mum said, I will take of them," the butler assured her.

Arial sat down and smiled at Mildred. "I think my son wants to hug you."

"You think so? I thought he was scared of me." Mildred looked at the Little Prince.

"Believe me, he wants a hug. He always acts like that when he's too shy," Arial assured her.

With that permission, Mildred smiled at the boy and waved at him. Mark took that as an invitation, ran to her and gave her leg a hug with his entire body.

Mark bawled his eyes out, crying as hard as he possibly could. He wiped his nose on her pants. That surprised Mildred. She didn't expect that reaction. She noticed for the first time that Mark wore a ratty pink cape.

"His boogers blend in with your pants, Grandma," Leslie said. Mildred ignored her.

Mildred looked at the parents. The smiling mother had tears in her eyes and the father seemed relieved. She felt uncomfortable around royalty and didn't know how to react. Why were they treating her like family?

Tentatively, she rubbed Mark on the head. "You have a beautiful son, Majesties. I especially love his hair color."

He was indeed the cutest thing she had ever seen in her entire life. Mildred felt like giving him a bone-crushing hug and a sloppy kiss.

"Thank-you Mildred, everyone loves him," Arial said, smiling.

"Not me. I think he's just a brat and an old fart," Luke called out and took a sip of lemonade.

"An old fart, that's funny," Leslie laughed. She sat next to Luke.

Arial noticed Mildred still stood. "My son seems to have taken a liking to you. Please sit down and relax," the queen said.

"Is he always so affectionate to complete strangers?" Mildred asked.

"You must understand something about our son. He has experienced a great loss. Demons killed his destined one in front of him, and he couldn't do anything to save her."

Mildred felt like crying. She could understand. Her parents died in a car accident when she was ten years old. It happened right in front of her and she couldn't do anything to save them. No one was there to help. If only she had a phone or knew first aid or something.

"There are demons here? Cool," Leslie said.

"They aren't cool. They're hateful, horrible creatures. They are the Spirit of Evil, personified," Mark shouted angrily.

"If demons exist, does hell exist as well? You know, with fire and brimstone and little red devils poking you?" Jane asked.

"Don't talk about things you can't possibly understand," Mark shouted. He sat on Mildred's foot and continued hugging her leg. Mildred knew the drill and gave Mark a ride by walking in circles.

“Hell changes according to your sin. It picks relentlessly at your mind and soul. It exploits your guilts and fears, and amplifies them,” Mark continued. “In hell, there’s no such thing as worst. There’s always more agony to be had.” Mark paused a moment. “Sorry for the lecture.”

The sermon surprised Mildred. Mark spoke with such conviction, like he had been there. His family was un-phased. They seemed to be used to it.

Before Mildred realized the implications of what Mark said, he changed tracks. “I believe it was Abraham Lincoln who once said, ‘Everyone has to have a leg ride at least once in their life.’ I hope you don’t mind if I indulge myself. I love you Grandma,” Mark said and snuggled his face against her knee. Mildred could feel his baby bum on her foot.

“I don’t think Abraham Lincoln ever said that. How do you know about Abraham Lincoln?” Mildred asked, looking down at the boy. His eyes were closed and he had a contented smile on his face.

“I’ve been to your world once before. It was nice but I’m happy to get back home.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re too heavy for me,” Mildred said. She was tired of walking in circles.

“Alright,” Mark said in a disappointed voice and got up. He held Mildred’s hand and kissed it. Mildred couldn’t understand why he was so affectionate towards her.

They went to the tables and Mildred sat down. She crossed her hands across her lap.

“Is it okay if I sat on your lap?” Mark asked and slowly blinked his eyes at Mildred. She had a close-up view of his face.

Mark had the longest eyelashes she had ever seen. They made him look like a little girl. Mildred always wanted eyelashes like that. All girls did, which was why they always put on eyeliner to lengthen them.

"Of course, Highness," Mildred said.

"Please call me Mark or anything else you want to," Mark said.

"You can also call him an old fart if you want to," Luke said.

Mark was about to sit down, but then stopped. He reached around his neck, untied his pink cape and handed it to an attendant. "I don't need that anymore."

Mark sat on Mildred's lap and wrapped her hands around his waist. He rested back and closed his eyes, looking peaceful.

"Mark has been wearing that cape for almost a year now. He hates to let go of it. He even sleeps with it, which is why it's so dirty. Mark, do you think she is...?" the queen trailed off.

"I don't know. I'm just happy to be with her. We'll find out soon enough," Mark reluctantly replied. He didn't want to be disturbed.

Find what out, Mildred wondered? Were they mistaking her for someone they knew?

"Is it normal for little boys to run around with pink capes here?" Mildred asked.

"I wore it to remind me of Annie, and her hair which was the color of strawberry ice cream."

Evening arrived. Before Mildred could ask about Annie, Jeeves interrupted her. He walked to the queen and said, "Mum, would you like to have dinner here or in the dining room?"

"Here would be fine Jeeves," the queen replied.

"Very good mum," Jeeves bowed and left. Servants brought out food and set the tables.

Jeeves stepped up to Mildred and spoke. "Princess Mildred, accommodations have been set up for your three companions. Larry, Peter, and Joe are currently entertaining them."

"Please don't call me that. It's embarrassing. It's hard to believe that people think I'm a princess," Mildred said.

"Yes Your Highness," Jeeves said and left.

Jeeves seemed to be stuck up and full of himself. He reminded Mildred of her first husband.

Mildred's first husband was a doctor. His friends called him Doc. He was a proud man and considered himself better than everyone else. He hated other people's opinions, unless they agreed with his own. Doc went to jail for malpractice.

James smiled at Mildred and said, "I understand how you feel. It feels good, doesn't it, being called a princess? Don't worry, eventually you'll get used to it. Eventually the embarrassment will go away – mostly."

Mildred looked at James curiously. He acted as if he had personal experience being new to the royal world. "Thanks Prince James."

"Just call me James. After all Grandpa...I mean Bill...I mean Mark. Yes, Mark has accepted you as part of the family. So have our parents."

Mildred looked at the Little Prince sitting on her lap. "I think you're mistaking me for someone else. I'm not anyone special."

"You're special to me Grandma," Mark said and kissed her hand. Mildred didn't know how to respond to that.

James looked around. "Mum, Dad, shouldn't we have a party to formally welcome Grandma?"

"That's a great idea, son. It's not every day we get to invite new members to our family," Arial said. Ramsey nodded.

"Please don't bother on my account," Mildred said, knowing they would ignore her.

Mark clapped his hands and bounced up and down on Mildred's lap. "Yay, a party, it's time to celebrate."

James looked at Mark. "You've really gotten the kid thing down, haven't you?"

"Being a kid is easy. I always felt as if I were a kid all through my life. On the other hand, I've never understood what it was like to be an adult."

Mildred laughed. "Off course you don't know how to be an adult. You're only six years old, after all." Truth be told, she didn't feel she fully understood what it meant to be an adult either.

"I'm seven years old," Mark said defiantly and held up seven fingers. He turned sideways and looked directly at Mildred. He blinked his long eyelashes at her.

"Are you sure about that?" Leslie asked, smiling. "You look six to me."

Mark looked confused. "I think I am. I hope I am." He scratched his head, considering. Still sitting sideways, Mark spoke slowly, counting on his fingers. "I've been six years old at least twice already. I don't want to be six years old a third time, at least not so soon."

The king laughed. "Please don't confuse my son. He's been through a very difficult time in his life."

"That's right. Old farts can't handle too much stress before they die." Luke spoke between sips of Kool-Aid. He still rested his legs on the table.

"And noogies aren't stressful?" Mark mumbled under his breath.

Everyone got up and sat at the dining table. They talked while eating. Mark sat beside Mildred.

Mildred looked at Luke. "Why do you always refer to him as an old fart?"

"Because he is an old fart – hang around him long enough and you'll find out. You're an old fart, aren't you baby brother?"

"I suppose I am," Mark agreed. "After all, I am older than the moon and younger than the stars."

"Never mind all that. So when will we be having our welcome celebration for Grandma and her grandchildren?" James asked.

The king looked at Jeeves. The butler replied, "That depends on how big you want to make the party. How formal will it be?"

The king paused to consider. "This affects the entire country. Everyone will want to meet the person who has finally made our son happy. We'll finally be able to end our year of mourning."

"Please don't make a big to-do just for me," Mildred protested, feeling positively embarrassed. She hated being the center of attention. She preferred working in the background, quietly changing the lives of people for the better.

"Nonsense, you're like a long lost relative who has just arrived home. We have to formally greet you," the queen said.

"We can celebrate on the *Princess Annie*," Mark cried.

"That's right. This is after all a state event," the king replied.

Mildred tried her best to tone down the excitement, but nothing she said had an effect.

On the other hand, the two granddaughters were excited. Their grandma always insisted they live humble lives, to accept what life gave you and be grateful. They were teenagers. They wanted fun and excitement. That's why they stayed with their grandmother. Despite herself, Mildred was always surrounded by adventure.

Dinner ended.

Nanny Jamie stepped forward. "Mark, it's time for your bath."

"Okay Nanny Jamie." Mark moved to get up, but stopped. "Mama, Papa, I want Grandma as my new nanny."

Mark turned to his current nanny. "Nanny Jamie, I hope you don't mind. I have a very specific reason why I want her. I can't really explain. It's just a feeling inside of me. We can still play."

"Off course Prince Mark, that's fine with me," Jane said, smiling at Mark.

"That's fine with us son. However, I think we should ask Mildred first." The mother looked at Mildred. "We would really appreciate it if you took care of our son."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? You don't know anything about me," Mildred said.

Mark turned and looked at Mildred's face. "Wizard Caldor did a background check on you. If he had found anything suspicious about you or your people, he would have told my dad. The fact that he left proves that we have nothing to fear from you."

"My son is right. I don't consider you a treat," the king smiled.

"But you don't know anything about me," Mildred complained.

"I know that at the age of six, a loving family found you, naked and without memories. You lived happily with them. Later in life, you experienced various tragedies and you suffered a great deal."

Mark got up from his chair, hesitated, and took out his froggie. He pressed the button. The frog prince went, "Reedeeep". Mark ate a mint and handed one to Mildred. She ate it without thinking.

Mark's actions, the sight of the frog-prince mint-dispenser, the smell of his breath, and the sound of the frog triggered a memory. Mildred felt nostalgic and experienced a sense of loss. Tears came to her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Mark asked with concern in his eyes.

"I'm sorry but I just remembered my grandfather who died when I was your age. The only thing I remember about him was his minty fresh breath. I don't know why I'm thinking about him," Mildred said and wiped her eyes. "Please don't look at me like that. You're making me cry."

Mark got up on Mildred's chair. He threw his arms around Mildred's neck and rested his head on her shoulder. "You may hug me if you want. I know you do."

Mildred tentatively hugged Mark. "Tighter," Mark instructed. Mildred complied by squeezing him.

"That's better. You probably had several abusive relationships. You grew from these experiences and became strong. You strove to be the best you could be. You did many great things to help the less fortunate of the world. At the same time, you strove to achieve your childhood dream."

Mark kissed Mildred's neck. "Finally, you decided that the world you grew up in didn't have what you were looking for. You set out on a journey. You found instructions on crossing dimensions on the internet. You bought your staff and other instruments of power from the company *Charming Adventures* and headed for Australia. There you performed the Ritual of Transference and crossed over to our current bane, or plane of existence. Did I leave anything out?"

Mildred closed her eyes and let the tears flow down. Holding Mark felt good. She loved the little guy.

Enjoying the peace, she whispered in his ear, "Grandpa, you left out the time when I was a teenager and..."

"You were raped. You decided to keep your child, despite what everyone said. Times were difficult for you but you grew strong from it," Mark finished.

"How do you know so much about me?" Mildred asked, still hugging the boy.

"I know everything about you. It's my prerogative as a prince," Mark said.

"No that's your pero...pero...Dam it. I hate it when you use big words," Luke complained.

"I'll stop it when you stop hitting me on the head. It feels so good to be hugged by you Grandma."

"Fat chance, you old fart," Luke got up and whacked Mark on the head. Mildred felt that.

"Please, Prince Luke, you shouldn't torment your baby brother so much," Mildred said. She closed her eyes and enjoyed hugging the Little Prince. A lifetime of pain and suffering seemed to disappear. She felt at peace with the world. Mildred couldn't believe what an

incredible boy Mark was. He seemed to have the wisdom of a wise old man.

"Now you see why I need a new nanny to protect me. I know you have great inner strength," Mark whispered in Mildred's ear.

"You're a real charmer, aren't you?" Mildred said.

"That's what princes do. They charm beautiful princesses," Mark replied.

"Come on you two, it's time for your bath," the mother said.

"I've never given a prince a bath before. I don't know what to do," Mildred said, still enjoying her hug.

Mark answered, "That's easy. You know in Japan, they have communal bathing?" Mildred nodded. "It's the same thing. We bathe together."

Mildred looked at the mother, embarrassed. *Are they serious?* The queen nodded. Apparently, they were serious. "Go ahead now. An attendant will bring evening clothes for you when you finish."

Mark got up, grabbed Mildred's hand and pulled. "Come on Grandma, let's go."



Mildred stepped into Mark's bathroom. The room was indeed in the Japanese style. A hot tub filled with fragrant water took up half the room. Next to the tub was a shower with several stools. There were the usual toiletries. In addition, toys little boys liked playing with while taking baths filled the room.

Mark undressed and looked at Mildred. "What's the matter Grandma?"

"I'm not comfortable being naked in front of a little boy," Mildred said.

"I think you're beautiful Grandma. You don't need to be embarrassed. If you want, I'll close my eyes." Mark sat down with his back to her.

Mark waited. Mildred reluctantly complied. "Okay. What do I do now?"

"Just give me a bath as if I were a little baby." Mark spread his arms out and waited. Eventually, Mildred bathed him. *Royalty really are pampered here*, Mildred thought.

"Would you like me to wash your back and arms?" Mark asked. "Come on. It will be fun."

Mildred couldn't resist the little boy. She agreed and he washed her back and arms. Mildred washed the rest of her body herself. She was afraid he would offer to do that as well. That would have been too embarrassing for her. He seemed to know that and didn't offer.

"Come on Grandma, let's get into the tub." Mark grabbed Mildred's hand and led her into the tub.

Mildred sat near the side and Mark swam around and played with a boat. Bathing in the hot tub felt good, but it was making her feel sleepy. Mildred looked at her hands. "We better get out before we turn into prunes."

Mildred dried herself and then Mark. They dressed in clothes supplied to them.

"It's time to go to the family room. Let's go Grandma," Mark said.

"Okay son," Mildred said. She stepped out of Mark's room and looked around. This place seemed vaguely familiar.

Mildred walked down several passageways and Mark followed. They arrived at the family room.

"I hope you had a good bath," Mama Arial smiled at Mildred.

"Yes Mama Arial," Mildred said and sat on a nearby couch. Mark sat beside her. She then realized what she just and covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I meant Queen Arial."

"Grandma, you look good," Leslie said. "At least ten years younger," Jane said. The others looked at her with veiled excitement.

"Thanks," Mildred said. "That bath felt good."

They talked about mundane things. Eventually, Mildred started nodding off.

"Grandma, can you please sleep with me and protect my back tonight? I get nightmares," Mark asked.

A memory seemed to rise in Mildred's mind. She chased after it but it got away. "Of course son...I mean Prince Mark."

"You may call me son or Mark or Bill or anything else you want to. Whatever makes you happy," Mark said.

"Do people call you Bill?" Mildred asked.

"Uncles Larry, Peter and Joe do. Everyone else calls me Mark. Come on Grandma." Mark led Mildred to his room and got into bed. Mildred followed. Mark pressed his back against Mildred and wrapped her hands around him.

"Lights," Mark called. The lights went out. "Goodnight Grandma."

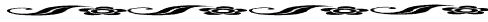
"Good night son," Mildred said. Mildred felt incredible relaxation and peace sweep throughout her body. Her one thought was, *what a loving boy this Little Prince is.*

In the middle of the night, Mark woke up. He turned to look at the woman sleeping beside him. "I'm sorry, baby girl. I wish I were there for you," he said sadly.

Mark leaned down, kissed the old woman on the forehead, and went back to sleep in her arms.

A New Day

The first day of a Journey
is always the easiest – but sometimes the hardest.



Mildred got up, fully refreshed. She hadn't slept that well in...She didn't know when she last slept that well.

She looked at the sleeping prince. He had his head tilted back with mouth open. There was a puddle of drool on his pillow. He must be teething. It was hard to believe anyone could be so cute. *What beautiful hair, the color of mint ice cream, and such long eyelashes,* she thought.

Yesterday, she examined his hair thoroughly. Mark's hair was green right down to the roots. His eyebrows and long eyelashes were also green. Mildred carefully examined the rest of his body.

The hairs on his arms and back were so fine as to be almost invisible. When carefully examined, they had a greenish tinge. There was no mistake. The Little Prince really did have hair the color of mint ice cream.

Mildred examined Mark's body for another reason. She couldn't believe a little boy could be so cute or have such long eyelashes. There was no question – he was a boy.

Mildred went to the washroom and discovered someone replaced her clothes in the night. She was now in a quandary. Should she wear her pajamas and search the castle for her backpack and other clothes, or should she wear the clothes they gave her?

