A Conquest of Dragons

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

As a result, it takes many life times to achieve the level of supreme master.

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Prologue

Don’t mess with the Gods

It is forbidden by Divine Law to take the Wizard’s initiation before the age of 16.

There were severe consequences for those who disobey. What these consequences were, no one knew – perhaps an eternal case of ache.

That was why, only the council of Elders in the Magic Academy performed the sacred ritual.

Opening the Gates of Magic

Behind every mystery  
is a deeper mystery waiting to be revealed

It was the first day of Wizard’s school. Hundreds of students from all over the country crowded the hall.

Excitement filled the air as they waited for the Head Master to give her opening statement.

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

Mark had ruby-red hair, large emerald green eyes and freckles on his chubby cheeks. He didn’t care about that. His appearance wasn’t important. He did have a moustache, of which he was proud.

“I’m finally going to be taking my wizard’s initiation. I’ve been waiting for this since I was eight,” Mark spoke, acting like someone who drank too much coffee.

“Calm down. You will get a heart attack if you get any more excited,” Harry chuckled.

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

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

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

The Head Master spoke. “Welcome to the Royal Academy of Magic. Here you shall learn the mastery of yourself and the world. It is an honor and privilege to serve, which you will soon find out…”

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

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

The princess had waist length deep green hair and lavender eyes. Purple was the mark of royalty. She also had soft kissable cheeks and a button nose.

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

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

“Perverts,” the blond girl looked at them in disgust. Mark felt the urge to hit her. Instead, he pursed his lips and gave her an air kiss, with a loud kissing sound. He saw someone do that on TV and it was effective there. It was just as effective here. The girl looked away in disgust. Both boys chuckled.

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

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

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

Everyone laughed at his childish enthusiasm.

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

“His job is organizing study groups and making sure tutors are available for those who need them. It is school policy for all students to belong to at least one study group.

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

“Yes Ma’am,” Mark called back.

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

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

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

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

Everyone applauded his nomination.

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

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

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

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

“It would be cool,” Harry agreed reluctantly.

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

“Are there any other nominations for the position of treasurer?” the Head Master asked. As before, there were no volunteers.

“Mr. Banks, would you fill the role of treasurer? We need you,” the Head Master anxiously asked.

With both Mark’s and the Head Master’s pressure, Harry reluctantly nodded his head.

The Head Master smiled a smile of relief. “I hereby appoint Mr. Harry Banks to the position of Treasurer of the student council.” Everyone applauded the nomination.

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

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

The darkness was blacker than black and the silence absolute. Amidst the darkness and silence, Mark floated upwards. Below him in the void an infinite plane appeared. It appeared perfectly smooth and black. Mark noticed circles on the plane. The circles spread out like ripples on a pond on a rainy day.

Mark rose higher. Above him appeared another surface like a giant sheet of paper. It too had circles like the surface of a rainy day pond. Above and below these appeared other giant sheets of black paper fluttering in the space around Mark. The number of sheets was beyond counting.

Lights raced between the sheets. In the background of this was a kaleidoscope of color and movement.

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

The blackness of the sheet dissipated and shapes appeared. Flowing around the shapes were streams of color and movement.

Mark drifted closer. The surface shifted and he had the impression of viewing the world from an infinite distance away. The world looked flat and not flat at the same time. As he drew closer, the world inflated into three dimensions.

The streams of light and movement he saw before resolved themselves into what he knew were the Lay Lines of the earth. All physical objects glowed with the light of Life. The glow of his fellow students out-shone the objects in the room in terms of intensity and complexity.

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

Mark stood disoriented and confused. He had no idea what he saw or felt. He was not alone in his confusion. What he saw did seem familiar. Where had he seen it before?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“However, my dad always said, ‘Act quickly before fear can get to you. A Draco is always brave,’ Mark said.

“My dad says, ‘There’s a fine line between being brave and being foolish.” Harry scolded Mark.

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

They approached the end of the bridge and stepped on a path that took them to a large building. The building was at least 10 stories high. It had flamboyant colors, which shone in the afternoon light. They entered the building and proceeded down a corridor. At the end of it was a large atrium.

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

“He’s an eternal ten year old. I wish he would grow up and not worry me so much,” Harry said, distractedly. “This place is incredible.”

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

They stepped into the atrium and the Head Master pointed out the student council rooms. They entered and the Head Master gave them a tour. “Students enter here to get help organizing clubs and dealing with study issues.”

Older students were milling about. Some were using the resources available around them.

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

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

“Mr. Draco, Mr. Banks, this is Sylvia Larks, our VP of Public relations. Her job is to manage clubs and club activities. Every student must join at least one club.

“This is John Hankins, our VP of Public Relations. His job is to help organize social events.