Not wanting to be seen walking around in her PJs, she chose to accept the gift. She quickly changed and admired herself in the mirror. The clothes looked good on her.

Mildred looked at her face. The bags under her eyes were gone and her face seemed less wrinkled. She wiggled her fingers. There was no pain.

Pleased with her appearance and overall health, Mildred did her thing and left the washroom.

Mildred stepped out of Mark's room, looking for the guest room. She decided to let the Little Prince sleep.

As she stepped out, she noticed a room next to the prince's room. It had a pink crown with the words *Princess Annie*.

Mildred realized this was the room of the dead princess. On impulse, she opened the door and stepped into the room.

The room was a standard little girl room. Dolls and other things little girls loved filled it. In addition, a picture of Mark hung on the wall. Looking around, Mildred spotted a picture of what were probably Annie's parents.

Looking at the two, Mildred had a feeling of recognition and nostalgia. Tears came to her eyes. Mildred wiped her eyes, feeling choked up, not knowing why she reacted that way.

Mildred stepped out of the room, closed the door, and walked away, feeling dizzy. She stepped into the master guest room without realizing. Her stuff was on a table. She grabbed her toothbrush and stepped into the washroom. There was a new toothbrush, along with other toiletries.

Mildred brushed her teeth and hair. Feeling better, she stepped out of her room and hunted for the dining room.

On her way, she spotted her grandchildren. "Good morning Grandma," Jane said.

“Good morning Grandma. You’re looking good today. Do you know where the dining room is?” Leslie asked.

“Sure girls, follow me,” Mildred replied and led the way.

Seconds later, they heard a scream. “Grandma, Grandma, where are you?” Mark shouted, in near panic.

Mildred took a deep breath and called, “Here I am son.”

Seconds later, Mark plowed into her leg. He was crying. “I thought the demon got you.” Mark still wore his pajamas.

Mildred bent down and hugged the little boy. “I’m sorry my Little Prince. I just wanted you to sleep a little longer.”

“I have a seven year old body. It doesn’t need much sleep. It only needs you,” Mark whimpered.

“Come on dear, go and change.”

“Not without you, Grandma.” Mark grabbed Mildred’s hand and pulled.

“I need to show the girls where the dining room is,” Mildred tried to argue.

“Sister Leslie, Sister Jane, can you please accompany us? I only need five minutes to change.” Mark looked at the two.

“All right Prince Mark,” Jane said. They accompanied the grandmother and the boy.

“You don’t need to call me Prince. Remember, you’re princesses too,” Mark spoke as he guided them.

“You didn’t correct Grandma when she called you Prince,” Leslie commented.

They entered Mark's room. He hesitated for a second, shrugged, and changed. "Grandma called me *My Little Prince*. That's a term of endearment. It's not a title."

Mark pulled Mildred into the washroom. Mildred balked at that. "I'll stay outside while you go potty," Mildred said.

"I don't care. Seven year olds don't know the meaning of modesty. I don't want you to run away again," Mark said.

Most seven year olds don't know the word modesty either. "All right, I will stay," Mildred agreed reluctantly. Mildred raised children before. This wasn't much different, other than the fact that Mark was a prince.

Mark brushed his teeth. "I'm sorry for acting like a brat. Everything I do is for a reason. Carry me."

Mildred picked Mark up and they headed for the dining room. They entered and greeted everyone present.

"Good morning Mama, Papa," Mark said and hugged the two parents.

Mildred felt the urge to address them in a similar way, but caught herself just in time.

They sat down and ate breakfast. "I passed Princess Annie's room and decided to look in. I hope you don't..."

"No!" Mark interrupted her.

Mildred turned around and looked at Mark. He had a look of horror on his face. Mildred realized she had done something she shouldn't have done. She looked around. Everyone seemed uneasy. Even Luke had a worried expression.

Mildred bowed to the family. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me for intruding."

"What's done is done son," the father said.

Mark walked around in circles, looking upset. Finally, he calmed down. Mark walked up to Mildred and gave her a hug. "It's okay Grandma, you didn't do anything wrong. I will always love you."

"Come on. Finish your breakfast. You have a busy day ahead of you," Queen Arial said.

Mildred looked at Mark eating his breakfast. He had such a sad expression, she felt like crying. She didn't know how to fix her faux pas.

"I'm sorry I entered her room. I didn't mean any offense," Mildred apologized.

"Did you see her parents?" Queen Arial asked.

Mildred nodded, feeling as if they were giving her the third degree.

"Did you feel anything when you saw them?" Mark asked.

How did he know? "Yes. I felt as if I've seen them before."

"The welcome party has been set for the end of the month," the king said, trying to break up the tension.

"That's great. I can't wait. Where is the party being celebrated?" Leslie asked.

"It's on the *Princess Annie*. The *Princess Annie* is a clipper Mark suggested we buy some three years ago," the king said.

Mark shook his head as if to clear some cobwebs, clapped his hands, and smiled. "That's right. I've always loved clippers. When dad said he

needed to buy a new state ship, I suggested he buy that. Grandma, let's go to the museum of transportation."

Mark grabbed Mildred's hand and pulled. "Bye Mama, Papa, see you later." Mark ran back and gave his parents a hug and kiss.

"Before you go, here's your allowance from the king and queen," Jeeves stepped up and handed Mildred a bag.

"I couldn't," Mildred complained. Mildred wasn't used to such unearned generosity.

"Off course you can. You're my nanny. That's the money you need to take care of me," Mark said.

"Tell Jeeves when you run out. Also, Jeeves will give you your salary as Mark's nanny later. Have fun," the queen waved at them.

Mark dragged Mildred to his room. He grabbed a tiny backpack, suitable for his size. Two poles stuck out of it. They looked familiar.

"Mark dear, is that my staff?" Mildred asked.

"No Grandma, it's mine. I bought it last year when I visited your world. My uncle bought it for me. I know how to use it. He trained me well."

Why would anyone buy a seven-year-old boy a dangerous weapon, and train him with it no less? Mildred realized nobility lived in a different world.

"Please be careful with it. It's dangerous. I personally wouldn't give a sword to a child," Mildred shook her head.

Mark clasped his hands together, closed his eyes, and prayed, "Please God, guide my actions. Give me wisdom in what I should do next."

Mildred nodded with approval. This little boy will one day make a great leader.

Mark stepped to the door and called back. “You’re right. I wouldn’t give a double-bladed staff to a child either. There are extenuating circumstances around why I have this weapon.” Mark paused and looked deep in thought. “I will tell you the story some day. Grandma, do you need anything from your room before you go? By the way, you may enter Annie’s room anytime you wish.”

Mildred looked at Mark. He confused her. He seemed like someone had glued an adult and a child together. He was definitely someone who could handle responsibility easily – as long as he had someone to hold his hand.

“Are you sure about that? I don’t want to intrude,” Mildred asked, not wanting to enter that sacred space.

Mark looked deep in thought. He grabbed Mildred’s hand and guided her to the guest room. She pulled out a daypack and filled it with stuff. Mildred shrunk her staff to its two-foot length, broke it in half, and placed the halves in the pockets designed for it.

“Come on Grandma, it’s time to meet the people of Blears.”

Mildred walked besides the enigmatic prince. He did a lot of thinking.



Mildred decided to do some thinking of her own.

The story started around eighty years ago. A couple in their late twenties had been trying to conceive a child for almost seven years. The wife always wanted a beautiful daughter with long black hair.

One day in a dream, a little boy with green hair told the wife that her prayer would come true. The next day Mildred appeared in front of them, naked and without memories. They fell in love with her and adopted her.

They named her after some person they admired. Mildred – she always hated that name. It seemed so lame. If only they had given her a nice name, such as Annie.

Mildred lived a happy life, until her adoptive parents died in a car accident when she was ten years old. She then went from foster home to foster home, never feeling wanted.

As a teenager, she looked for men she felt would give her the security she needed. She found them. They were all strong men, with bulging muscles, both on their arms and in their heads. They proved their strength by bullying those weaker than them. They also abused her. But they were strong, so she stayed with them.

A perfect example was her second husband. Mildred's second husband was the angriest, grumpiest person she ever knew. Being a wrathful person, he always paid back every slight against him with interest.

Mr. Grumpy tended to talk with his fists. One day, a rival gang member talked back with their fist. That was the end of him. He died with a cracked skull.

If only she could pull a Bill Murray and redo her life. *Groundhog Day* was a good movie. Most people didn't understand it, thinking it was just a comedy or chick flick.

Mildred looked at her companion. It was uncanny how the Little Prince could read her. He seemed to have psychic powers.

Mildred looked around. They approached the town. Mark waved at people, greeting everyone he met. They in turn greeted him, looking genuinely happy. Even those too embarrassed to wave were happy. Everyone loved the Little Prince.

"You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?" Mildred asked.

Mark shrugged. "This is my princely duty. You have no idea how much a country loves its monarchy. It's my job to make them happy. I do this by greeting people and being friendly to them. By the way, what country do you come from?"

"The United States," Mildred replied.

Mark nodded. "They don't have a monarchy. They wouldn't understand. Have you ever been to England? If you visit then, you'll understand...They love gossiping about the queen and discussing scandals. They love seeing the princes and talking about their love lives. I myself don't understand it. To me, royalty is just a bunch of people doing necessary work. Should they fail; new royalty will rise to take their place."

Mildred was impressed. "You have a mature understanding of the world."

"Thank-you," Mark said. "It's time I told you about Annie."

They walked down a path and towards a bridge. Mark walked to the center of the bridge and climbed on the railing.

"Blears and Rosette kingdoms were at war for decades. One year before I was born, they declared a truce. Our kingdoms decided on a royal marriage to bind our countries.

"The king and queen of Blears decided to have a son. That's me. The king and queen of Rosette decided to have a daughter. That you – your – err..." Mark stopped, looking confused.

Did he say me? That's impossible. I'm too old. Mildred dismissed that idea.

"Your – room, the room you entered, Annie's room," Mark jumped down and started pacing.

"As I was saying, the king and queen of Blears decided to have me. The king and queen of Rosette decided to have Annie. At conception they bound our souls together." Mark looked at Mildred.

"That's so sweet," Mildred said misty eyed. "I wish I had a destined partner." She wiped her eyes. She loved the idea of soul mates and destined encounters. Mildred was a romantic at heart. Unfortunately, no soul mate existed for her.

Mark stared intently at Mildred. "You have. He's here in this world. That's why you're here. In time you'll meet him."

"How do you know these things," Mildred asked, unbelievably.

"I was charged by Nexus to bring you two together. Remember, I said I had an uncle? That's the one. He's away on an important mission for Nexus, but he should be back in about a month or two."

"Who or what is Nexus?" Mildred asked.

"That's a good question. I don't fully understand. As far as I can tell - Think of Nexus as being the helpers of God. They are tasked with managing the universe." Mark stopped pacing and began gesturing with his hands. He tried to focus his thoughts.

"Think of God as being the ultimate King. He delegates responsibility to his subordinates. We call the hierarchical organization he controls Nexus. But Nexus is more than that. That's not important."

Mark paused for a second. "What was I saying," Mark asked.

"You were saying you're tasked with helping me find the perfect man, my Prince Charming," Mildred said.

"That's right. My uncle is the one you're looking for. But you'll have to wait for him." Mark paused again. "I have to warn you. Before you meet him, Nexus will test you. You'll only meet when you pass that test. It's my job to make sure you pass."

Who or what are you? Before Mildred could ask that question, Mark grabbed her arm and pulled. "That's enough philosophy for one day.

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It's time to play. Come on Grandma, I have to show you the museum of transportation. It's fun. I also need to show you the clippers. They're my favorite ships. My dad has a clipper he uses for official occasions. We'll be having a party on it. Isn't that fun?" Mark clapped his hands and waved at passersby. The Little Prince was back to being a child.

Mark's sudden changes confused Mildred. He frightened her sometimes. He had an uncanny knack of looking directly into her heart. He also seemed to be incredibly wise and childish at the same time. No, not childish, childlike – Mark was never bratty. He was always polite, maybe to a fault. He was always considerate to others. He knew his duties and took them seriously.

He would make a good husband. He had incredible strength, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He had the qualities she searched for since she was a child.

Throughout her life, Mildred met men whom she thought had those qualities, but time revealed her judgment was crappy. She always ended up in abusive relationships. Leaving such relationships is harder than most people understand.

Mildred's third husband, Hatschi, fit that description well. He was romantic, seemed dependable, and was good with the kids. After years of marriage, Mildred could no longer keep her eyes closed. His dependability was an illusion.

Hatschi was a drug addict and sneezed all the time. He enjoyed any drug that he could sniff. His sneezing became so bad that he tended to cover everything with boogers.

He was a lusty man and was romantic to all women. His drug use only increased his lust. Hatschi considered lust to be the greatest pleasure in life. He was good with the kids, but in the wrong way. He went to jail for child molestation.

Mildred looked at Mark. Annie was a lucky girl to have him as her destined partner. Mildred suddenly realized that Annie was dead. Demons killed her or something.

That was so sad, Mildred felt like crying. "What kind of girl was Annie?"

"Annie is the sweetest girl you can possibly imagine. She's kind and gentle. She's always considerate towards others. She's fun to be around. She laughs at my jokes and thinks everything I do is interesting. We play all the time. One of the games we enjoy is hide-and-seek. We are destined to be together forever. One day I will marry her. She's one of my internal organs. Without her, I will die."

Mildred couldn't believe a seven-year-old boy could be so romantic. In Mildred's opinion, all men were jerks throughout their lives.

Mark was a man who knew how to appreciate his girl. He was the complete opposite of every man she had ever had a relationship with. Mildred felt jealous of Annie.

"You're talking as if she's alive. I thought she was killed," Mildred commented, secretly happy that Annie was dead. She felt ashamed of her feelings and tried to suppress them.

"You're right. That demon blasted her out of this universe. Don't worry – she's just playing hide-and-seek with me. One day I'll find her," Mark said. "Come on Grandma. We've arrived."

Mark pulled Mildred's hand and they ran to the town center. Mildred looked at a public clock. It was 10:00AM.

Mark dragged Mildred to a fountain in the town center. He got up on a table, raised one hand above his head and waved people towards him. "Everyone, please come here. I have something to say," he called out. People gathered around them. A crowd formed.

“Hi everyone, we have a friend who has just arrived from a world from beyond Nexus. She calls herself Mildred. I call her Grandma.” Mark spoke in a loud voice so everyone could hear.

“She’s my new nanny and I love her very much. Everyone, please welcome the newest member of our family.” Mark clapped and the crowd followed. Everyone happily greeted her.

One couple approached her with tears in their eyes. “Thank-you Princess Mildred. You have no idea how happy we are to see Prince Mark happy again.”

“Thank-you Grandma for everything,” someone in the background yelled.

Mildred was experiencing extreme stage fright. She wanted to run away and hide. She hated being the center of attention. Her low self-esteem didn’t allow it. This was the main reason few people knew her name, even though she contributed greatly to world betterment.

Mildred recalled her journey of self-discovery.

As a teenager, Mildred was unusually self-conscious. When the self-consciousness was intense enough, she felt as if she were two separate people. One was the person everyone saw and interacted with. The other just stood back and observed. A Zen Kōan or saying described this:

There are two birds in a tree. One bird eats seeds and goes about its business. The other bird sits back and just observes.

The everyday person was easy to understand. It’s what we see when we meet people, and the only thing science acknowledged existed.

The observing person was another matter. Mildred never could understand that observing person. However, the more embarrassed she felt, the stronger the Presence was.

Mildred found a book on Raja Yoga. It had an exercise to help prove that we are that hidden person, the immortal one. The exercise was simple. Just imagine yourself as being dead.

Nexus

You could be run over, impaled, shot, or whatever. Then you ask yourself, who's observing you dead? The answer is – you are. You can imagine your body as being dead. You can imagine your mind as being without thoughts. However, you can't imagine that Presence as being dead.

Another Kōan went something like:

What you can imagine isn't it.

The Presence within her was like that. It wasn't her body. As she grew up, her body changed, but that Presence within her remained constant.

Starting from age twelve, she carefully noted these changes in body, but not in spirit.

The Presence wasn't her mind. Her thoughts changed but that Presence remained. Mildred occasionally spotted that Presence within her dreams. She even saw that Presence after going unconscious from a car accident. She knew she existed but nothing else.

Anything that she could analyze or reason about wasn't the Presence.

The only thing she could say about the Presence was that it represented pure existence. "I AM"

This was the gateway into her spiritual journey. Mildred read about karma, reincarnation, and the meaning of existence.

Are there such things as soul mates, someone bound to you for eternity? That idea was appealing to her. So far, her life was crappy.

Mildred looked at Mark. She considered asking if he had similar experiences, but changed her mind. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know the answer.

"Please, you're embarrassing me. Can we please go somewhere else?" Mildred begged.

"I'm not doing this to torture you Grandma. I'm doing this so you can understand. I want you to learn to appreciate yourself."

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Mark addressed the audience. "I think Grandma has had enough excitement for one day. We'll come back another day to play." Mark waved good-bye to everyone. People dispersed.

"I told you I need to make you ready for the time you met my uncle. Before you can meet him, you need to improve your self-esteem. You need to know your true value. You need to see yourself in the same way my uncle will one day see you."

Mildred glanced at her new spiritual master and nodded.

"Come on Grandma, it's time to go to the museum of transportation." Mark walked quietly beside her without speaking. Mildred had the feeling that Mark was giving her time to think.

The museum of transportation was a blur, as were the museum of history, and the museum of art.

By 5:00PM, they headed home.

"Grandma, how would you like to be young again?" Mark asked.

"That's impossible son. God allocated a certain time for us to be on this earth. We can't stay a second longer."

"It is possible to become younger. You just have to want it and I'll give it to you," Mark said.

Mildred considered for a second but rejected the idea. "I'm sorry but I can't."

Mark nodded and they continued home. They arrived with plenty of time for dinner.

"I'm going to play some video games. Would you like to join me," Mark asked. They played a car racing game until a servant called them to dinner.

Dinner was uneventful and they retired to the family room at 8:00PM.

The family talked about unimportant things.

Mark fidgeted awhile before speaking. "Sister Jane, Sister Leslie, how would you like it if Grandma became young again?"

"Please Mark I don't want to become young again. I'm happy the way I am," Mildred complained. She hoped Mark forgot, or at least accepted her decision.

The girls looked at the king and queen. "Is that possible?" Leslie asked.

"That's right. Grandma can become younger," queen Ariel said.

"That's incredible. Grandma, I really want to see you young again. Then we can go shopping and have facials together," Leslie said excitedly.

"How young will she be?" Jane asked.

"Please, I don't want to become young. I've spent my entire life trying to become old," Mildred complained.

"What's so special about being old? You just spend your life complaining about aches and pains. Then you get a horrible disease and then you die. Being young is the best," Leslie said.

"You don't understand. God has decided that we should live a certain time before being called home." Mildred has another reason for not wanting to be young again. She had a difficult youth and didn't want to relive that. She couldn't wait to become an adult and gain independence.

"Never mind all that. How do you make Grandma become young again?" Leslie asked.

"There are two ways: the long way and the short way. The short way takes seconds. That's not true. I don't know how long it will take, but it should be fast," Mark said.

"So how does it work?" Leslie asked, excited. She obviously wanted a new sister.

"Remember your fairy tales. How do you wake up a sleeping princess?" Mark asked. He had a serious face.

Remember my fairytales. Mildred recalled her past. The handsome prince kisses the sleeping princess. Mildred looked at the little boy playing with a toy dragon. *Does he expect to give me a lover's kiss? I can't kiss a child like that.*

Mildred felt her face turning red. She imagined her face looking like the queen's hair.

"Grandma, are you thinking dirty thoughts again?" Leslie asked, leaning back on Luke. Luke had his arm around her.

"Dirty thoughts?" Luke asked, looking confused.

"In a fairy tale, a handsome prince wakes the princess with a lover's kiss," Leslie said wickedly.

Mildred wanted to run away. She looked at the king and queen. They didn't seem to be bothered. Even James, Artemis and Luke were un-phased. In fact, they seemed to be waiting for Mark to kiss her. It was as if he kissing her was natural to them. What kind of perverted family did she find herself with?

"Are you saying Mark needs to kiss Grandma with a lover's kiss?" Jane asked, confused.

Mildred wanted to say or do something, but she didn't know what. Mark looked intently at her. He then looked at her two grandchildren.

Mark opened his mouth to say something, but then stopped. Instead, he turned to his mother. "Mama, big sisters are making fun of Grandma," Mark shouted.

"Girls, have some respect for your elders," the queen scolded.

"Yes, ma'am," the girls said.

"The only one who'll be kissing my Grandma will be my uncle. I told her it was my duty to get them to meet." Mark looked at Mildred. "Remember I told you about him."

Mildred felt relieved, then disappointed, then embarrassed for being disappointed, then confused about her emotions.

"You also told me I needed to pass a certain test. Does anyone know what this test will be?" Mildred looked around. Everyone shrugged.

The sound of birds interrupted them. "On," Papa Ramsey said.

Everyone looked at a painting over the fireplace. Mildred assumed it was a painting. The image disappeared and a family replaced it, with a father, mother, two boys and a girl.

"Hello Jason, Jenny. I was planning on calling you," Ramsey greeted them.

Ramsey and the others got up and Mildred got up as well. "Jason, Jenny, I would like you to meet Mildred. Mildred, come here."

Mildred stepped near the king and he presented her to them. The queen stood on the other side of her. Again, she was in the spotlight. She hated these situations. She wasn't deserving of so much attention.

"Mildred and five girls gated to our back yard yesterday, just after Mark blew out the candles," the king said meaningfully.

A New Day

The man dropped the papers he carried. The woman had tears in her eyes. They looked at Mildred with overwhelming love. The boy with blond hair and purple eyes, and the girl with blue hair and eyes clapped. The rest followed.

Mildred wasn't used to all this undeserved love and attention. Nothing in her life had earned her this. She just wanted to run away.

Mark came to her rescue. "Wait," he said and raised his hand. The clapping stopped. "Grandma, that's Annie's mother and father. You saw them in Annie's room. That is Mama Jenny and that is Papa Jason. The blond boy is Brother Joseph, the purple haired boy is Brother John, and the girl is Sister Dara.

"Mama, Papa, Brothers, Sister, let me introduce Grandma Mildred's grandchildren. That is Sister Leslie and that is Sister Jane."

There were introductions all around.

The mother was so excited she couldn't contain herself. She still cried. "So Mildred dear, has Mark been showing you around? What do you think of our world so far?"

"I love it. The people are so friendly. It's like being in heaven," Mildred said.

"We are planning a formal welcome celebration for Mildred in a month. We will send you formal invitations," Papa Ramsey said.

Annie's mother looked at Mark. "Is it possible for us to come earlier?"

Both families stared intently at Mark, waiting for his verdict. Mark seemed deep in thought. He raised his head. "I think that's a great idea Mama Jenny. I can't wait to play with my other brothers and sister."

King Ramsey smiled. "I look forward to meeting my good friend. It's been so long."

Mildred noticed how everyone deferred to Mark. Even Luke bowed to Mark's wisdom. That didn't prevent Luke from tormenting him.

Joseph and Dara seemed restless. "Mama, Papa, I would like to marry Dara, if that's okay with you," Joseph said and looked at Mark.

Both families looked again at Mark, seeking approval. Mark looked innocently around. "Don't look at me. I'm not his grandfather. I'm his baby brother and I love my big brother very much. I think a wedding would be fun, when they both turn eighteen."

So, the boy and girl had asked for and gotten approval from a seven-year-old child. The boy had specified that they wait till they turn eighteen. Mildred couldn't understand what gave the child so much authority.

"Excellent. Jason, I'll have Jeeves prepare rooms for you. Have a safe trip. See you soon," Ramsey said. They said goodbye and sighed off. The image of ships sailing on a river in space replaced the family.

Ramsey rang a bell. Everyone sat down. Mark curled up in a ball and placed his head on Mildred's lap. Mildred looked at everyone, then at Mark. She rubbed his shoulder.

"Majesties, I've spent the whole day with the Little Prince. I don't understand him. He seems so..." Mildred didn't know how to finish.

"Old *fart* like?" Luke suggested. It seemed the prince liked the word *fart*.

"That's right," Mildred agreed. She covered her mouth and turned to Mark. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to call you an old fart."

Luke laughed so hard, he almost fell off the couch.

A New Day

Mark smiled at Mildred. "That's all right Grandma. As you know I'm older than the moon and younger than the stars."

Jeeves entered. "You rang, Sire?"

"Annie's family will be arriving soon. We don't know when," Ramsey said.

"Do we have enough space? Do you think Grandma should move into Annie's room?" Mark asked.

"That's a great idea," Arial said.

"I couldn't. I don't want to desecrate Annie's memory," Mildred complained.

"Nonsense, we want you to be happy. Please use that room," Mama Arial smiled at her.

"What about Annie's parents? Won't they be upset?" Mildred tried to argue.

"Believe me my dear they'll be happy to let you use the room. Jeeves please move Mildred's stuff into Annie's room," Mama Arial said.

"Very good mum," Jeeves bowed and left.

"Mark, isn't it your bed time?" Mama Arial asked.

Mark got up, and hugged and kissed his mother and father. "Goodnight Mama, Papa. Come on Grandma, let's go."

Mildred stepped into Mark's bathroom and undressed. Today she didn't feel embarrassed. She was too preoccupied with her own thoughts. She had a lot to think about. Mildred undressed Mark and gave him a bath. She let him bathe her as well.

They dressed and Mark got into bed. “Grandma, you can sleep in your new room. I’ll be fine tonight. Goodnight Grandma.” Mark closed his eyes and cuddled with a stuffed dragon.

Mildred walked out and stood in front of the room with the pink crown. *So I’m supposed to stay here.* Reluctantly, she stepped into the room. Her stuff was on the table.

Mildred looked around. It was the perfect little girl room. There were expensive dolls, a dollhouse, a tea set, makeup, pretty dresses and shoes.

Mildred went to the washroom, brushed her teeth, did her thing and then went to bed. She had plenty to think about.



All through her life, Mildred had to prove herself. Growing up as an orphan, she went from home to home. No one wanted her.

As a teenager, she dated. Boys were interested in her, but only for her body, and the favors she could provide.

During schooling, she met people claiming to be her friend. They only wanted her to help them study, since she was the smartest and most hard working person in school. They were always reluctant to help her in return.

Later in life, people came to her seeking money and favors. Her business skills earned the organizations she worked for plenty of money. The richer she became, the more people mooched off of her.

That changed when she entered this new world.

She was now in the presence of royalty and they didn’t ask anything of her. Instead, they willingly opened their home to her, made her a

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full-fledged member of the family, and showered her with all the love she never knew.

They gave her an allowance. They said it was to care for the Little Prince, but she knew that wasn't true. That gift was freely given.

Mildred felt bothered. She knew she didn't deserve any of this.

She thought of the little boy in the room next door. He put a great deal of effort in choosing his words and actions. She could see the strain it had on his little body. All his actions seemed to be for her benefit. It was almost as if he was her servant and not the other way around.

Mildred remembered Annie's parents on the TV screen. The mother cried when she saw her. It was like a mother seeing her dead daughter come back to life. That reaction was too much for her.

Mildred went to sleep with a guilty conscious.

Fishing

To see the playful child inside the grouchy old man,
the dancing girl inside the crippled woman –
that's the essence of spiritual vision.



“Princess Mildred, breakfast will be served in half-hour,” someone called outside the door.

“Thank-you,” Mildred called. She felt like a little girl lying in bed. This took her back to her childhood when her parents were alive.

Mildred realized that people were secretly taking care of her without appearing to do so. It was all Mark's fault. He would run to servants and speak quietly to them. He would then return and pretend nothing happened.

She had once asked him what he told them. He just shrugged, and made up some excuse.

Mark reminded Mildred of Bill Charming. They had the same way of dealing with life.

Mildred followed Bill closely because she had a secret crush on him. He never knew she existed because she always kept a low profile. Now she regretted doing that. If only she was brave enough to meet him.

Mildred knew why she never met Bill. Because of her perverse nature, she was only attracted to bad men. She knew she would have rejected him if they had met.

After living eighty-seven years, Mildred was finally beginning to understand herself. Was she ready to meet Mark's uncle, her so-called Prince Charming? The thought of meeting this unknown uncle terrified her. She didn't even know his name and was afraid to ask.

Fishing

Mildred felt that Mark never lied to her, yet at the same time he was keeping secrets. It was the same for everyone here. No one lied, but there was a secret people kept from her.

Mildred got up and went to the washroom to freshen up and dress. She was too distracted to notice her appearance.

At age eighty-seven, appearance becomes a little less important. She still considered personal grooming important, but she didn't worry about things over which she had no control. Wrinkles were a part of life. She only looked at herself to make sure she was presentable, but nothing more.

Mildred stepped out of the room and passed Luke on the way to the dining room.

"Good morning Grandma," Luke said. They walked together.

"Luke, do you ever feel jealous of Mark? I think I would be in your place," Mildred said. She suspected jealousy drove his attitude towards Mark.

"No, off course not, why would I be jealous of that little twerp?" Luke said, a little too quickly.

"Are you sure about that? Two countries made peace because he was born. People give him an unusual amount of respect, even though he's just a child. He seems to have a destiny. I know I would be jealous." Mildred stopped and looked at Luke, defying him to contradict her.

Luke looked down, guiltily. "I admit I was a little jealous of him. When he was born, everyone went crazy over him. People completely ignored me. I'm supposed to be the next king."

"I know dear. It can be tough," Mildred sympathized. She was happy to start to get to know the boy.

Mildred learned psychology and many forms of therapy to help those in need. She figured Luke needed her help.

"I'm no longer jealous of him. I'm glad I'm not him. I wouldn't want to go to hell, or experience the stuff destiny has in store for him. Being the next king is fine with me," Luke said.

He went to hell?

"You love him, don't you?" Mildred asked. She suspected Luke didn't know how to express affection. She knew he loved his little brother, although a little jealousy remained. Mark was off course a man apart from others.

Luke looked down, embarrassed. He was blushing. "Off course not, I don't like him." As an after-thought, Luke added, "I like giving him noogies. He's fun to tease."

Leslie and Jane interrupted the conversation. They greeted their grandmother. "You look young grandma," Jane said.

"Yes Grandma you look incredible. Luke, doesn't she look young?" Leslie asked.

Mildred got a chill. She wanted to scold Mark. She had specifically told him she didn't want to become younger. He had disobeyed her.

"Does she?" Luke asked. He looked clueless.

"You men, you don't pay attention to anything." Leslie slapped his arm.

They entered the dining room and greeted the others.

"Good morning Grandma," Mark said and hugged Mildred. He guided her to a seat near him.

Fishing

Luke stepped up to Mark and used his head like a drum. “Good morning, old man. You’re right Grandma, being nice to the little brat is fun,” Luke said and sat down to eat.

Mildred didn’t know what to say. Her talk had the wrong effect.

“Everyone, doesn’t Grandma look younger to you?” Leslie asked. She looked around, but everyone seemed as clueless as Luke.

“I think you’re imagining things dear. It’s impossible for someone to become younger just like that,” Mildred said, relieved.

They had breakfast.

“So dear, what are your plans for today?” Mama Arial asked.

“I don’t know Mama Arial,” Mildred said and rubbed Mark’s head.

“Should we call them that too, Grandma?” Jane asked.

Call them what? Mildred realized what she called the queen. She thought a second, and then decided that was a good idea. They needed to be polite like Mark and they didn’t need to be so formal to Mark’s parents. But Mark’s parents were the king and queen of a country.

“Majesties, how should we address you two?” Mildred asked.

The queen looked at the king. “You may call us Mama Arial and Papa Ramsey.”

“Okay Mama Arial, Papa Ramsey,” Jane said.

“Mama Arial, Papa Ramsey – I like that,” Leslie said and looked at Luke. Mildred wasn’t sure if it was a good idea for Leslie and Luke to be so close. It was clear Leslie was speaking about Luke’s parents as if they were her future in-laws.

Come to think of it, wasn't that how Mark addressed Annie's parents? They were engaged to be married since before they were born. He still believed he was betroved to her. He lived in denial, poor child.

"Why don't we go fishing?" Luke suggested.

"That's a good idea, Luke. I wish I could come but my schedule is full for today," Papa Ramsey said.

"I'll get my backpack," Mark said and left.

Mildred remembered about the staff Mark had. "Majesties, are you okay with Mark having that double-bladed staff?"

"He's a responsible child. He knows how to use it. He won't hurt himself or anyone with it," Papa Ramsey said.

"We feel safer with it in his hands. In fact, we insist he carry it," Mama Arial said.

"He doesn't like going to town with a guard. He thinks it frightens the people and interferes with his duties. Believe it or not but he has been training our soldiers. He's surprisingly good," the father said.

"I think he works too hard with his studies and his duties," the mother complained, shaking her head.

Mildred realized what Mark was doing. Psychologists called it work therapy. By focusing on work, you avoid thinking negative thoughts. The only problem was it doesn't work at night, when it comes time to go to sleep.

"Luke, have you ever fought Mark with the double-bladed staff?" Leslie asked.

"No way, he would kick my ass. Don't tell him that," Luke replied.

"What exactly are Mark's duties?" Jane asked.

"Okay I'm ready," Mark said.

"Mark, what exactly are your duties? Aren't you too young to work?" Jane said.

"My duty is to be friendly to people and make them happy. Unfortunately, I've been shirking by responsibilities. I've been going to town only once every one or two weeks. Come on everyone. Let's go."

"Take Larry, Peter and Joe with you. There are bandits in the area. Remember to take your weapons as well," the king said.

"Where are we going?" Leslie asked.

"The best fishing hole is Lake Mead. It's about 40 miles away from here," James said.

"We'll meet you at the garage. Bye Mama, Papa," Mark said. "Let's go Grandma."

Mildred followed Mark to the garage. He handed a fishing rod to Mildred. "How is this Grandma?" he asked.

It seemed fine. They walked to the ride. The ride turned out to be an old-fashioned horse drawn carriage without the horses. They got into the carriage and waited.

As usual, Mark was thinking deep thoughts. He tended to think with his hands. Occasionally he would write something in his notebook. Mildred wanted to ask him what he was thinking, but didn't want to interrupt him.

The gang came. Susan, Samantha and Sara were there as well. They had their swords.