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

“Mr. Maurice Brown is our secretary.” Head Master Marjorie stopped talking and liked to the new comers.

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

Head Master Marjorie addressed the seasoned members. “Please give them a tour of the faculties. I have an errand I need to take care of.” With that, Head Master Marjorie left.

The school grounds covered over 50 acres of land. It contained the Academy, as well as a university for advanced magical studies. It bordered the palace grounds to the north.

The grounds contained school buildings, administrative buildings, a cafeteria, a gym, and other training facilities. It also contained a residential area with a shopping district to serve the thousands of people who called the school grounds home.

By the time the tour was over, the three freshmen were exhausted. Everyone returned to the student faculty lounge and lazed about. Monday evening would start their real work as council members.

Sylvia brought out some snacks and everyone ate while they talked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everyone agreed to be informal.

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

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

“I’m two months older than Harry and have known him – for at least 14 years, and he still treats me like a brat.” Mark swallowed the last half of the sandwich in one bite.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Boys should understand girls,” Jane said.

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

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

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

“You don’t know my parents. My dad always says, a Draco is always courageous and my mum always says a Draco is always wise. They didn’t seem to realize that it can mess up an eight year old’s head.” Mark forgot what gender he was for months. That was not something he ever wanted to relive.

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

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

“Both my parents were grand-masters at the time. Bypassing the age restriction was a simple matter for them,” Mark replied. “They both achieved grand-master status at around 300 years of age. They want me to beat that record and are convinced I can do it. They ascended from this plane of existence about two years ago, at age 435.”

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

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

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

Mark agreed fully. “If only level 80 wasn’t so hard to reach. It doesn’t matter, we have plenty of time.”

“Exactly what are wizard levels,” Jane asked?

“Each level represents one life lesson learnt. Lessons learnt range from the value of hard work to universal compassion. Each time you learn a lesson, you gain a level. There are 99 lessons in total,” Maurice said.

“Student is 1 to 19. We learn basic skills here at school. One lesson everyone has to learn here is the value of hard work. Without this, no one may progress.

“As a result, most people who drop out do so before this lesson is learnt. It takes about a year to complete this for almost everyone.

By the second year, everyone is at level 20 or higher. We are given our second form here, when we enter second year of schooling. My second form is Gnome. It’s perfect for me since I like studying and doing research.”

“Rookie is 20 to 29. This is where we get a handle of the basics and prepare for more advanced lessons.

“Journeyman is 30 to 39. We will all be at this level when we finish schooling. We will need to apprentice with a master to get work and experience. This is the end of the easy stuff. From now on, it gets harder and more time consuming to level up.

“Junior Sorcerer is 40 to 59. At this level, we can do most thing technology can do, as well as things it’s not worth using technology to do.

“Senior Sorcerer is from 60 to 79. At this level, we start being able to do things technology can’t do, such as teleportation. This is where aging slows down and our natural ability to heal increases greatly.

“Master Sorcerer is from 80 to 89. As mentioned, we are freed from aging and gain eternal youth and vitality. Ladies don’t have to worry about visits from their favorite aunt.” At this, Jane frowned at him. She didn’t like crude references.

“Grand Master is from 90 to 98. Grand masters have complete mastery of their biology and can do pretty much anything they want.

“Supreme Master is level 99. This is the highest level we may achieve in this world and is said to be almost impossible to achieve before the age of 500.

“As for ascending, that is truly news-worthy. I remember the news about Mark’s parents making this monumental achievement.” Maurice yawned. “It’s time for bed,” he said and headed for the door. Everyone followed.

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

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

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

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

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

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Mark looked around. Surrounding him were enormous sheets of stygian blackness, fluttering in the darkness. Far off in the distance two sheets wobbled and sections of the sheets bulged towards each other. They bumped.

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

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

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

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

Out of curiosity, Mark approached the green expanse, but an unknown force prevented him from entering. Mark moved away, realizing that he was approaching forbidden territory. He didn’t want to enter the palace grounds uninvited.

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

Mark fell like a rock. He braced for the impact…and awoke with a start. He went to the bathroom, changed, and went back to sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re so cute,” Jamie said and patted Mark on the head.

“I’m not cute. I’m manly, with a manly moustache,” Mark whimpered. He still had his ID card in hand. He put it away since it wasn’t doing any good.

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

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

“What are you looking at?” Jane whispered.

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

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

“You like him, don’t you Annie?” Jane as asked. Annie nodded. “I like him too. Let’s invite him over.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How old are you, Mark?” Annie asked.

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

“How come you seem so young if you’re older than Sister Jane?” Annie asked, confused.

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

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

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

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

“I was hoping to get it for Annie but there was nothing released for the movie,” Jane said.

“I have it,” Mark said proudly.