Luke drove. They were on their way. The speed and comfort of the carriage surprised Mildred. She expected a bumpy ride, considering how ancient the vehicle looked.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived. Luke drove the carriage into the water. He pressed a button and the carriage converted itself into a boat like a Transformer robot. He drove them to the middle of the lake.

"This is an interesting ride," Leslie said.

Mildred agreed. The technology was incredible.

They spent the afternoon fishing.

"Grandma, why don't you tell me some stories," Mark asked. Mildred entertained the Little Prince all afternoon.

She sang to him.

"This is a beautiful lake. It looks as if it's composed of emeralds," Mildred commented.

"Mark, please tell me about this mysterious uncle you keep referring to. What kind of person is he?" Mildred wanted to know about her future husband. She was apprehensive about being married to a complete stranger.

"I was waiting for you to ask that question." Mark sat next to Mildred and looked at her face, long eyelashes slowly blinking at her.

That statement sent shivers down Mildred's back. The little guy seemed to be working on a schedule. Also, he knew too much about her and had knowledge and wisdom no seven-year-old boy ever possessed.

"Who or what are you?" Mildred asked.

Fishing

Mark blinked his long eyelashes at her. “Do you think you’re ready to know the answer to those questions?”

Mildred realized she wasn’t ready and didn’t say anything.

Mark turned around and sang:

You fill up my senses like a night in a forest
Like the mountains in springtime, like a walk in the rain
Like a storm in the desert, like a sleepy blue ocean
You fill up my senses come fill me again.

Come let me love you, let me give my life to you
Let me drown in your laughter, let me die in your arms
Let me lay down beside you, let me always be with you
Come let me love you, come love me again.

Mark hummed the instrumental part of the song.

“That was...” Mildred trailed off. How did he know that song? It was one of her favorite songs.

“*Annie’s Song* by John Denver. Did I mention I visited your world? It reminds me of my BFF – Best Friend Forever.”



They went to a local town. The town was holding a weeklong garlic festival. Everything was made of garlic.

“Come on Grandma, I’ll buy you some garlic flavored mint ice cream. You can buy me some garlic flavored strawberry ice cream,” Mark said smiling.

“Is it true that garlic keeps vampires away?” Larry said. “It’s keeping me away,” Peter continued. “Like stinky feet,” Joe finished.

“It must be working. I don’t see any vampires,” Susan said. “I don’t see anyone with good taste either,” Samantha continued. “Like smelly toes,” Sara finished.

The six friends argued about supernatural creatures and body odor.

They loaded up with food and sat at a nearby table.

“Did you hear, the Banshees have been captured?” a woman sitting next to them asked her friend.

“Who are the Banshees,” Mildred asked.

“They’re a local criminal gang, Highness. They’ve been terrorizing the area recently. Their leader has a club he uses to bash people’s heads in, before stealing their possessions,” the woman said.

“Let me guess, the gang called him Bashful,” Mildred said.

The leader reminded Mildred’s of her fourth husband.

Mildred’s fourth husband was a greedy man. When he saw something he liked, he would bash the owner’s head in and take the item. Half the time, he threw the item away because he didn’t need it. His gang called him Bashful. Bashful died when a rival gang bashed his head in.

“Hi, my name is Mildred. Pleased to meet you,” Mildred said and extended her hand.

The woman froze in fear.

“Grandma, in this world, regular people are forbidden from touching royalty, except by special permission,” Mark explained. “The only exception is if they give us something and our hands brush together.”

“I’m sorry,” Mildred apologized and withdrew her hand.

“Pleased to meet you Princess Mildred,” the woman said. “I think his name was Hank.”

Mildred spent the next half hour gossiping with the two women. She enjoyed herself, but didn’t like them calling her *Princess* and *Your Highness*.

Fishing

Evening came and they headed home. Mildred enjoyed her trip. It was fun being around young people. They know how to live.

That night they had fish for dinner. Mildred caught three fish and Mark caught only two. She felt a perverse pleasure in knowing she caught more fish than Mark.

Mildred gave Mark a bath and both went to the family room. Even after the bath, she felt she stunk of garlic.

The group described the day's events with the parents. They had plenty of pictures to share of their adventures.

"They had several eating contests. One man ate so much garlic that he threw up. He did end up winning most of the prizes. Larry, Peter, and Joe, and their girlfriends tried to compete, but they had no chance," Luke said.

"How did that man eat so much? He wasn't fat," Artemis asked.

"They stuff themselves with food to make their stomachs larger, and then throw up so they don't get fat. Some people in my world can make a living just by eating," Mildred said.

Mildred thought of her fifth husband.

Mildred's fifth husband was like that. Gilmore was a glutton, or as he liked calling himself, a connoisseur of food. He ate and drank all the time, and then threw up to make space for more food. He was excessive in his pleasures, usually at Mildred's expense. Happy hour was his favorite time of the day. His favorite songs were, *Don't worry, be happy*, and *Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think*.

"I got second prize in the garlic ice cream eating contest," Luke said proudly. Everyone congratulated him.

"Mark got first prize in his eating contest," James said.

“That’s only because he was competing with little kiddies. Anyone can win if you’re competing with babies,” Luke said.

“But Mark is only seven years old, just like the other contestants. He wasn’t cheating,” Mildred tried to defend Mark.

“The old fart has two stomachs. One down here, and one up here,” Luke pointed at Mark’s stomach and his head.

After a peaceful evening, Mildred went to bed in her new room.



Lying in bed, Mildred realized how comfy the room was. This was a perfect little girl room. She wished she had a room like this when she was a child.

Mildred looked at Mark’s picture hanging on the wall. It was over two years old, before he turned five.

Mark was so cute with those long eyelashes. She wondered how he would look in a dress.

Mildred always wanted a little sister. She grew up with only brothers. They were typical men.

In the group-homes she stayed in, Mildred never found anyone she could relate to. They came and went without leaving a trace in her mind.

Mildred missed having a girlfriend she could do girl stuff with. There were girls she hung out with, but they never qualified as friends. They were always seeking favors.

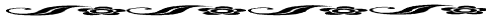
Mark was different. He could understand her and he never asked for anything.

Fishing

Mildred fell asleep dreaming of how she could dress Mark up in frilly dresses. Playing house would be fun.

Social Services

To see the mature adult inside the crying child –
that too is spiritual vision.



Mildred got out of bed, changed, and then did her girl stuff. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face had a healthy glow to it.

Mildred went to the dining room and found Mark there. The sight of him made Mildred feel guilty for dressing him up in her mind. He was a boy.

"I need a new picture of Mark in my room," Mildred said between bites of egg.

"Yes dear," Mama Arial smiled at her. Mildred realized she said *my room*. Also, why does she need a new picture? Mildred rationalized by telling herself that grandparents like having pictures of their grandchildren.

"Mildred dear, have you decided what you'll be doing today?" the queen asked.

"No ma'am. I would like to know more about the social conditions of your country. What are the services available to widows and orphans? What kind of educational systems do you have? I've spent my whole life dealing with such things and so am interested," Mildred asked.

"No problem Mildred," the king said. "Please follow me."

The king got up and both Mark and Mildred followed. They left the royal suites and entered the administrative area of the castle.

"Has Larson arrived?" the king asked.

"I'm right here, Your Highness," someone called from the back.

They followed the voice and found Larson buried in paperwork. His hands were filled with papers. He was stuffing multiple boxes at the same time. "How may I help you, Your Highness?" he asked through clenched teeth. He held paper in his mouth.

"Mildred is interested in the social welfare of our citizens. Please answer all her questions." Ramsey turned to Mildred. "Have fun, my dear." He left.

"Good morning Princess Mildred. My name is Larson," Larson introduced himself.

Mildred decided she would never get used to people calling her *princess*.

"We have sufficient schooling facilities to handle the needs of our citizens. They range from kindergarten to high school, and college. This is good enough for most of our citizens." Larson said.

"What about university?" Mildred asked. "Here, let me help you with those papers." Mildred grabbed some papers from Larson's hand.

"Thanks Majesty. Unfortunately, there's not enough demand for advance schooling. For this, we look to neighboring countries and worlds beyond Nexus."

"What about social services, such as..." Mildred hesitated, not knowing what to ask for.

"We have retirement homes for war veterans, who can't return to their homes. We have hospitals that serve the needs of our people. We have rehabilitation centers for criminals..." Larson continued.

"What about domestic violence?" Mildred asked.

"We deal with that through the educational system, the justice system, and the health care system," he said.

“What about orphanages?”

“We have both public and private orphanages – Thanks for your assistance,” Larson said.

“I would like to visit one of your orphanages,” Mildred said.

Being an orphan herself, Mildred found the welfare of other orphans important to her. In high school and college, she did volunteer work for them. She found it rewarding to help those less fortunate than herself. Mildred’s experiences allowed her to develop ideas that later became mainstream.

“No problem Majesty. Please follow me.” Larson guided Mildred through a maze of offices. This place seemed remarkably modern. They arrived at a cubicle.

“Lara, Princess Mildred is interested in visiting an orphanage. The king has instructed us to answer all her questions. Good day, Princess Mildred. When you get back, please feel free to ask me more questions.” Larson bowed and left.

They visited the Happy Homes orphanage. The home was clean and spacious. The housemother greeted them.

“Mrs. Duggle, please allow me to introduce Princess Mildred. She requested a tour of an orphanage,” Lara said.

“Please to meet you, Princess Mildred. Please follow me. We currently have 23 residents living with us. They range from three months old to almost seventeen,” Mrs. Duggle said.

Mrs. Duggle guided Mildred to the office. “Here are my certifications for the job,” she said.

“What type of training do you need to do the work you do?” Mildred asked.

"We need training in psychology, education, basic medicine, and child care. We also need to take an annual psyche tests to make sure we remain suited to caring for children. Then there are the refresher courses."

Mildred asked some administrative questions before leaving the office. Mrs. Duggle rounded the children and presented them to Mildred.

"Hi kids," Mildred said.

"Hi Princess Mildred," they said in unison.

"Kids, did you know I wasn't always a princess? I come from another world. It's in another..." Mildred trailed off, not knowing how to describe something she didn't understand herself. She wasn't Bill who could easily explain these things.

"She's from a world beyond Nexus," Mark said, holding a two-year-old girl in his arms. He had problems carrying her since she was almost as big as he was.

"I grew up as an orphan, just like you. I dedicated my life to self-improvement and eventually became rich and successful. All of you can fulfill your dreams if you work hard enough for it," Mildred said.

Mildred came to the belief early on that the best way to fulfill her childhood dream was to strive constantly for self-improvement and to influence the world in a positive manner. The belief some held that we exist here on earth to grow spiritually and the belief that we can't truly achieve our dreams until we meet our spiritual goals guided her path in life.

This didn't prevent her from making stupid choices in life, but that was a different story.

Mildred lectured the kids on hard work but Mark distracted her.

“Hello little Jessica, did you know I used to wear diapers just like you? My nanny always held her breath when changing me,” Mark said.

Jessica giggled. “Mrs. Duggle does the same thing when she changes me.”

Mark sniffed her butt. “I think someone needs her diapers changed. How would you like me to do that for you? Then you can say a prince changed your diapers.”

Mark grabbed some diapers and changed Jessica. “Okay Jessica, it’s time for me to hold my nose,” Mark said and held his breath. Jessica laughed.

“Thank-you Prince Mark for changing Jessica’s diapers,” Mrs. Duggle said. “Boys your age don’t like doing that. Where did you learn to do such things?”

“If you remember, I went to the other world last year. I got experience there. I don’t mind changing Jessica’s diapers since she’s a girl. I wouldn’t want to do that for a boy,” Mark said.

“That’s right. I remember it mentioned in the news. By the way, why won’t you change boys’ diapers?” Mrs. Duggle asked.

Mark shrugged.

“Mark thinks the male anatomy is disgusting,” Mildred said. Mark smiled at her and Mildred realized he never told her that. How did she know?

Mark kissed Jessica on the cheek and led her to the other children her age. He played with them.

Time passed and evening came.

"Thank-you Princess Mildred for visiting," Mrs. Duggle said. She turned to Mark. "Prince Mark, I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Thanks Mrs. Duggle," Mark replied. "Grandma restored my heart."

"Thank-you Princess Mildred for restoring Prince Mark's heart for us," Mrs. Duggle said by way of goodbye.



They arrived at the castle.

"What did you mean I restored your heart?" Mildred asked Mark when she was alone with him.

Mark led Mildred to his room. "All last year, the only thing I could do was study and train. I found everything else to be too painful to do. I missed Annie too much.

"It's surprising how much you can learn if you spend every waking moment doing it. Mama and Papa would have liked me to play outside but they didn't force me. They knew this phase would pass.

"Sit down Grandma. Let's watch TV while we wait for dinner." Mark pulled out a tricorder from his pocket and touched it. It turned into a regular remote control for a TV.

"Does everyone have those tricorder device thingies?" Mildred asked.

"No, you need to be certified to own one. It's quite a rigorous test. The studying and the test kept me distracted from thinking about things I shouldn't." Mark pressed a button and a screen appeared on the wall.

"I set it up so we can get Earth TV." Mark stepped through the channels. "I like watching the *Discovery Channel*."

Mark handed the device to Mildred. "You can use it now. It's set up to act like a remote control. It's keyed to me but it'll work for you as long as I will it. I'll get Wizard Caldor to add a connection for your room so you can watch.

Mildred looked at the device and channel surfed. "Did you use this to find out about me?" Mildred asked.

"I don't need that to know about you. Remember I was tasked by Nexus to train you," Mark replied.

Mildred stopped at the news. "An earthquake of magnitude 7.5 hit the Middle East 6:00PM local time," the announcer said. She showed the destruction, and announced the death toll and estimated damage.

"In other news, a few days ago at noon, the person many believe to be the secretive philanthropist Jane Reed was sucked up by a mysterious tornado that suddenly appeared on Ayers Rock in Australia."

"Jane Reed?" Mark asked.

"I like using pseudonyms. I don't like being at the center of attention," Mildred explained. She pressed a button but nothing happened.

Mark looked at her with those big purple eyes. "May I please watch? I need to know more about you."

"You know so much about me but I don't anything about you," Mildred objected.

"Don't worry, in time you'll know so much about me, you'll get sick of me," Mark said smiling.

Mildred caught herself treating Mark like an adult. This wasn't the first time.

The announcer continued. "We are now at the location. Here is the mysterious stone circle that appeared a year ago. Scientists still don't know its composition. Professor Jerry, people say Dr. Bill Charming created this as a way to travel to other worlds. What do you think?"

Professor Jerry sneered. "Mr. Charming is a charlatan. It's like his ridiculous red crystals. I admit they make for pretty jewelry, but to say they can produce energy from nothing is ridiculous.

"The same thing is true about this circle. I don't care what people say, it's impossible to create a wormhole. If such a thing were possible, it would have destroyed the planet."

The announcer looked annoyed by the professor's comments. Nearby people seemed equally annoyed. "Bill isn't a charlatan, you are," someone in the background shouted.

"I take it you haven't heard the news," the announcer said.

"What news?" the professor asked.

"An independent study was published yesterday showing seeds radiated with dragonite radiation grow nutritionally complete foods. Charming Industries announced this morning they would seek FDA approval for the process," the announcer said.

"I'm sure they'll find it produces cancer. Mark my words. We'll all regret ever knowing him," the professor said angrily.

"Let's look at footage taken of the event. It seemed someone caught the event on tape," the announcer said.

The video showed five teenage girls surrounding an old woman. They were performing some sort of ritual.

“Wizard, record this show,” Mark said. The tricorder beeped.

Swirling clouds formed above the pedestal and the six ladies. A bit of static appeared around the clouds and around the pedestal. Mist appeared on the ground surrounding the pedestal. Static obscured that as well.

The clouds descended upon the people performing the ritual. The static in the picture increased. It was hard to see the shape of the descending twister.

The image degraded until it was almost impossible to see anything. It was like watching old-fashioned celluloid film of the early twentieth century, which time had damaged beyond repair. The image kept jumping and black and white lines and flashes of light appeared everywhere.

Seconds later, the image cleared. The sky was clear and the pedestal stood empty.

Mark recognized the events unfolding. He paused the show. Mark tried to describe what he knew took place, but found it next to impossible. His explanations only confused Mildred.

Mark resumed the show.

The announcer looked at the professor. “Professor Jerry, how do you explain this video?”

“The video is a well made hoax. As you can see, it’s impossible to determine anything. If it’s real, we should be able to analyze it, but we can’t. That proves that this so-called wormhole is nonsense.”

It wasn’t surprising that the film quality was so bad. As a fundamental principle of nature, paranormal or magical phenomena are impossible to analyze.

Many times, the equipment just stops working or someone makes a mistake and doesn't capture anything. That's just the nature of the phenomena. Dr. Stanislav Grof calls this event psychoid phenomena – neither purely physical nor in your head, but somewhere in between.

For that reason, it's almost impossible to photograph ghosts, aliens, and things most scientists don't believe in. Anything not of this world belonged to this category.

The same applies to God. There's plenty of evidence for and against God's existence, but it's impossible to prove or disprove anything.

The pedestal was just a stone tablet when not being used. When Mildred and her crew stood on it, it opened a door to something beyond. When the Gate opened within the twister, the normal laws of physics no longer applied. As such, no one could photograph the twister.

Once the Gate closed, the pedestal once again became just a piece of rock.