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

“My uncle Albert works in production and gave me one. It seems there was a glitch in production which delayed everything. If you want I can ask my uncle to give one to you. I’ll give him a call now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark looked at Annie’s eyes for the first time. He leaned towards her with mouth open. “Purple grapes,” Mark exclaimed. Annie jumped.

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

“How did you know?” Jane asked.

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

“What are you doing today?” Jane asked.

“I have nothing planned. I thought I’d be lazy today.” Mark got up and waited for the ladies to exit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ten minutes later, they were at the store. The three passengers stepped out and the limo sped away.

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

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

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

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

“I don’t need anything,” Mark said hastily. “I’m just keeping you company.” He didn’t like buying expensive clothes. A real man should wear clothes that are practical and functional, unless he was going to a formal event.

“Nonsense dear, everyone needs a new set of clothes – especially a handsome man like yourself.” An effeminate man wrapped an arm around Mark’s waste and guided him to another boutique. “Please call me Guido. We employ specialized magic and a refined sense of fashion to make sure you are well dressed.”

The boutique was filled with chairs, posters and manikins. Other sales reps serviced other customers. Guido guided Mark to a changing room. “I have the perfect outfit for you dear. I’ll be right back.”

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

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

“Guido,” Mark called.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So are you,” Jane replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The First Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry arrived just as the bell rang.

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

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

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

“These assignments are specifically designed so that you can build on your skills and knowledge. They came about from thousands of years of work, and they are the minimum for the job at hand. Therefore, you must pass every assignment before proceeding.

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

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

“By the time you complete schooling you shall all have become level 30 wizards at the very least. From then on, it is up to you to achieve level 99 and become Supreme Masters.”

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

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

For the next hour, the room was silent.

Professor Rover interrupted the class. “Okay class, please stop writing.” Professor Rover passed in front of the class.

“Desire is the driving force when it comes to magic. The greater our desire is, the greater our results. Magic is shaped by our beliefs and desires, which constantly change. The suggestions of others affect the results as well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We stop aging when we reach level 80 and can live forever then,” John Hanson spoke in a quiet voice. The short kid with stubble sat down when the class turned towards him.

Eventually everyone had their say. The professor continued his lecture.

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

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

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

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

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

“There are exceptions as when someone or a group of people pray with intense desire. Unfortunately, this is too unreliable to be of practical use.

“So what do we do for consistent results? The answer is the Initiation. The Initiation allows us to move away from the physical and see the world as it is. We become level-one wizards once we pass the initiation.

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

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

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

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

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

Mark wondered why no one mentioned those strange black surface things with the circles and those colors and that movement. This was one of the few times he was without words and remained silent.

“Excellent. You saw what you needed to see. Seeing the truth of the world allows you to change the laws that govern the world and magic is born.” Professor Rover smiled at everyone. The bell rang. It was lunch time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The bell rang.

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

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

“I shall now enable the book for you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Sea of Chaos is a region of space in the Pacific Ocean, about 100 miles away from shore. It was created over ten thousand years ago by the ancient civilization called Atlantis. They were trying to understand the fundamental nature of reality. Unfortunately, one of their experiments failed and damaged the fabric of the universe, not to mention destroying their entire continent.

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

“Do people live there?” Sharon asked.

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

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

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

Mark looked at Sharon and said, “If you want, I can take you on a tour of the island.”

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

Rover checked his notes. “You will all need to create email accounts. You will also need to adjust your privacy settings.

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

Mark clicked on an icon marked People First. Mark looked around and saw name tags above everyone’s heads. He checked the relationship box and above their heads an additional box appeared. It read ‘Relationship’. Above some it said, ‘single, dating’, and above others it said, ‘single, not dating’. A few people had question marks, indicating that information was either not known or was private.

Mark felt excited. This was exactly the information he needed. He selected the woman’s category and added a new field. It read, ‘Asked Out’. He set it to ‘false’ by default. Now, above all the woman’s heads a new field appeared. This was perfect. He could now ask all the girls out, without worrying about asking the same girl twice.

“Mr. Draco,” the professor called. Mark looked around and realized that he was the only sitting. Everyone laughed at him. Not surprisingly, Harimau had the loudest and most obnoxious voice.

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

The information played out in his second screen.

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

All 24 students followed the professor out of the door.

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

The temple was adorned with images of various deities. The inside was the size of a large classroom. At the far end of the room was a platform, with seven steps leading up to it. In the center of the platform was a foot-high rose-marble alter.

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

“Hello everyone,” Jackson said. “A wand is a device that helps amplify your magical abilities. Their secondary purpose is to help maintain the stability of our world. They are created using trans-dimensional substances, such as Oricalcum.