"How do you explain why the stone platform is indestructible? Remember, the army tried to destroy it with dynamite soon after tourists discovered it. It wasn't even scratched," the commentator asked the Professor.

The professor looked uncomfortable. "I admit, Mr. Charming was a genius, but he was completely insane. The theories he came up with are complete nonsense."

"Can we please turn off the channel? His guy is really getting on my nerves. How dare he make fun of Bill Charming? Bill is a great man," Mildred said angrily. She hated it when people made fun of her hero.

The son of a <beep> Jerry reminded Mildred of her sixth husband.

Mildred's sixth husband was a dopey, narrow-minded fool who couldn't see beyond his own worldview. He was also an envious person and envied everyone's abilities and achievements. The fool was too stupid to realize, it was possible for him to achieve what others have achieved, given enough effort.

After years of dealing with his stupidity, intolerance, and narrow-mindedness, Mildred finally decided she had enough of him. She drove to Denver and ditched the dopey dude there.

"That type of talking can get you lynched," the announcer warned. Mildred agreed. She felt like lynching the professor.

"Did you ever meet this Bill?" Mark asked and turned off the TV.

"No, I couldn't. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to meet someone you idolize?" Mildred sighed. "Plenty of opportunities appeared for us to meet. I always found an excuse to be elsewhere."

Mark slowly blinked his big purple eyes at her. His long eyelashes made him look like a girl. Mark reached over and kissed her hand, still looking at her.

"Why do you love me so much?" Mildred asked.

Mark continued looking at her. Mildred could see his mind racing. He was forming and discarding multiple answers.

Mark responded slowly, "Why does a child like her grandmother? I mean his grandmother."

Mark looked back at the monitor. "I wonder if dinner is ready."

"So the tricorder-like device you have is called a Wizard?" Mildred asked.

"It's called a hyper-spatial trans-modulator. Most people just call it a mod. I call it Wizard because of a TV show I watched while in your

world, called *Phil of the Future*. Phil had a device that could do anything.”

A servant announced dinner.

Dinner, bath, and family time came and went without incident.



Mildred retired to her room. She noticed the new picture of Mark upon entering her room. She suspected someone took it this afternoon. There was plenty of time for that. Mark had gone off somewhere on several occasions when she was distracted.

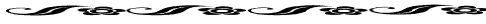
Mildred prepared for sleep and jumped into bed. Lying in bed, she admired the new picture of Mark. This picture was prettier than the previous picture. Mildred again had the urge to do girl stuff with him.

He would make a great husband for any girl, since he could share in all aspects of her life. Mildred wondered if Annie ever forced him to play house with her. She knew she would have at that age.

Mildred fell asleep with thoughts of dolls, tea parties, makeup and other girly things.

Secrets Revealed

The Truth can set you free,
But sometimes it can send you to Hell



Mildred woke to the breakfast call. She was enjoying this little vacation of hers. She did her thing, dressed and went to the dining room.

“Jason, Jenny and the kids will be arriving tomorrow afternoon,” Papa Ramsey said. “Mildred, have you decided on what you’ll be doing today?”

“I would like to continue the tour of your other institutions,” Mildred said.

“No problem Mildred, I’ll let Larson help you again,” Papa Ramsey smiled.

Breakfast finished, Mildred followed the king to the offices.

They found Larson with his hands filled with boxes of documents. “I don’t know why people like documents. It’s so much easier doing everything online. How may I help you Princess Mildred?” Larson looked around for a place to put the boxes.

“I would like to know how you deal with the poor of your country,” Mildred said.

“Sorry for the mess. I’m trying to organize everything. Please follow me if you don’t mind.” Larson walked out the room and Mildred followed.

He talked while they walked. “First, we have the educational system to make sure everyone has the skills needed to make a living...Jimmy,

did you finish your inspection of the Wendell Employment Center yet?"

"Not yet boss," Jimmy called out. "I plan on leaving now."

"Please take Princess Mildred. I think she would like to come too," Larson said, struggling under the boxes.

Mildred grabbed one of the boxes. "Thank-you Princess for your help," Larson said.

"I wish people would stop calling me Princess," Mildred complained.

Larson looked at Mildred, confused. "Why don't you want people calling you Princess?"

Mildred didn't know how to answer that. "I spent my whole life believing I was a commoner like everyone else. Now I come to your world and everyone thinks I'm a princess. I don't know what to do or how to behave."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't know about such things. I'm just a pencil pusher, just like my father and his father and his father before him. Most people know from youth what they'll be in life."

They arrived in an archiving room. Larson handed the boxes to someone and they left.

"So you're happy with your station in life?" Mildred asked. She couldn't believe anyone could enjoy doing what he did.

"Off course, I love what I do. I have to admit I don't like carrying boxes." Larson wiped his forehead.

"Didn't you ever question not being a...pencil pusher as you call yourself?"

Larson looked curiously at Mildred. "I feel sorry for the people of your world. It must be one of the worlds, where no one knows their life destiny. In our world, souls enter bodies most suitable to them." Larson scratched his chin. "About ten percent of the population does fall under the category where their life destiny isn't defined. The various employment centers deal with them."

Mildred was impressed, but she wasn't satisfied. There had to be something wrong with this seemingly perfect world. "How about street people – people who don't have homes."

"Social Services make rounds throughout the cities and towns looking for such people. We also get reports from neighbors about those needing help. People with mental illnesses can't help themselves. It's up to us to find them and give them the help they need."

"This world doesn't use property as investment tools," Mark explained. "In addition, there is no gentrification since all commoners are equal. As such, houses are affordable."

Mildred was getting stumped. She couldn't find anything wrong with how the people ran the country.

"You shouldn't call people commoners," Mildred scolded.

"Why not?" Larson asked, confused.

"Because...", Mildred trailed off, not knowing how to respond.

Jimmy walked up to them. "I'm ready, Director." Larson bowed to Mildred and left.

Mildred followed Jimmy out the castle and to the garages. He led them to an old-fashioned horseless carriage of the nineteenth century. Jimmy opened the door for Mildred. Mark jumped in from the back. He climbed like a monkey and acted like the child he was.

They left the castle and headed for the city.

Mildred thought back on her life.

After high school, Mildred went to college and studied the social sciences. She wanted to help people suffering in the cities and elsewhere. She believed that was her calling in life.

Unlike her seventh husband, the people she helped were dedicated to improving their lot in life. They just didn't know how to turn their lives around.

Mildred's seventh and last husband was a lazy bum and loved sleeping all day. Sleeping and lovemaking were his only saving graces. He was sleepy all the time, since he slept all the time. He gave new meaning to the word sloth.

They passed a temple to an unknown god. Mildred prayed to God to give her Diligence.

Mildred prayed and meditated throughout life. She believed that that was important. It allowed people to get closer to the guiding principle of the universe. Only through sincere prayer and meditation could we face the challenges God placed in front of us.

Everything in life happens for a reason, so the more challenges one faced, the closer one gets to the end where our heavenly award awaits.

This was another reason why Mildred didn't want to become young again. She didn't want to relive all those challenges.

The carriage stopped and they went into the employment center. Jimmy introduced her to everyone and started the tour. Mildred asked questions and proceeded.

Next on the tour was a hospital. Following that was a vocational school.

Mildred was satisfied with the overall welfare of the country, but was a little disappointed. They didn't need her help.

Evening came. Jimmy returned them to the Castle at around 5:00PM. Mildred decided to walk the castle grounds to sort her thoughts.

After school, she became a psychologist and helped people overcome their traumas. Her growing administrative skills allowed her to run the clinic. She opened other clinics throughout the country.

Under various names, Mildred published books on psychology and the social sciences. They became best-sellers. People and groups sought her expertise throughout the world. Everyone wanted her to speak.

Mildred now had a problem. She hated being the center of attention. She preferred working on the sidelines, quietly helping people.

To resolve the issue, she used pseudonyms. When called on to speak, she always insisted on anonymity. As a result, no one knew the real Mildred.

Her exploits eventually made her wealthy. She didn't know where the money came from. She never sought it but it came. She pumped that money into various charities under the pseudonym Jane Reed.

One day, one of her secretaries told her Bill Charming was trying to find out about her. It seemed he needed her help on one of his projects.

Mildred recalled that well. There was no way Bill would ever find her. She was that careful. Bill was her hero because of his work in the political world and his works on spiritual matters. He worked hard to get to where he was. She seriously considered meeting Bill but eventually sent someone in her place.

Mildred knew that if she met Bill, she would fall in love with him. She didn't want that. Commitments terrified Mildred. Seven failed marriages will do that to a person.

Mildred looked down at Mark. "Your country is incredible. You have implemented all of the ideas for social reform I ever came up with. There are even ideas I never thought of. I feel as if I've been plagiarizing from this country."

"I know the feeling," Mark said.

How could he know the feeling?

That was a question for another day. It was time for dinner.

During the meal, Mildred commented on what she saw. "I'm impressed how well your country is run. I've spent my entire life trying to implement some of the things you take for granted."

"Your world is young. They don't have direct access to Nexus. My uncle mentioned a mysterious person doing great work in the social field. He spent decades looking for her but never found her. I assume that's you," Mark said between mouthfuls of food.

"Mark, don't speak with youth full," Mama Arial scolded.

"Sorry mum," Mark said with stuff falling out of his mouth.

With more questions to ponder, Mildred followed Mark to his room. They undressed and showered.

Jane and Leslie entered the bathroom just as Mildred rinsed Mark off. Both Mildred and Mark turned and looked at the two girls.

"Oh-my-gosh, you're not going to believe it. Luke said that Rosette has an incredible floating resort. We just have to go there," Leslie said.

"We saw the brochure. It's incredible," Jane said.

"I know. I've been there. It is incredible," Mark said.

Jane looked at him for the first time since entering the bathroom.

"Oh-my-gosh, that's so cute."

Mark looked confused. "What's so cute?"

Leslie smiled and said, "Nice gun you have there, big boy."

Mark looked down. "Thanks, but it's not loaded."

"Grandma, do you wash him all over?" Leslie asked evilly.

Mildred nodded, embarrassed.

"Even his pee-pee?" Leslie asked, enjoying herself at her grandmother's expense.

Mildred suddenly felt the need to justify herself. "He told me to wash him like a little baby. I wanted him to wash his own pee-pee, but he always said, 'I'm a prince. You're my nanny.'"

Mildred looked at Mark. He looked down, blushing.

"You – naughty – little – boy," Leslie said smiling.

"Mark, did your previous nanny wash you down there too?" Mildred asked.

Still looking down, Mark replied, "No. I'm not interested in her."

Face red, Mark raised his eyes, looked at Mildred's face and blinked his long eyelashes at her.

"You're a real Romeo, aren't you little brother? Look at him flirt with those eyelashes," Leslie laughed. "Wouldn't it be fun if you married Grandma?"

"If he marries Grandma, does that mean I would have to call him Grandpa?" Jane asked.

At that, Leslie laughed so hard that she almost fell on the wet floor.

Mildred was tired of this conversation. "That's enough girls. Mark is too young for me. I'm too old for him. I am an eighty-seven-year-old woman. In time, he'll find his own princess. I'll be dead and gone by then."

Mildred got up and dried herself and Mark. They dressed. Mildred was hoping for a good soak in the tub, but she couldn't with those two there.

They entered the family room and greeted everyone.

During family time, Mildred said, "Majesties, there's so many things about Mark I don't understand."

"Yes, we want to hear about Grandpa's history," Leslie said, chuckling.

"Grandpa?" Luke asked.

"Mark was seducing Grandma. We thought it would be funny if they both got married," Leslie said.

No one found that funny. It almost seemed marriage between the two was expected. Mildred knew she was reading too much into the situation. There was no way Mark's parents would want him to marry her.

Everyone ignored the comments.

"You want to know more about Mark..." Papa Ramsey said.

The parents looked at each other, uncertain. "I'm not sure where to begin. You know that he's an extraordinary child..." Arial trailed off. She didn't seem to know how to proceed.

There was that secret again. Why didn't the idea of their son marrying an eighty-seven year old woman bother them?

Mark looked at his father. "Papa, please tell Grandma about my history and the previous war. I think she needs to know this. Start with the previous war. There's a lot I don't know myself."

Papa Ramsey looked at his son. "If you think that's best."

Papa turned to look at Mildred. "I'll tell the story from my point of view. For almost a century, the Blears and Rosette kingdoms were at war over a border dispute. We were fighting over mining rights to a newly discovered dragonite deposit."

"You mine dragonite? Where I come from, there is no dragonite. An incredible person named Bill Charming invented them," Mildred interrupted.

Mildred looked at the queen. Arial looked like a proud mother. "Thank-you," she said. Mildred couldn't understand the reaction. The queen acted as if Bill was her son.

That was clearly impossible, since Bill was born decades before the queen. Mildred let it pass. That was just one more mystery surrounding the royal family.

Even the king looked flattered, as well as Artemis.

Luke made to get up, but changed his mind. Hitting Mark on the back was impossible since he was sitting down. Instead, Luke balled up a piece of paper and threw it at Mark. It hit Mark on the head. Luke looked like a proud brother.

James just smiled and nodded, like he knew all along.

Papa Ramsey smiled and nodded his head in thanks. "The ancients seeded the dragonite into the earth long ago. The seeded earth eventually produced the dragonite we mine. No one knows how they did that, or how to produce it in factories. The technique your friend discovered is a closely guarded secret. Nexus discourages the spread of this knowledge, since too much of the stuff can affect the stability of a world. As a result, we need to mine it or import it from Nexus."

Mark had the look of a guilty little boy.

The king continued. "About eight years ago, our kingdoms finally decided on a truce. We would seal the truce with a royal marriage. The king and queen of Rosette decided to have a daughter. Her name was Annie. We decided to have Mark. We conceived both children and bound their souls together at that time. It was televised to both countries."

"It was embarrassing, if you know what I mean," the queen said.

Mildred had to agree. Having sex in front of a country would certainly qualify as being embarrassing.

"Jenny and I gave birth to them in the same room and at the exact same time. I remember holding him in my arms for the first time. He was so cute," the mother reminisced.

"Note she said *was*," Luke said. "I agree he was a cute baby. Where his cuteness went, I don't know." Luke had his arm around Leslie's waste. Leslie's arm was around Luke's shoulder.

"The birthing process was also part of the ritual. It finalized the bond," Papa Ramsey said.

"Papa Ramsey, when does the soul enter the body?" Mildred asked, fully engrossed in the conversation.

"According to reports from people who have remembered their experiences between lives, souls never enter a human host before the first trimester, since the brain isn't developed enough to bond with the soul.

"For the next five years, Annie and Mark lived together. One year they would spend in Rosette Kingdom and the next year they would spend with us.

"On their fifth birthday, demons attacked. They lived in Rosette at the time. During the attack, a demon threw a fireball at Mark. He

exploded in a shower of golden light. A few minutes later, the demons were vanquished, but it was too late. Mark was gone.”

Mark sat up straight. “Then what did you do, Papa? From then until you saw me and my *Brothers*.”

Papa Ramsey looked at James. He seemed to get the hint. He nodded. “From then until I saw you in my wife’s arms...

“Let’s see now. Everyone in Blears blamed Rosette for your death. They couldn’t accept it. How dare they let demons near Mark? How dare they not protect him?

“The whole country was up in arms protesting Rosette. People secretly raided them. Rosette tolerated it, but had to increase border security. There were so many people joining the military that we had a problem handling them. We had no choice but to declare war on Rosette.” The king shook his head.

“I’m sorry Papa, I didn’t know. I’m sorry for scolding you,” Mark looked down with a guilty look. Mildred hugged him with one arm.

Papa Ramsey smiled at his son. “We knew that Mark wouldn’t approve if he were alive. After all, his birth represented the bond between our two countries. However, that bond was now broken.

“We officially declared one year of mourning. Arial and I hoped that that would cool everyone down. It didn’t work. Finally, we decided on negotiations as a last ditch effort for peace.” Ramsey looked at Mark. Mark actively listened.

“I arrived at Nexium and started negotiations with King Jason. About two hours later, there was a commotion outside. People claimed they found Mark. Jason and I ran out and found Mark in Arial’s arms. The one year ordeal was finally over.” Ramsey leaned back and smiled. James looked like he wanted to say something.

Ramsey was serious again. "A few minutes later, demons attacked. I had no idea until then how horrible those creatures were."

"Did they start eating people, dragging people to hell? How many people died?" Leslie asked, intrigued.

"Those things are disgusting creatures, Leslie. They're like walking bags of puke and vomit," Luke said, disgusted. "Believe me – you don't want them hugging you. That's an experience I could do without." Luke shuddered.

"You have no idea how it feels to be raped by those things and how they get inside of you," Artemis shuddered, looked nauseous.

"But I thought they were really strong fighters. You know, taking over the world, getting revenge on God, that sort of thing," Leslie said defensively.

"Leslie dear, demons are the Spirit of Evil, personified. People are constantly giving off negative emotions. This collects as a sort of sludge. Eventually there is an outbreak and we have a demon attack," Mama Arial patiently explained to Leslie.

"But none of that happens on Earth," Leslie said defensively.

"That's right," Jane agreed.

"That's because Earth is a closed world. All that sludge produced by those billions of people has collected beyond its borders. Now Bill Charming has made an opening in that wall. It's only a matter of time before demons overrun the Earth," Mark said, clearly upset. He looked as if he was going to cry.