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

“Trans-dimensional beings supply the wands to us, as their construction is beyond our ability to produce.

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

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

The students formed a line. For some reason, Mark was last.

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

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

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

Several people climbed the steps and took their wands. Harimau climbed the steps next. A folded hunting knife appeared in front of him. “Sweet,” he exclaimed, bowed and took the knife.

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

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

Second to last was Harry. His wand had the appearance of a walking stick a leprechaun would use.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everyone was in shock. Even Jackson was unsure what went wrong. There was no record of this failing before.

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

Thankfully, Harimau didn’t say anything, possibly because he too was in shock. No doubt the whole world would know about it next week – the only person in the entire Universe without a wand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rover led everyone to an isolated garden. In the center of the garden was a granite pedestal. On the top was a compass with four areas. The areas had the symbols for Earth, Water, Air, and Fire inscribed on them.

Rover continued the lecture. “We shall now discuss the various categories of magic. The four basic categories are Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. They represent the four basic states of matter, which are Solid, Liquid, Gas, and Plasma.

“However, the four elements are more than just that. They represent the heart and soul of matter, which we shall try to connect to.

“We all have a natural affinity for one element. You will be assigned to various classes based on what your affinity is. This way, we can start using magic as soon as possible. Once we gain sufficient mastery, we shall learn a second element, until all four are learnt.

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

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

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

Harimau did so and the hand of the compass snapped to Fire. “Of course it would be fire,” he said. “I’m a tiger after all.”

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

One by one, everyone discovered their primary element. Only Mark and Harry remained. Harry stepped to the dial and the hand pointed at Earth. Harry nodded knowingly and stepped away.

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

“It seems you don’t have a primary element,” Rover said.

“You really are a pathetic loser,” Harimau said.

Mark felt worse than before. He couldn’t decide whether to cry and run away or to hit Harimau.

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

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

“Yes sir,” Harimau replied.

“Mr. Draco, since you don’t have a primary element, you can choose any you want. What will it be?” Rover asked.

“Choose Earth,” Harry suggested.

“Okay,” Mark said.

The lesson continued. Mark didn’t pay much attention to the professor. The lack of a wand weighed heavily on him.

First, he couldn’t get a girl, which was a sign to the world that you are an adult. Now he couldn’t get a wand, which was a sign to the world that you are a wizard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry realized that there was only one thing to do. He had to get Mark to eat.

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

“I’m not hungry,” Mark mumbled.

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

Mark cracked a smile. He reached out and grabbed a fork. He stuffed food in his face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As they were walking back to campus, Uncle Albert phoned. “Hello Mark. How’s my favorite nephew doing?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like what?” Harry asked, smiling.

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

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

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

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

“It was from Anna Cortes,” Jane replied.

“Who’s Anna Cortes,” John asked.

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

“Disney movies,” John nodded.

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

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

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

Sylvia guided Jane to a second room.

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

The only thing remaining was to wait for students wanting help. In the mean time, Mark did his homework. He had to set up his email account and personalize his Book of Knowledge.

After a few minutes of fussing around, he was able to log onto the VP of Education account of the student council. Now he could do his council work anywhere he went.

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

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

“Can another friend join?” Jane asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark watched anime until 10:00 PM, when he almost fell asleep on the computer. He got up, did his bathroom stuff and changed.

Ten minutes later, Mark went to bed and cuddled with his favorite stuffed bear. Seconds later he fell asleep.

Earth

They who master Earth masters Life

Mark got up bright eyed and bushy tailed. Today was the day the fun starts, when he could practice real magic.

The sun was shining, telling the world that it was great to be alive. The birds were chirping outside the window. The breeze was filled with the scent of pine trees.

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

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

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

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

The bell rang.

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

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

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

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

“Wizardry is unnecessary for any of this.

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

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

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

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

“What about parallel lives?” Ester asked.

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

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

Harimau’s face turned red.

“That’s unlikely,” the professor said. “Living parallel lives is exhausting, which is why few souls do it. Besides, there’s plenty of time, so what’s the rush?

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

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

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

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

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

“As time passes, something disturbing happened. The use of magic was disrupting the fabric of reality. As a preventive measure, transcendent beings started supplying wands to wizards. The wands both helped the wizards yield their magic and kept reality stable…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark entered class as the bell rang. The class was filled with new students, all needing to learn Earth style magic.

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

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

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

“Earth magic is also used in construction and physical divination.

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

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

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

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

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

“You are absolutely right. However, I believe I have an equal affinity for all elements. That’s what Professor Rover said…I feel like rolling around in the earth,” Mark said suddenly.

“That’s the spirit. Only by being close to Earth may we feel its heart,” Professor Harriet said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark wandered off to fetch food.

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

Sea of Chaos

Lost in the Sea,

We find shelter in unexpected places

It was Friday evening. Annie was in her room, playing with her dolls. She loved the dolls Mark had sent her.

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

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

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

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

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

Entering the office, she saw a strange man in his late forties.

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

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

Jane looked uncertain. She had no interest in meeting the famous actress. “I’ll pass,” she said.

“Come on, Sister Jane, it will be fun,” Annie begged. Reluctantly, Jane agreed.

“Excellent,” the king said. “We will leave tomorrow at ten - good night you two.”

Annie returned to her room. That night she couldn’t sleep.

Early next morning, Annie got up and dressed. Lady Sanders, one of Annie’s nannies, helped her pack for the over-night trip. She went for breakfast.

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

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

Annie ate quietly, annoyed at how unexcited the family was. Meal finished, they headed for the palace’s entrance. Parked in front was a boat-like vehicle.

Adam, the man from yesterday, was waiting.

“Good morning, Majesties, Princess Jane, Princess Annie,” Adam said.

Adam turned to the king and said, “This vehicle is equipped with some of the same features installed in the Drac assault vehicles I told you about yesterday.

“It can handle most anything the Sea of Chaos can dish out. It’s still a prototype model, but I think you will be impressed with how well it can help you protect our country. We call this class of vehicles chariots.” Adam waited for them to enter.

Everyone entered and sat on designated chairs. The interior had an expensive look, suitable for royalty. Annie sat at a window and looked out. Jane sat opposite her.

The chariot taxied out to the front gate and past the security guards. Seconds after leaving the palace grounds, the chariot took off. The ground fell away and clouds surrounded them within seconds. They attained cruising height and proceeded on their way.

“Did you notice the lack of g-forces? We have found a way to utilize the wand of a wizard that’s only lever 55. That’s 3 levels better than our last release,”

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

“Our main guns can fire ten thousand rounds a minute, for almost ten minutes, before needing to be reloaded,” Adam replied.

“We can launch multiple types of missiles. We even have the latest tracking system that can track a target almost two miles in the Sea of Chaos…”

“That’s impossible,” the king said.

“We’ve had the system for almost a decade, but we chose not to deploy it. We don’t like giving out military equipment that can threaten us.

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

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

“We are over the water,” Annie said.

“That’s because we’re travelling at over 2.5 times the speed of sound, Princess Annie. At this speed, we will enter the Sea in a little over…nine minutes.”

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

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

“That’s because this is a prototype vehicle, with equipment that can’t be mass produced,” Adam said proudly.

“Please follow me Majesties, Princesses,” Adam said and led them to a staircase leading upwards. They entered a room containing chairs and a door leading out. They stepped out towards the front of the chariot. Surrounding them on deck was a railing, to prevent anyone from falling. The air was still and quiet on deck. It was as if they were on the ground.

Annie ran to the front and looked out. Jane stood beside her and rested on the railing. The parents sat on a couch ten feet behind the girls. Adam stood near the side railing.

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

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

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

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

Annie and Jane gazed around in wonder. They had never seen anything like this place before.

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

“Do you know Mark Draco?” Annie asked

“I know of at least three Marks, Princess Annie. Do you mean the one that just entered Wizard’s Academy?” Adam asked.

“Look, there is a flock of dragons there…Yes, that’s the one,” Annie replied and pointed. “Are those your relatives?”

“The correct term is a conquest of dragons. Those are natural dragons, unrelated to humans. We humans borrow their power, as well as the power of other magical creatures when we get our second magical form,” Adam said.

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

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

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

“Would you like something to drink? We made sure we were well stocked for the trip,” Adam said.

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

A woman in her sixties entered and passed them the drinks. “This is my daughter, Jamie,” Adam said.

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

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

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

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

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

Clouds were rushing to a central location. It was as if everything was getting sucked down a drain. As it converged, the center glowed. It became brighter, then too bright to look at. “Brace yourselves. We are going to have some turbulence,” Adam warned.

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

“That gives me an idea. If you’ll excuse me a minute, I need to get something.” Adam left, and brought back a pillow.

“We are going to that turbulent area for this demonstration.” Adam waited for a few seconds. “Okay, watch what happens when I throw this pillow.”

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

Adam concentrated, and then threw. An aurora formed around the pillow as it crossed the force-field. The pillow disintegrated as it entered the outside. Within seconds nothing remained.

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

“What kind of magical creature are you and your daughter?” Annie asked.

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

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

“The Tiikeris are tigers,” Annie replied.

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

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

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

“Are you saying they will have a horrible marriage?” the mother asked, worriedly.

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

Far off in the distance was a large floating island with a bonsai tree on the top and mountainous terrain on the bottom.

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

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

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

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

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

Annie blushed happily at that.