"Wasn't there some prophesy about demons overrunning the world? I remember that in that underground city we visited," James asked.

Mark nodded, but was unable to speak. He ran into his mother's arms. His mother hugged him. "It's okay dear. You didn't know. Nexus will deal with the problem. You don't have to carry everything on your shoulders."

"That's right son," Papa Ramsey consoled.

"Are you saying that Bill Charming, the guy trying to unify the world is the Anti-Christ?" Lisa asked.

"There are prophecies about that, aren't there? Grandma, too bad you never met Bill. You could have said you met the most evil person in the universe," Leslie commented.

Mark cried like a baby. Tears soaked his face. His nose added to the flow.

Luke smacked Leslie on the back of the head. "Hey," Leslie shouted and rubbed her head.

"Thank-you Luke," Mama Arial said, continuing to comfort Mark.

Mildred felt jealous. She wanted to console the Little Prince. She looked at Mark. Why was he acting as if it was his fault? He wasn't Bill, was he?

Bill created the stone platform. He blogged about the Ritual of Transference he developed, and explained what to expect. Mildred remembered the demon faces outside the circle. What would have happened if she had heeded the call and stepped outside the Circle? Would the evil sludge have drowned her? Mildred shuddered. Leslie and Jane were thinking along the same lines. That trip was more dangerous than she realized.

Papa Ramsey paused for Mark to calm down. "One demon waited for Mark to see him, and then tossed a fireball at Annie. Annie exploded in a shower of golden light.

"Mark then asked God to get rid of those creatures. Seconds later, a gentle breeze came and the demons dissolved. There was the sweet smell of my grandmother's blueberry tarts. Finally, the ordeal was over."

Mildred looked at Mark. He sat on his mother's lap and hugging her. "Did Rosette declare war on you?" Mildred asked.

"No. Jason claimed responsibility for protecting his daughter. Unfortunately, I couldn't do the same since I wasn't there," Papa Ramsey said.

"Where were you during that year you were missing?" Jane asked.

"I was sent to Grandma's home world. I returned home with Uncle Bill's help," Mark said. He was still miserable but he wasn't crying.

"Come on Mark, it is past your bed time," Mama Arial said gently.

"Okay Mama. Good night Mama," Mark said and kissed his mother.

Mark got up, and hugged and kissed his father. "Good night Papa."

"Come on Grandma," Mark said and walked out the door with drooping shoulders. He seemed like the saddest boy she had ever seen in her life. The Little Prince sure had a hard life. "Grandma, can you please protect my back tonight? I don't want to sleep alone."

"Yes dear," Mildred said and followed Mark to his room. He went to the washroom and got into bed. Mildred followed.

Mark snuggled in Mildred's arms. "Please wake me up when you get up. I'll go crazy if you leave me alone again," Mark pleaded, slowly blinking his long eyelashes at her.

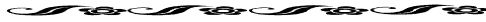
"I promise my Little Prince. I didn't know you would get so upset," Mildred said, suspecting Mark purposefully did that eye-blink.

“Children – Seven year olds are like that. They can be irrational about the strangest things,” Mark said and fell asleep.

There he was psychoanalyzing himself again. Mildred hugged the enigmatic prince. She closed her eyes and fell asleep as well.

The Test

Men gain value by doing -
Woman gain value by being.



Mildred awoke to the morning call. She looked at the sleeping prince. As before, Mark had his mouth open and head back.

She felt intense love and affection flowing from her to him. He was such a dear little boy. Mildred hugged him close to her and gently closed his mouth.

On impulse, Mildred kissed him on the lips with all the love and affection she felt for him. Seconds after the kiss, Mark opened his eyes.

“Thank-you for waking me up,” Mark said.

Mark got up and changed. As before, Mildred found a new set of clothes in the washroom. She looked in the mirror and got the fright of her life.

In the mirror, staring back at her was a forty-year-old woman. Her hair was still snow white, but now it went past her shoulders.

“Mark. I told you I don’t want to become young again,” Mildred scolded Mark. “You disobeyed me.”

Mildred looked at him. He looked like a guilty little boy. Mildred couldn’t stay mad at him. “It’s okay dear. You’re only doing what you think is best for me. But can’t you see some people are happy just the way they are?”

Mildred changed while Mark brushed his teeth. They stepped into the corridor and headed for the dining room. Leslie and Lisa joined them.

"Grandma, what happened to you? You look incredible," Leslie said.
"Become a little younger and people will think we are sisters."

Mildred experienced a wave of annoyance. "It's this b...Mark's fault."
She wanted to call Mark a brat.

"But you look beautiful and your hair is incredible. Why are you angry with Mark? I think you should be thanking him," Lisa said.

I'll thank him with the backside of my hand. Mildred calmed herself down. He's a child. Children always act selfishly.

They passed Luke's door and Luke stepped out. "Good morning Grandma, Leslie, Lisa, Little Brat," he said. Luke tapped Mark lightly on the head. Mildred realized Luke was being gentle.

Luke walked with them a few seconds. He then did a double take.

"You finally noticed. I was wondering how long it would take," Leslie scolded Luke.

Luke said nothing. They arrived in the dining room and greeted the parents. The rest of the family didn't seem to notice the change in Mildred, or at least they pretended not to.

"Hello everyone, hasn't anyone noticed how young Grandma looks? Isn't that incredible?" Leslie said.

"Yes dear, we see. Sit down and have breakfast," Mama Arial said.

Mildred was grateful to the family for not harping on her physical appearance. Mildred realized something. None of them was surprised. They knew this would happen.

"I don't understand how you can be so blasé about Grandma's transformation. Is this a commonplace thing here?" Leslie asked.

"No dear," Mama Arial said.

The Test

"Then why is everyone not excited?" Leslie asked.

"I think I mentioned that Grandma will need to undertake a test before she can meet my uncle. The test has begun." Mark held Mildred's hand. "We're worried about her."

"Yes Leslie dear. The next few days are going to be very difficult for Grandma. Please don't get too excited about her physical appearance," Mama Arial said.

Leslie looked frustrated. Mildred felt relieved that was over, but was worried about this so-called test she was now taking. What exactly was it?

Lisa looked around, confused. "Yesterday you mentioned something about kissing a prince. Grandma, did you kiss Mark with a lover's kiss?"

Mildred felt her face burning red. She realized the test had indeed begun. "I'm sorry Majesties. I shouldn't have done that. It was wrong of me. Please forgive me," Mildred bowed to them.

The king and queen seemed unsure how to react. "We aren't angry at you dear. We know what to expect and we're fine with it."

"We love you Grandma. Remember, when you pass the test, you'll meet my uncle. Isn't that great?" Mark said.

Why was everyone so accepting of her?

"Is there any way to stop the process? I'm afraid of what's becoming of me."

"You can always bump Mark off," Luke demonstrated with a throat-clashing motion. He pretended to be dead and laughed.

"I thought you loved him," Mildred said angrily.

"I do. I love tormenting him and giving him noogies. What more could a baby brother ask for?"

Mildred looked at Mark. "Doesn't it bother you to be tormented by Luke?"

Mark looked at Mildred. "It is at it should be."

Mildred realized yesterday still bothered him. She felt the urge to hug and kiss him, then reframed. She remembered the last kiss. She had lost decades of age with just one kiss. The next one might turn her into a baby.

"So the parents are arriving this afternoon?" Mildred asked to break up the tension.

"Yes Mildred. I need to do some work before they arrive. See you later." Papa Ramsey walked away. The others left as well, leaving her alone with Mark.

"Come on Grandma. Let's play some video games while we wait." Mark walked to his room and Mildred followed.

Neither of them was into the game. Finally, the time arrived. They walked to the back yard and waited. Everyone saw a speck in the sky. It resolved into a Cinderella type carriage drawn by a pair of dragons.

"That would be great for a wedding reception," Leslie said.

For some reason Mildred had butterflies. It felt as if she were meeting her parents for the first time.

The carriage landed and pulled up to them. A man and woman stepped out. There they were, as big as life. Dozens of feelings flowed through Mildred's head.

They both stood there, looking at her with love in their eyes. The woman gripped the man's arm.

"Grandma, please show your solidarity between the United States and Rosette Kingdom by giving Mama Jenny and Papa Jason a hug and kiss," Mark instructed.

"Yes dear please do as Mark instructed," Mama Arial said.

Mildred felt conflicting emotions filling her. "Mama, Papa," she said, feeling tears well up. On impulse, she hugged the mother and cried. The mother cried as well. The father joined in on the hug. He too was misty eyed.

"Grandma, what's happening to your face," Leslie called.

Startled, Mildred pulled back. She put her hands on her face and looked back. Mama Arial looked as if she was going to slap Leslie. "Leslie, behave yourself."

"What happened to my face?" Mildred asked, horrified.

"You lost ten years in a matter of seconds. You now look around thirty," Jane said.

Mildred panicked. Her changes terrified her. She looked at Mark, ready to scold him, but realized it wasn't his fault. She looked at the two people in front of her. Who the hell were they and why did she call them Mama and Papa? They were Annie's parents, not hers. Why did she suddenly age regress while hugging them? Was this also part of the test? There was so much stuff going on in her head that her brain was overloading. Mildred felt as if a spotlight was shining on top of her.

"Brother Joseph, carry me," Mark said and raised his hands to his brother. The blond haired boy picked him up, gave him a kiss on the cheek and carried him.

"I love you big brother," Mark said and hugged the brother. "Big brother, tell us about the wedding. Sister Dara, soon you'll be my real big sister, isn't that fun?" Mark turned around in Joseph's arms and clapped.

Mark's child-like behavior calmed Mildred down.

Papa Ramsey approached Annie's father and shook his hand. "Still working your butt off, I see. You need to delegate more. At this rate, you'll die before you get a chance to retire," Ramsey said.

"You delegate too much. Without proper control, the country will fall apart," Jason said.

"Once Luke becomes ready, I plan on delegating everything to him and then I'll retire and have fun. Then he'll have to deal with the problems," Ramsey laughed.

The two queens walked off, discussing important matters. The rest of the family dispersed as well, leaving only Joseph, Dara and Mark with Mildred.

Mildred felt a great deal of stress. She looked at Mark. He happily talked about boats.

Mildred had the feeling he deliberately ignored her. "Big sister, give your new baby brother a hug and a kiss." Mark held his arms to Dara and she carried him. "I love you new big sister." Mark rested his head on her shoulder.

Mildred realized Mark's antics did a good job distracting her. She knew it was intentional, since he constantly glanced at her while pretending not to.

Mark was the most enigmatic person she knew. He had depth she hadn't seen in anyone. That wasn't true. There was one person she knew that had the same depth. He was Bill.

The Test

Bill was someone she preferred to admire from afar. The more Bill tried to connect to her, the more effort she put into being anonymous. She prided herself on the fact that he had no idea who she was.

Mildred remembered a talk show she saw. Bill mentioned he wanted to meet the author of a series of books he enjoyed. According to Bill, the books shaped his thinking about politics, social affairs and life. This laid the groundwork for him to create his vision of a perfect world.

Bill wanted to meet that person so they could fix the flaws in his thinking. He gave an impassioned plea for the person to come forward. He finally conceded that the person was probably dead.

“Everyone, why don’t we play a board game? We can play there,” Mark said. They walked to the tables near the castle. “Mr. Jones, please bring us the game Dragon X,” Mark called out. “Also bring my backpack. Call Uncles Larry, Peter and Joe and their girlfriends. We can play together.”

“Do you think I should...?” Joseph asked Mark, looking concerned. Mark nodded. Joseph ran off and came back with his sword strapped to his side.

The attendant came back with the game. Mark ran to the attendant, said something to him, grabbed the game and his backpack and returned. The servant ran off, looking terrified.

Mark placed his backpack near his chair and set up the game. The six teenagers arrived. They were armed. “Come on you guys, let’s play,” Mark said. Mark and the teenagers sat down around the table and played Dragon X. Mark knelt on the chair. Everyone was a little on edge.

That made Mildred nervous. Was Mark expecting an attack?

The others arrived. The returning boys noted that the others were armed. They went for their weapons as well.

"Hi Princess Mildred, how are you enjoying our world?" Queen Jenny asked.

"It's a beautiful world you have here. But this place confuses me. It's so different than the world I come from," Mildred said.

"I'm glad you like it here," Queen Jenny said.

"Why is everyone being so nice to me?" Mildred blurted out.

"Why wouldn't we be nice to you? You're a foreign princess come to visit our humble home," King John said.

"But you're beyond nice. It's as if you're greeting family..." Mildred accused them.

There was a dead silence.

"Hey you're cheating," Mark called, breaking the silence.

"No I'm not you little runt," Luke said.

"Why don't we have lunch here," Ariel called.

Servants set the tables.

Mildred remembered yesterday and how freaked out Mark became because of Bill's actions. He implied that Bill was the mysterious uncle she waited for. He said Uncle Bill returned him home.

Mildred remembered that a demon killed Annie. Mark expected her to come back from the dead.

Mildred remembered how the queen of Rosette cried when the king mentioned how they arrived. Come to think of it, they didn't comment on the fact that she was so much younger now than then. They accepted it without question.

The Test

What was the relationship between Bill, Mark and the mysterious uncle? Why were they treating her like a long lost relative?

The way they treated her grandchildren was vastly different from how they treated her. The family treated Leslie and Jane normally while they treated her specially.

Mark said Annie was coming back. They expected her arrival. Realization dawned on Mildred. They thought she was Annie.

Mildred got up and knocked the chair down. Everyone looked at her. "Sorry," she said and picked the chair up.

Mildred waited for everyone to resume eating and talking. Mildred looked at Mark. He ate and talked with his brother with his mouth overflowing. She stepped behind and to the left of Mark and spoke. "Mr. Charming, you dropped something."

Mark reached down with his left hand and stopped. He straightened and looked at her. Staring back from beyond those purple eyes were Bill's eyes.

The blood drained out of Mildred's face. There was no question. The man she had spent decades running away from sat right in front of her – and he was not a man but a seven-year-old boy.

"Oh – my – gosh, you're Bill Charming." Mildred stepped back.

Everyone stopped eating. They looked at her.

"That's impossible. Bill is an old man. He isn't a runt," Leslie said.

"Look at me and tell me if that's impossible," Mildred cried hysterically. "I used to be an eighty-seven year old woman. Now I'm in my mid-thirties. Everyone thinks I'm Annie come back from the dead."

Mildred backed away. Mark got up and glanced at his backpack. The others stood up as well.

"Please dear we all love you," Queen Jenny said.



That was the wrong thing to say. Mildred felt claustrophobic. She felt the world staring at her. The world seemed distorted, like a nightmare. Mildred recalled she took psychedelics as part of the Ritual of Transference.

There was a breeze. Bill took his tricorder out of his bag and spoke into it. "Caldor, come here immediately. This is an emergency." He put the tricorder on the table.

She had always known that drugs were bad. Why did she do something so stupid? She knew why. She was following the instructions of someone she had a mega crush on but was too afraid to meet. In a perverse way, she hoped they would meet in an alternate reality where she was a better person and worthy of him.

People try to escape the world, but end up only trying to escape themselves.

The desire to escape her life, to escape Bill, to escape people demanding things from her overwhelmed her.

The winds picked up. Swirling clouds formed overhead.

Bill looked at her with those large purple eyes. He blinked his long eyelashes at her. She was strongly attracted to him, but repulsed by the fact that she was attracted to a child.

The wind strengthened and fog rose from the ground. The people stared at her, agitated. Tiny dust devils formed, kicking up debris.

The Test

She looked at her grandchildren. They always demanded things of her. She looked at the others. They expected her to fulfill a role she didn't want to fill.

"Stop, you're opening a demon gate," Mark or Bill or whoever he was called from behind. All she knew was that he wasn't quite human.

Mildred remembered yesterday's conversation about him being the Anti-Christ. She had to get away from that demon spawn.

The winds made strange sounds as Mildred walked away, spiraling around her. Bill tried to follow and Mildred started running. *I have to get away. I have to leave. I can't let myself be trapped in a bad situation again.* Bill tried to keep up, but Mildred was too fast.

The air around Mildred shimmered. Near the ground at Mildred's feet a green light appeared. It paused a second, then zoomed around her, making a green circle. Other lights appeared, zooming around Mildred, making intricate patterns. The magic circle was forming. The Gate was opening.

It was an illegal gate, filled with negative emotions. The color of the circle was unhealthy. It was the color of sewer scum, bile, monster blood, and other disgusting things. This was what demons waited for.

People behind her screamed. Mildred stopped running and turned around. The Circle remained centered around her. From out of the woods, behind buildings and from various hidden spaces, demons poured out.

The Little Prince was in trouble and it was Mildred's fault. She had opened the gate. She couldn't believe she had done something so stupid.

Mildred's maternal instincts took over and she ran back. The magic circle disappeared, along with her desire to escape.

Mark had his double-bladed staff out and ran towards her. She reached him just as the demons reached them.

Mark swung his staff and disintegrated the demons with his weapon. Looking back, Mildred saw demons overrunning the castle. The three officers and their girlfriends fought the demons. The six also disintegrated the demons with a single hit.

The royal boys also fought to protect the ladies, but their weapons weren't so successful. They only splattered demon brains and guts everywhere.

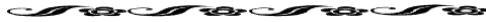
The palace guard joined the fight. Green and brown sludge covered everything. Even from here, Mildred could smell it.