“Other clans live in the Sea of Chaos, not just ours. There are thousands of known islands within the Sea. All you need to live here is a strong enough will to claim a vacant island, and the desire to live here,” Adam said.

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

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

“Why are you being so generous to us?” the king asked.

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

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

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

Very sneaky, the king thought. He smiled and nodded. “Okay, I’ll allow it.”

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

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

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

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

Annie followed him to the front of the chariot. “That’s the co-pilot’s seat. Place this around your neck and sit down,” Adam instructed.

Annie placed a necklace with what appeared to be a dragon tooth around her neck. She sat down and the console lit up.

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

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

“Dragonia,” Annie said.

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

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

“Other clans have their own ways to navigate in this space and find their own homes. Now I shall follow your compass and we shall return home.” Adam turned the chariot in the direction the arrow pointed. Occasionally the compass would abruptly change directions and Adam would have to make a course correction.

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

Coming of Age

Most of us grow up,   
but some never do

Mark got up at 7:00 AM Saturday morning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The door-bell rang. “Come in,” Mark called. There was no reply.

“I said, come in,” Mark called again.

“Okay I’m coming,” a loud voice spoke from behind him. Mark humped. Uncle Albert was always doing stupid things like that, but his jokes always got Mark.

Mark turned around and Uncle Albert gave him a bear hug. Mark felt as if all his bones were breaking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uncle Albert opened the door and Mark followed. Mark got the surprise of his life. There standing in front of him was Anna Cortes.

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

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

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

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

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

After the hug was over, Mark said to Anna Cortes, “Thank-you for sending those dolls to the princess. She really loved them. I’m glad Uncle Albert didn’t send them.”

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

“When are you not embarrassing?” Mark asked.

“Come on, let’s get moving,” Uncle Albert said. He went to the garage and opened it. The garage was filled with stuff that needed to be moved.

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

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

Anna Cortes locked the house and everyone entered the chariot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They could be worn then,” Uncle Albert said.

Mark realized something else was planned, but didn’t know what.

They returned to the craft and Mark took the pilot’s chair. He said, “Dragonia” and a compass appeared above the console. The chariot turned and they headed for Dragonia.

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

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

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

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

Up ahead the storm clouds appeared. They penetrated the wall and everything went gray.

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

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

“Are we in someone’s guts?” Aunty Anna asked.

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

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

“Stop that you two. This is dangerous,” Aunty Anna said.

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

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

It contained bright green forests, blue rivers and lakes, and red designs that didn’t make sense. On the sides of the layers were waterfalls.

They landed near some trees and bushed. “Okay everyone, let’s get out,” Mark said and stepped out the door.

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

“You mean that this is a cake?” Aunty Anna asked. “That’s impossible.”

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

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

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

“No,” Mark said.

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

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

They headed in that direction. They passed a few eye balls along the way. The eyes turned to look at them.

Aunty Anna got nervous, since the area they were travelling through was getting creepier. “Are you sure this is the way?” she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“It kind of slipped my mind,” Uncle Author said.

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

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

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

“That’s a surprise I could do without,” Anna said.

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

“I didn’t do anything, Uncle,” Mark said in protest.

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

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

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

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

“Okay Uncle,” Mark said and started undressing.

“Wait a minute, I’m here,” Anna said, feeling embarrassed.

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

Mark finished undressing and dumped his clothes with his other stuff. He headed to the washroom. Five minutes later he came back.

Mark looked at Anna. She averted her eyed.

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

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

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

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

Mark was in a corridor filled with perhaps fifty doors on each side. The corridor was perhaps twenty feet wide and twenty feet high.

Mark walked to the end of the corridor. He stepped onto a balcony surrounding a large hall. Every few feet of the balcony had other corridors. Each corridor had a different number of doors. Above the balcony was another balcony, just like the one Mark was currently on. Mark felt slightly dizzy when walking through that area.

Mark walked down some stairs and onto the main floor. In front of him was the entrance to the docking platform.

He walked onto the platform. Mark saw a craft approaching. It landed ten feet in front of him. The engine turned off.

The cockpit door opened and Mark got a surprise. It was Annie, Jane’s baby sister.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Annie followed Mark to the doors of the Gate House. “Annie, what are you doing here? I’m surprised your parents would let you enter the Sea,” Mark said.

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

That reply surprised Mark. He didn’t think outsiders were allowed on the island. That, however, was none of his business.

Mark opened the door for Annie. They stepped in. They walked toward a passageway opposite.

“You came for the concert, didn’t you? I can’t wait to hear Anna Cortes sing,” Annie said. She stepped into the corridor and got dizzy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right over there,” he said and left.

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

They walked towards the stage and found the royal family. A waitress was asking them what they wanted to eat.

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

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

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

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

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

“But I didn’t feel anything,” the queen said.

“Neither did I,” the king agreed.

They all turned to Jane. “I didn’t feel a thing either.”

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

Annie was about to say something to Mark when the waitress interrupted her. “What would you like to order, Princess Annie?”

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

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

The Grammy Award winning singer stepped out and began singing.

In time lunch was served, and then dessert.

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

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

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

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

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

Back again came singers singing for adult audiences.

Mark looked up to see Adam approach the royal family. He said something and the king and queen nodded. They continued to watch the show. It was apparent that they, as well as Jane, were enjoying themselves.

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

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

Mark suspected something fishy was going on. He was having too much alone time with Annie for it to be a coincidence.

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

Mark grabbed Annie’s hand and led her to the balcony. Annie looked around. They were on a plateau overlooking a canyon. “Wait here,” Mark said.

Mark ran back through the hall into the Corridors. He arrived at his uncle’s home door and entered it. Mark ran to the back of the house and jumped onto a horseless carriage. Activating the controls, Mark took off. He zoomed to the edge of the island and went under it. As he flipped around, a new scene awaited him. This was a scene of mountains and lakes. The underside of the island was now the top side. Now where was the princess…there she was.

Far off in the distance he could feel her presence. Mark oriented the carriage and zoomed in Annie’s directions. Five minutes later, he approached the plateau the dining hall was located on.

Mark parked in front of Annie and got off. “Now we don’t have to worry about those scary halls,” Mark said. “Come on, we have five hours to waste.”

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

They went down a vast canyon. It put the Grand Canyon to shame, in terms of the colors of the rocks and the types of formations it held. They passed a bowling-pin rock, and zoomed through dozens of stone arches.

“Are you scared of caves?” Mark asked.

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

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

They zoomed towards a sheer cliff. There was a tiny opening, with water flowing out. The water gushed two thousand feet down to land in a lake.

They zoomed in. At first it was dark, with only the carriage’s lights to illuminate the way. The path brightened. Colors appeared on the walls. The cave walls were studded with rubies and diamonds.

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

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

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

“Thanks, Mark,” Annie said, happily.

The space opened out to a cavern with hundreds of openings. They zoomed into one of the openings. They entered into a cave with a lake in it. A waterfall poured into it. The roof was covered with stalactites.

Next came a cave filled with strange crystals. They looked like trees and bushes. There was what looked like flowers growing from several bushes.

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

Mark hovered near a flowering bush. He clasped his hands and said, “Please mum and dad, can I please have one of those flowers?”

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

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

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

“Okay,” Annie agreed reluctantly.

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

“We came from there,” Annie said.

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

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

“There,” Annie shouted and pointed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark found a hollow tree and climbed into it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The only difference was that her sister was too old to play with her. Mark, on the other hand, was only slightly older than her, and could still relate to her. She knew he was still a kid under that moustache.

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

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

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

Not surprisingly, his pants fell down as he ran, along with his underwear. He pitched forward onto his face as his shoes went flying.

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

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

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

“Congratulations,” he said, absentmindedly, as he tried to push his hands through the sleeve openings. “Ah-huh,” he said, triumphantly, as his hands popped out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I do have some ventilation that you don’t,” Mark said and smiled at her.

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

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

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

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

The entire area was filled with geysers and hot springs. They stopped at a large set of inter-connected pools.

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

Annie stripped her clothes off and ran as fast as she could. She dove in first and splashed Mark as he entered. Mark splashed her back.

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

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

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

“I just peed in the pool,” Annie said and giggled again.

“So did I,” Mark said, and smiled at her. “You haven’t live life unless you’ve done that with your best friend.”

Annie turned and looked Mark in the eyes. “Purple grapes,” Annie said. “Your eyes look like purple grapes.”

Just then Mark’s stomach growled. “You’re making me hungry,” he said. “Your eyes look like purple grapes too.”

Annie’s stomach growled just then. Both laughed.

Mark turned and looked at the setting sun. He sat up straight and pointed. “Good grief, look at the time. It’s 5:30 PM. We better get dressed.”

“But I’m having so much fun,” Annie complained.

“Can’t help it,” Mark said. “We don’t want the grownups to catch us, do we?”

That got her attention. “All right,” Annie said and reluctantly followed Mark out of the pool.

“We don’t have a towel, how do we get dry?” Annie asked.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get dry quickly. All we have to do is sit on these rocks and wait.” Mark reached behind him and wrung out his hair. Annie did the same.

Mark sat on a rock and Annie sat opposite him. “This is the first time I’ve been naked with a boy. How about you,” Annie asked?

“Dracos are naturalists. We believe clothes are unnatural. I never thought twice about being naked, until after I left the island. I do have to admit, being naked with you is fun. I think we’re dry now. Might as well dress and return to the real world,” Mark said and got up.