Both Bill and Mildred ran towards the others. Bill protected her as best he could. "Mildred, call on God to get rid of those things. Only you can do that."

Mildred couldn't believe she caused so much trouble. Despair overwhelmed her. She felt herself drowning in demon sludge.

Regrets

Despair is the gateway into hell.



Mildred found herself standing in front of her house. She was ten years old. Her parents pulled out of the driveway. Just then, a speeding truck crashed into her parent's car. Both the car and truck went flying. The truck driver smashed through the windshield and died on impact. Her parents were alive but unable to move.

Mildred tried to get back in the house but the door was locked. She couldn't reach the phone. She called for help but no one was there. She knew there was a way to rescue them but she didn't know what it was.

Her parents begged her to stay away. They knew they were beyond reach. Mildred smelled gasoline and burning plastic.

Someone grabbed her from behind. She struggled as the person pulled her away from her parents. Seconds later, the car exploded. She couldn't do anything to save them.

The scene switched to a foster home. The foster parents were nice in front of the social workers, but abused her in private. She changed homes.

The new foster parents never abused her. That was the good news. The bad news was that they treated her like furniture. She was just a trophy they displayed to their friends to show everyone how generous they were. The cops arrested them for unknown criminal activities. She changed homes.

Other foster parents followed. Mildred lost track. The theme was the same. She was unwanted.

Mildred entered high school. People were always friendly to her. They asked favors from her and she gladly obliged. One day the teachers found out the others were cheating off of her and she got into trouble. Her friends drifted away when her value to them ended. She was unwanted.

The scene switched to a bedroom scene. A friend she trusted was raping her. He impregnated her and left. She was unwanted.

The scene switched again. She was in college. She worked like a dog at her part time jobs and at studying and school. Mildred felt there was no end to the suffering.

The scene switched again to her married life. Each husband abused her in his own unique way.

Her first husband treated her like an idiot. He was a doctor and she wasn't. Putting her down made him feel superior. She was unloved.

Her second husband abused her whenever he was grumpy. She was unloved.

Her third husband lusted after all women except her. He only sneezed on her and covered her with boogers. She was unloved.

Her fourth husband tried to use her as a shield when a rival gang member bashed his head in. She was unloved.

The fifth husband was happy when using her to satisfy his gluttony. She was unloved.

The sixth husband didn't exactly abuse her, but he suffocated her with his dopiness, stupidity, intolerance, and narrow-mindedness. She was unloved.

The seventh husband treated her like his housekeeper. He was always sleeping, while she worked her butt off for him. She was unloved.

Regrets

In hell, there is no love.

The scene switched to an African country. Poor people surrounded her. They lay in squalor, begging for her help. She had no help to give. She too was drowning. She was useless.

In hell, there is no hope.

The scene switched back to the death of her parents. This time she remembered there was a key under the doormat. The car exploded just as she opened the door. Again, she was too late.

Back at the foster parents' homes, she experienced people ridiculing her for losing her parents. She felt the shame and despair of not being wanted.

In high school, shadowy figures raped her. She felt shame and humiliation.

During life, people asked for help but never gave anything back in returned. This was another kind of rape. The shame and humiliation was the same.

The scene switched again.

There in front of her was Bill Charming. He preached on a pulpit about a better world. Everyone believed him. She knew better.

Bill approached her. She ran through the crowd. Everyone mocked her as she fled. He came closer. She ran faster. No matter how fast Mildred ran, it wasn't fast enough.

Bill grabbed her and threw her on the muck-covered ground. He turned into every man who had ever abused her. He abused her. The only good man in the world turned out to be a bad man.

Mildred ran away. She ran through a tunnel.

Again, Bill pursued.

Bill turned into a terrorist. “Marry me. Together we will exterminate the infidels.” He laughed with bad teeth. Bill now embodied all the prejudice and intolerance she ever fought against.

Mildred ran away. She ran down a sewer pipe filled with several inches of sewer water.

Again, Bill pursued.

Bill turned into Hitler. “Marry me. Together we shall ruuuule the world.” He laughed with bad teeth and smelly breath. Bill now embodied the anger and hatred of the entire world.

Mildred ran away. The sewer water had rotting meat and feces floating in it.

Again, Bill pursued.

Bill turned into Judas. “Marry me. Together we shall betray Jesus.” He laughed with bad teeth, smelly breath and horrible grooming. Bill now embodied everyone who had ever betrayed and humiliated her.

Mildred ran away, with rats and cockroaches keeping her company. Things crawled in Bill’s hair and clothes.

Again, Bill pursued.

Bill turned into the Anti-Christ. “Marry me. Together we shall end God’s rule.” He laughed with bad teeth, smelly breath and horrible grooming. Those were his better qualities. Bill now embodied all the evil and corruption of the world.

Mildred was in an underground sewer system. Surrounding her was the filth and refuge of a degenerate society. Flies swarmed the dung heaps. Rats ran freely. Things swam in the sewer water.

Regrets

Standing knee deep in the filth, sludge and decomposing flesh were her seven husbands, supposed friends, and everyone who ever wanted things from her. They exposed their true selves to her. Bill was also there in each of his evil disguises.

Mildred looked at the assembled Bills. They weren't Bill. They were demons in disguise.

Mildred felt a light shining down. The filth and refuge surrounding her dissolved. One by one, the demons faded, leaving only her seven husbands.

Mildred smelled her grandfather's minty fresh breath and felt his presence. Peace filled her as the demons left her mind, body and soul.

Mildred looked carefully at her seven husbands, standing in a row. Each husband represented a sin she had to overcome – Pride, Wrath, Lust, Greed, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth.

Each husband had taught her a valuable lesson – Humility, Patience, Chastity, Charity, Temperance, Kindness, and Diligence.

Everything in life happens for a reason. Even demons have their place in the scheme of things. Mildred was grateful to her seven husbands for what they taught her.

"Our job is done. Sorry for being so rough on you," Doc said. The seven husbands smiled and bowed.

"Thank-you for taking care of me," Mildred said and returned the bow.

The seven husbands faded from existence, their job done.

Mildred was alone.



The girl felt herself lying on something cold and hard. Her eyes were closed.

She felt soft lips kissing her. She opened her eyes. In front of her were large purple eyes framed by long gorgeous eyelashes. The eyes moved away to reveal the beautiful face of a young prince. He looked like Brad Pitt and Leonardo DiCaprio, mixed together. He had hair the color of mint ice cream, and minty fresh breath. He wore a military dress uniform, cape and sword.

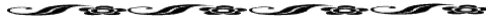
The girl looked around. She lay inside a glass coffin. A winter scene surrounded them. Beside the nineteen-year-old prince was a snow-white unicorn.

The smiling prince extended his hand to the seventeen-year-old girl. She couldn't believe her luck. Throughout her lonely life, she had attracted bad men who abused her. She now faced a good man who wanted her more than life itself. He had deducted his entire life to making her happy and asked for nothing in return.

She took the hand of the prince and the coffin dissolved, leaving just the pedestal she rested on. The girl got up and the prince helped her onto the unicorn. He jumped on behind her. The girl felt strong arms wrap around her. She felt safe and loved. The unicorn extended its wings and took off into the sky. The ground fell away.

Time to Reflect

The complete unconditional acceptance
of one soul by another
is the sexiest thing in the world



Mildred opened her eyes. Above her were storm clouds that looked like a bubbling mass of feces and vomit. Around her, Mildred heard the sound of fighting. Soldiers fought demons. Demon slime covered everything.

The soldiers surrounded and protected her as best they could. Beside her were the other non-combatants.

“Grandma, please call on God to get rid of those creatures. Only you can do it.”

Mildred turned to the right and found Mark lying beside her. She got up and looked at the damage she had caused in her selfishness.

Mildred closed her eyes and prayed from the depths of her soul. “Please God, forgive me. Please get rid of these creatures.”

A gentle breeze blew. She smelled her grandfather’s minty fresh breath in the air. Mildred opened her eyes. All around her, demons dissolved. The evil clouds above her dissolved as well. Only the soldiers and non-combatants remained.

Mildred got up, crossed her hands across her chest and bowed to the king and queen of both countries. “Please forgive me for the trouble I caused.” Mildred turned around and apologized to the soldiers as well.

Everyone rested on the lawn, exhausted.

Mark walked to Mildred, looking sad. “I’m sorry Grandma. I messed up. I was hoping to protect you.”

Mildred wanted to hug the boy. It wasn't his fault.

"Grandma, you're a teenager," Leslie called.

"I've heard about entering your second childhood, but this is ridiculous," Larry said. "That's not true. My grandmother became young," Peter continued. "No. Your grandfather just married a younger woman, or was that a younger dog?" Joe finished. Their girlfriends joined the conversation.

Everyone ignored them.

Mildred covered her face with her hands. "I don't want to be a teenager. None of you understands how it's like to be young."

Jane looked at her grandmother, confused. "Are you saying I don't know what's it like to be a teenager?"

Luke laughed. "That's a good one. I have to use it sometimes."

Mark looked at Mildred, "The only reason why you had a horrible teenage life is because you had no one to love you. For that, I am truly sorry. But now you have a new life. You can correct all your mistakes."

"The damage has been repaired. The demons are vanquished. It's time to celebrate," King Jason said. He clapped and everyone followed.

"But I was the cause of this mess," Mildred said, feeling miserable.

"It's okay dear. We all make mistakes," Papa Ramsey sympathized.

"If it's so easy to open demon gates, shouldn't something be done about it?" Mildred asked.

Everyone looked uncomfortable at the question. "Mildred dear, I think you need to know the truth. Any sort of gate is exceedingly

difficult to open. You need unbelievable spiritual strength to open one. This is one reason why we use Nexus to travel between this plane of existence and places beyond Nexus.

“Apart from the gates you and Mark opened, no one has opened a gate for countless centuries. You and Mark have a destiny,” Papa said.

“Grandma, you know who I am, don’t you?” Mark asked.

“You are Bill Charming,” Mildred said.

“The next Anti-Christ,” Leslie added.

Mark looked pained. “Yes I’m E – Ev – not a nice person.” Mark looked at Mildred with his big purple eyes. “I wish I could set you free, but that’s not possible.”

“Mark, you are a very good boy. You are loving and considerate towards everyone. Please don’t assume those nonsense prophesies are about you.” Mama Arial hugged Mark. “Leslie, please don’t call my son such bad things.”

“Thanks mum,” Mark said sadly. “I think it’s time Grandma learned the rest of my history.”

Servants brought out chairs and Mark sat on his mother’s lap.

“I think you know my history. As you have realized, it’s similar to your own. I was found by adoptive parents at age five, naked and without memories.”

“Yes, I’ve read about your past,” Mildred said.

“A little over a year ago, on Annie’s birthday, Uncle Bill, his two grandchildren James and Joseph, and their three friends...”

“Wait a minute. Did you say grandchildren?” Leslie asked.

“Good grief, I just realized something. I’ve seen pictures of James and Joseph before on TV. They were the only two people in the world born with purple eyes,” Mildred said.

“Uncle Bill appeared in front of the royal family, just like you did in front of us. Just like me, Annie was also blowing out the candles,” Mark said. “I’m sure you can understand how desperately Uncle Bill wanted to hug Annie. It should be how you felt when you saw me.”

Mark continued the story. He paused at the part where he went to hell. “Grandma, you’re not the only one to do stupid things. In fact, I was hoping to protect you from such things. I guess we really can’t change destiny,” Mark sighed.

Mark finished his story when he saw his mother. “I saw her face and all my memories flooded back to me. I had the overwhelming urge to run to my mother and hug her. It was the happiest time of my life. Brother James, Brother Joseph, what did you see when that happened?”

“Your appearance changed instantaneously. Your features transformed and your hair turned green. A second previously, you looked like a terrified little boy. The moment you saw Mama, you got all excited. You then screamed and ran to Mama’s arms,” James said.

“Why are you calling Queen Arial, Mama?” Jane asked.

“It was Grandpa’s idea. He thought it best that they adopt us. He also thought it stupid for us to call a six year old boy Grandpa,” Joseph said.

“Also, I didn’t want to be called great grandma. That was making me feel old,” Mama Arial said.

Everyone looked at Mildred. She seemed in a lot of stress. “Should we continue this topic another time, Mildred?” Ramsey asked.

"No, let's finish," she said and covered her hands. Mildred didn't want to see her hands. They were reminding her that she was no longer an old woman.

"I wore gloves when I was your age. They calmed my mind. Shall we get some for you? Can someone please get gloves for Grandma?" Mark called. A servant ran off.

"So you're the Bill that Grandma always talked about but was too afraid to meet," Jane said. "If you two had met and married, then you would have been our Grandpa."

Mark didn't say anything. No one spoke.

"So did you change James' and Joseph's diapers?" Leslie asked.

Mark smiled at the two. "They were such cute little babies. Everyone loved their beautiful purple eyes. Yes, I changed their diapers."

"And I changed Grandpa's diapers," James said proudly.

"Why did you change your grandfather's diapers? Did he have a bladder control problem or something?" Jane asked.

Mildred looked at Mark. He looked down, blushing cutely.

"Please excuse my son. The loss of Annie traumatized him. It gave him nightmares and made him wet his bed," Mama Arial said.

"An eighty-seven year old man wetting his bed – that's so funny," Leslie laughed.

No one found that funny. Luke frowned.

"I don't think you realize it but Mark really is a seven-year-old boy," Papa Ramsey said.

Mildred didn't like how the conversation was going. It implied that soon she would become a full-fledged baby.

"Let me explain," Wizard Caldor said. "All of us have reincarnated before. We grow up and live our lives. We die and our spirit or soul enters Nexus. There we train with our spirit masters and then we select a new host body to inhabit."

"So Nexus is like heaven," Mildred interrupted.

"Yes, but that term doesn't do Nexus justice. Nexus is much more than that. I can't explain it in five minutes," Caldor continued.

"Anyways, we then grow up as children, not remembering our previous lives or the time between lives when we resided in Nexus.

"The only difference between Prince Mark and us is that the Little Prince remembers his previous incarnation. Also, the life as Prince Bill isn't a previous incarnation, but more like a parallel incarnation. Also, he brought back two grandchildren he had in that alternative life as Prince Bill." Caldor scratched his chin.

"I know it's confusing. The long and short of it is that the Little Prince was born seven years ago. He never got married or had any children. Prince James and Prince Joseph are both the products of another incarnation that we call Prince Bill. Prince Bill and Prince Mark are two separate incarnations who happen to share the same soul. That's easy to understand, isn't it?" Caldor smiled, happy with his explanation.

"I'm sorry but I have no idea what you just said," Jane said.

"So who wet his bed?" Leslie asked.

"Give me a break. I was only six-years-old then. I think it's allowed at that time," Mark said, still blushing.

"That's right. He's just my little baby, whom I gave birth to seven years ago. It's not his fault that he remembers a past life," Mama Arial said. She hugged and kissed Mark on the cheek.

"So where does Bill come into the picture?" Jane asked.

Mark looked annoyed. Mildred was surprised how much patience he had. She herself was getting annoyed with all the questions.

"Bill is my uncle that Grandma Mildred is destined to marry. Brother James and Brother Joseph are the grandchildren of Uncle Bill." Mark looked from Joseph to Dara. "That's why it's okay for Brother Joseph and Sister Dara to marry. I marrying Annie won't affect anything. We aren't related."

Mildred got up. Everyone looked at her. "I need to go to the washroom."

"I'll come with you," Mark said, looking at her with those beautiful eyes. Mildred knew why he wanted to come.

"A gentleman shouldn't watch a lady go to the bathroom," Mildred said.

"I'm not a gentleman. I'm seven. I've already seen you naked. If you want, I can stand outside the door," Mark said.

Mildred gave up. She couldn't get away that easily. She sat back down.

"Please don't run away from me. You know what will happen if you leave. I will die." Mark blinked his eyelashes at her.

"You're purposefully doing that, aren't you, blinking those beautiful eyelashes at me?" Mildred blurted out.

Mark opened his mouth and then closed it. Mildred suspected he wanted to say that they were destined to be married. She would have freaked if he said that.

Mark paused and looked at Mildred. She saw him think. "How would you like eyelashes like these? Grandma, I'll give you as much space as I possibly can." Mark closed his eyes and kissed his mother's hands.

"Speaking of eyelashes, we need to go to that floating resort in Rosette," Leslie said. "Grandmother, now that you're a teenager, we'll have so much fun doing makeup, having facials and stuff."

"That's a capital idea. We can book a two week stay at the resort," King Ramsey said.

"Can our friends come too?" Jane asked.

"Sure, all six of them may come," Ramsey said.

Mildred suspected an ulterior motive for the six coming. It was like when Mark invited the six to come for a board game. The real reason was for security. Mildred had to figure a way to leave. The idea of becoming Annie terrified her. She didn't want to die.

"We have a problem. They offer six two-week packages and I can't decide which to choose," Leslie said.

Everyone got together and discussed which package to select.

"Dinner is served," Jeeves said.

They sat at the table and continued discussing the vacation plans.

Mildred was distracted during dinner. "Mark, I don't think it would be appropriate for me to be your nanny anymore."

"I understand. Nanny Jamie can take over," Mark said. He didn't seem surprised, just sad.

Dinner ended and still no one could make a decision.

“Just let the little brat choose. They’re all good choices. Even he can’t make a mistake,” Luke said. Everyone agreed.

Mark tapped the brochure with his finger and sang the choosing song. “Eenie – meenie – miney – mosey. – Kiss – a – princess – on – her – nose.”

Mark looked at Mildred with longing. He obviously wanted to kiss her on the nose. Mildred felt his charm and looked away.

Mark continued, “If – she – sleeps – on, – let – her – snosey. Let – me – choose – this – one.”

After dinner, Mildred bathed by herself. She didn’t speak much during family time. She retired to her room.

Lying in bed, Mildred wished she were in another room. She didn’t want to be reminded that everyone thought that she was Annie, reincarnated.

That night Mildred dreamed she played hide-and-seek with an unknown person. They would change appearances and go out into the world. Following that, they would seek each other out until they met. They would then make passionate love with each other. The game would continue.



The next day, Mildred ate breakfast and walked around the castle grounds. Mark was conspicuously absent. Mildred suspected he was nearby. She loved the little guy but was afraid of commitment. Her heart still hadn’t healed from those seven marriages.

She still would have been in an endless cycle of marriage and divorce if it weren't for a special event that happened when she was in her late forties.

Mildred remembered it well. She was considering an eight marriage. The night was cloudless.

Mildred sat on the swing on her balcony and stared hypnotically at the moon.

Mildred could hear a voice in her mind, singing off key, sounding strangely like the mouse in *An American Tale*.

*Somewhere out there beneath the paaale moonlight -
Someone's thinking of me and loving me tonight*

Mildred stood up and answered the voice.

*Somewhere out there someone's saying a prayer -
That we'll find one another in that big somewhere out there*

*And even though I know how very far apart we are -
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star*

Mildred imagined a handsome prince standing up.

*And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby -
It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky*

Both Mildred and the prince in shadows raised their hands towards moon, singing in unison.

*Somewhere out there, if love can see us through -
Then we'll be together somewhere out there -
Out where dreams come true*

Mildred sang her love out to the unknown prince.

*And even though I know how very far apart we are -
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star*

Time to Reflect

The prince answered:

*And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby -
It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky*

Both Mildred and the mystery prince bowed their heads together.

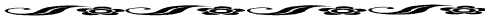
*Somewhere out there, if love can see us through -
Then we'll be together somewhere out there -
Out where dreams come true*

After that, she decided never to settle for second best. She knew the perfect man was out there, waiting for her. She just had to look.

Mildred crossed dimensions searching for her prince and ironically found a child that was both ancient and young at the same time.

The Red String

Destiny is not of your choosing,
but without your choice, there is no destiny.



“Grandma, come on. It’s time to go to the spa. I can’t wait,” Leslie called.

Mildred followed Leslie to the carriage. She got on and found Mark sitting next to a window. He played video games on his computer and didn’t seem to notice Mildred.

Annie’s father decided to return to his country. He claimed to have too much work. Mark’s father also stayed back, claiming he needed to pretend to work.

Mildred, her grandchildren, and both royal families took off for the resort. The trip was pleasant. Mildred never imagined she would be riding on a fairytale carriage pulled by a pair of dragons.

They arrived at the resort three hours later. Leslie and Jane dragged her everywhere, happy to have a new sister. Mildred had to admit she did have fun. One of her childhood dreams was to do girl thing with a few best friends. They had fulfilled her dream.

She should be happy, but she wasn’t. Mildred felt like a prisoner. She felt people and events were forcing her to play a role for she wasn’t suited. As the saying went, she was neither fish nor fowl.

Mark didn’t bother her while she was on the island. That wasn’t surprising since she couldn’t leave.

Mildred couldn’t believe that the Little Prince would die if she left him. She figured that that was a romantic delusion on his part. After all, he should have died when she or Annie or whoever was blasted

from the universe. The only thing he suffered from was severe depression.

The days passed and she remained at age seventeen. That to her meant only one thing – her interaction with the prince was driving the age reduction.

Mildred remembered what it was like being young. It meant being helpless and vulnerable to all the forces around her. She didn't need the fear and uncertainty of childhood. Adults could pretend to be in control of their destiny. Children couldn't.

Days passed quickly on the resort. Time came to return to the castle. On the final day, the resort was extra crowded. It was a state holiday and people enjoyed their days off.

Mildred found herself separated from Mark and the others. There was a carriage in front of her. It was about to depart. On impulse, Mildred jumped on. The carriage took off.

Mildred couldn't believe that she succeeded. She was convinced that security was tighter. Now she could grow old again.

People on board looked at her, wondering what she was doing there but they said nothing. Ten minutes later, they landed and she got off.

Mildred walked around the city, trying to decide what to do. The first things she needed were a job and a place to stay.

Mildred had money on her. She made sure she was prepared should the opportunity arise. This would cover her for several months, which was plenty of time to get a job and settle down. Then she would search for a way to return to her own world.

Mildred knew that the powers that be would seek her out and try to get her back. She knew how powerful a country was – especially when it was determined to do something, such as hunt her down.

Mildred walked down the street of an unknown city. She remembered from the trip to the museum of transportation that she could leave this dimension through Nexus.

Mildred asked for directions and came to a travel company that could get her to Nexium, the home of the Nexus gate. In less than an hour after escaping, she was ready to go home.

The transport she chose was expensive, but she would arrive by this time the next day. The plane or whatever vehicle it was would leave in three hours. All Mildred had to do was to wait.

Mildred felt a little dizzy. She decided to eat something. That helped a little. The minutes ticked on. For some reason she felt tired. This was strange. During her stay with the prince, she never felt like this. Even if her mind was in turmoil, her body always felt good. Now that changed.

Mildred looked at the time. Two more hours left before the flight left. Waiting made her tired.

Mildred paced up and down the corridor. One hour left. By now, her muscles and bones were paining. She felt dizzy. One hour left before boarding time. She couldn't wait.

Mildred felt a pain in her heart. She recognized it instantly. It was the pain of loneliness and loss. She felt it when her grandfather passed away. She felt it when her parents died. She felt it when yearning for her perfect man.

Mildred had spent her entire life trying to make herself into a better person, so she could be worthy of true love. She realized her journey was just beginning.

Time ticked on. The pain and loneliness grew unbearable. She keeled over.



Mildred awoke in the arms of Mark. Mark looked at her with deep concern. "Please don't run away from me," he said. Her head was clear. There was no pain in her chest. She was back to normal.

Mildred looked around. She was still in the travel agency.

"Mark told us that you were hurt and needed help. I had to carry him because he seemed in a great deal of pain and was crying. I felt sorry for the little guy," Jane said. "When he saw you, he almost jumped on top of you. A few seconds later, he calmed down. You then opened your eyes."

"We came just in time to see you collapse. What happened?" Leslie asked.

"It seems I can't leave the Little Prince. If I do, we'll both die. I can't believe that it's true. I spent eighty years away from you and nothing happened. Now I leave you for a few hours and we both almost die. That doesn't make any sense," Mildred said.

"Don't blame me. Blame our parents. They were the ones that bound our souls together," Mark said. "Once your transformation is complete, we'll both be safe."

"What does he mean that your souls are bound together?" Jane asked.

Mildred looked at her granddaughter. Jane had some incredible abilities, which was why she chose her as a companion. Unfortunately, she wasn't that bright. "I am Annie. I'm the one who died a year ago. Don't try to understand. You'll only hurt your head. Just accept that both Annie and I are one, just as Mark and Bill are one."

Mildred looked at Mark. "I'm sorry but I don't accept any of it. However, I won't run anymore."

"Will you at least hug me at least once every now and then?" Mark blinked his eyes sadly at her.

Mildred couldn't stay angry with him. "You're a real flirt, aren't you?" Mildred smiled at him and gave him a hug.

"By the way, where's everyone?" Mildred asked.

"Mama Arial told us to take the carriage and look for you," Leslie said.

They left the agency and piled into the carriage. Jane drove them back to the resort.

The first thing Mildred did upon seeing the family was to apologize. "I'm sorry everyone for making you all worry." She looked at Annie's mother. She didn't know what to say so she just smiled at her.

They left for home and arrived in time for dinner.



Mildred lay in bed. She stared at Mark's picture for an hour before falling asleep.

The next day she wandered around the castle grounds. Mark came up beside her. They walked quietly together.

Mildred stopped and looked at Mark. "What's the minimum distance we need between us? I don't want to hurt you again by accident."

"Physical distance isn't important. Universes separated us and yet we were fine. The only distance that matters is the distance that separates our hearts.

"The problem came when I tried to separate myself from you at the city of Nexium last year and when you tried to do the same yesterday," Mark said. "Just keep me in your heart and you'll be able to travel anywhere you want to."

They strolled to a nearby koi pond and watched the fish swim. "I can understand why you wouldn't want to marry me," Mark said. "When I was your age, I too was freaked out. I couldn't believe an old fart could be the destined partner for the cutest girl in the universe." Mark threw bread into the pond.

Clouds drifted lazily overhead. A two-headed bird sang a duet.

"I notice you're not wearing gloves. I always wore gloves to give myself the illusion that I was in control and not changing. I convinced myself I was the same person until the moment I saw my mother. All that changed the second I saw her for the first time."

"That's why you freaked out when you discovered I saw Annie's parents. It was premature," Mildred said. They walked on to a nearby bridge.

"Why don't you want to marry me? Is it because I... Bill is a bad person?" Mark walked with his head down.

Mark didn't understand. He couldn't understand. Mildred had to explain. "I think you're too good for me. I think Bill is too good for me. Why do you think I spent all those years running away from you?" Mildred said, pleadingly.

Mark climbed on the bridge railing and looked at the seventeen-year-old Mildred. "Baby girl, you must understand you are my destined partner. It's not a question of earning the right. Our parents bound our souls together – nothing can separate them.

“For the record, I think you’re the most incredible person in the universe. It doesn’t matter how wrinkled you are, you still look the same to me as when I first saw you standing over the cake, with your hair the color of strawberry ice cream.

“Do you have any idea how much effort I put into making myself worthy of you? I think you do. I’m convinced you put an equal amount of effort in making yourself worthy of me.” Mark reached out and held Mildred’s hand.

Mark stared into Mildred’s eyes. “Can’t you give up responsibilities for just a few years?” Mark asked.

Mildred didn’t say anything. She rested on the railing besides the sitting Mark. Overhead a swarm of bee-like creatures formed intricate patterns.

“I think the waiting is the hardest thing in the world. I understand the spiritual reasons for it but that knowledge doesn’t make it any easier to bear,” Mark said.

“Would you like the welcome party to be postponed? We can wait until you’re ready.”

Mildred considered. Delaying the party would inconvenience the whole country. “No, that would be too much trouble for everyone.”

Mark got down from the railing and they walked down the path beside the stream. They reached a waterfall. Rainbows formed in the mist.

“Soon enough, we’ll both grow up and I’ll return to Earth to fulfill my destiny. I need to prepare the way for the opening of the Nexus gate and the coming of the Nexus Rep.

The Red String

"I'll need your help for that. I promise to keep your name secret so only I'll be the one everyone hates." Mark looked up at Mildred with his big purple eyes. "Will you be my strength for the coming ordeal?"

Mildred couldn't say no to the Little Prince. "Off course, my Little Prince," she replied.

Mark had tears in his eyes. "Thank-you, Mildred." Mark hugged her.

They walked on in silence.

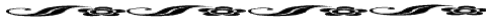
"There's something Annie's mother has been dying to show you ever since she discovered you had returned. It's a pair of dolls. They're Annie's favorite. You'll understand when you see them. I think it will bring you closer to the completion of your transformation. When you think you're ready, ask her to show them to you. I'm going to give you some space to think." With that, Mark walked away.

There was a lot for her to think about. Mildred couldn't hide the fact that the red string of fate bound them together. She experienced that bond firsthand when she tried to run away.

Mildred always trusted Bill since he was her light. She knew what she had to do, but she was frightened.

Childhood

Childhood is an essential part of being an adult



Mildred hunted Annie's mother down. She found her and almost turned back. Mildred tapped Annie's mother on the shoulder and she turned around.

"Is it okay if I address you the way Mark does? I'm not ready to call you Mama," Mildred nervously spoke.

"Off course, my dear," Mama Jenny said, looking radiantly happy.

Mildred hesitated for a second. "Mama Jenny."

"Thank-you for calling me that – may I please hug you?" Mama Jenny asked, desperately needing a hug.

Mildred hugged Mama Jenny, realizing that technically she was the same age as the other teenaged kids. The mother was indeed old enough to be her mother. For some reason it felt good. The pain of loss disappeared from her soul. She was finally hugging her true mother.

On impulse, Mildred spoke. "I love you Mama."

"I love you too dear," the mother replied.

Mildred stepped back and realized her clothes were baggy. "Don't tell me, let me guess. I aged regressed again," Mildred smiled. This time she didn't feel upset.

"How old do I look now, Mama Jenny?" Mildred asked, admiring her now-black hair. Her acceptance allowed her hair to change color.

"You look like a ten year old girl, maybe eleven," Mama Jenny said.

Childhood

"Mark said you had a pair of dolls you wanted me to see. He thought it was important I see them," Mildred said.

At this, the mother's eyes lighted up. "I've been dying to show them to you ever since I first saw you on the monitor." Mama Jenny grabbed Mildred's hand and pulled her to her room.

They entered the master guest room. Mama Jenny took a box from a nearby table and handed it to Mildred.

Mildred opened the box and found two little sister dolls inside. One had pink hair and the other had green hair. Mildred picked up the green haired doll and laughed, "That's so cute. That's not Mark, is it?"

"Annie always wanted a little sister to play with. She forced Mark to take on that role since he was so cute. You have no idea how much Mark hated doing that, especially since Luke would tease him mercilessly."

"Mama, why is Mark so pretty?" Mildred asked while sitting on the bed with her mother. She admired the dolls, feeling like a kid again. She held both dolls together and played with them.

"Mark was born out of the spirit of the country of Blears. It's only natural that he looks that way. He'll always have life and beauty as long as the kingdom of Blears prospers. The same is true of you. Annie was born out of the spirit of Rosette, which is why she's so exceptionally beautiful. She too will have life and beauty as long as the kingdom of Rosette prospers.

"Come on, I'll show you pictures," Mama said.

"Okay Mama," Mildred said, living a childhood as a ten year old she never had in the old world.

Mildred enjoyed herself looking at the four-year-old Mark dolled up in dresses, makeup and jewelry. He looked positively embarrassed.

"I remember when I first slept in my room. I pretended what it was like to dress Mark up. I never had a little sister. I always felt deprived," Mildred said.

"If you want to, you can dress Mark up now. We can take picture to embarrass him later in life," Mama said mischievously.

"We couldn't do that," Mildred giggled like the ten-year-old girl she now was.

Mildred ran out of the room and headed for Mark's room. He was there, reading *Revelations*.

Mildred grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the room. "No time for old fart stuff. It's time for dress-up." She pulled him to her room.

During the next few hours, she had more fun with him than she ever had in her entire life. Mildred finally knew what it was like to have a little sister. She didn't question the fact that all the dresses perfectly fit both of them.

Dinnertime came. They entered the dining room. Luke immediately started laughing. "I love the makeup, you girly man."

Mildred realized she forgot to remove the makeup from Mark's face. She quickly did that. Luke snickered throughout dinner. Mark blushed furiously.

During family time, Mildred asked Mark, "Why did you allow me to play dress-up with you? No boy would do that."

Mark seemed to go out of his way to make her happy.

"I love playing with you. It doesn't matter what game we play. I'll take any role you want me to," Mark said earnestly.

Childhood

Mark glanced at Luke. "Although I admit I could do without Big Brother's comments."

Mildred looked at Mark. If only she met him before she met those other men.

Mildred realized all the bad experiences of her life had forced her to grow spiritually. It gave her a deep understanding of the world no book could ever give. She realized all the failed marriages, the abuse and suffering of her life were necessary to create the person she was today.

She accepted her life experiences as a blessing.

Mildred retired to her room and entered the washroom. She looked at herself in the mirror. Looking back was a seven-year-old girl with black hair and brown eyes. Her facial features were still completely different from Annie's features.

Mildred finished her girl stuff and got into bed.

She began thinking. She looked nothing like Annie and had none of her memories. Despite this, everyone believed she was Annie. Her only proof was that Mark's life was bound to hers.

Life was full of contradictions. The higher truths were always that way.

Mildred couldn't sleep. So much stuff happened during the day. So much stuff happened since the time she arrived in this new world.

She kept tossing and turning. She got up, passed Mark's room and looked in.

Mark was busy on his computer. He looked up. "What's the matter Grandma?" Mark asked Mildred.

"I can't sleep," Mildred replied.

Mark got up and led her by the hand to the balcony. It was a beautiful cloudless night. Stars covered the sky.

Mark sat on a swing couch, the type you find in backyards. He motioned Mildred to lie down with her head on his lap. At first, she was reluctant. "Come on Grandma, it's okay to lie on your grandson's lap."

Mark stroked Mildred's black hair and thought of the day everyone went fishing on the lake, shimmering like emeralds. It was like an emerald bay.

Mark remembered a time he sang a lullaby to another girl.

Good night my angle, time to close your eyes, and save these questions for
another day

...

Mark looked down to see Annie looking back at him – blue eyes filled with tears, face framed with hair the color of strawberry ice cream.