Annie got up and followed Mark.

Mark stopped near his clothes and tried to put on his underwear. “Damn, this is too big for me. How do I revert to my full size?”

Just then both heard a twig snap. They both jumped. Mark’s body reverted back to full size. His hair became short and his eyes turned green.

“Damn, for a second I thought that was Uncle Adam,” Mark said, and began dressing.

“Me too,” Annie agreed and dressed as well. “That would have been embarrassing.”

“I know,” Mark agreed, but for a different reason. “How is my moustache?” Mark asked.

“It’s fine,” Annie said, and both got back in the carriage.

As they headed back, Mark commented, “It’s a good thing our clothes are dirt and wrinkle proof.” Expensive clothes were like that.

“I know,” Annie replied, and tried to comb her hair with her fingers.

They arrived with five minutes to spare.

Adam was on the terrace when they landed. “What did you two do?” he asked.

Both looked at each other and laughed. “Nothing,” they said in unison.

“Let me comb your hair, you two,” Adam said and waived his wand at them.

“You two look as if you have just taken a bath together. I’ll fix that for you as well,” Adam said and waved his wand a second time.

“That’s better. Now I’ve covered up all your sins,” Adam said.

Adam turned to look at Mark. “Mark, return to Uncle Author’s house. He has something for you.”

Adam waited for Mark to leave and turned to Annie. “Annie, what you two did on this island is a secret. Under no circumstance must you tell anyone, do you understand?” Adam spoke to Annie in a very serious tone of voice.

“Yes Uncle,” Annie said, intimidated by his tone.

Adam smiled at her. “Good girl. Remember, this is both for your protection in the real world, as well as Mark’s.

“Now I’d like to share a little secret with you. Mark has shown you a side of him he has never shown anyone else. In fact, even he didn’t know about it until he showed it to you. You should cherish that.

“Now come in, your parents are waiting.”

Adam went in and Annie followed. The M.C. was just wrapping up his show. “Well folks, that wraps up the show until 7:00 PM. We shall have a dinner show, as well as the main event. See you later.”

“Did you have fun dear?” the mother asked.

“Yes mum,” Annie said, beaming with happiness.

“Your Majesties, one of our fashion designers has clothes he would like your two daughters to wear for the evening. Would you allow them to wear it?”

“Yes please,” the queen said.

“He is in the guest house, waiting for you. If you would follow me,” Adam said.

“I don’t want to go through the Corridors. They’re scary,” Annie complained.

“Nonsense, there is nothing scary about those halls,” the king said.

“No, I’m scared,” Annie whined and went close to Adam.

“Your Majesties, Annie has a very special ability that very few people in the world have. She can sense the dimensional structure of the universe, even without going through the Initiation,” Adam said.

“Your hotel room and this hall are actually on opposite sides of the island. Your hotel is on one of the branches of the Tree of Life, and this place is on the underside of the island. A wormhole is used to connect the two locations by something we call the Gate House.

“For someone who’s sensitive, that’s very scary. If you don’t mind, I will drive your daughter to your hotel via the long route,” Adam said.

“Are you saying she has abilities I don’t have?” the king asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty. As a matter of fact, I only know one person with that ability. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Adam said.

Adam shouted at Hammer, who was still on stage. “Hammer, can you please take Their Majesties to the Guest House? It’s master suite 1. Thanks.” Without waiting for a reply, Adam headed for the balcony and Annie followed.

They jumped in and sped off.

“How do you like your new home, Annie?” Adam asked.

“I love it. I wish I could stay here forever,” Annie said happily.

They approached the edge of the island. “Brace yourself. This could be scary,” Adam said.

This wasn’t as scary as Annie expected. Annie looked around as they zoomed over to the Tree side. They then zoomed towards the Tree of Life.

As they approached one of the branches, Adam commented, “The Guest House is on the underside of that branch over there. I find it easier to zoom over the branch and around it, rather than go straight.”

Annie looked on the underside of the moss covered branch and decided that the direct route would be scary.

They zoomed towards the top of the branch. As they approached, Annie stared at the moss on the branch. The moss resolved into a forest. They were five hundred feet above the branch.

“There’s a forest growing on that branch,” Annie said in surprise.

“That branch is several miles in diameter. Mount Everest on Earth is smaller than some of these branches. Such a thing can’t exist in our physical world. We’re almost there. If you look up, you’ll see the island and the base of the tree,” Adam said. “There’s the hotel.”

As they stepped onto one of several balconies, Annie commented, “This branch has its own gravity.”

They walked to the door leading in from the patio. Adam knocked.

“Come in,” the mother said.

Annie opened the door and entered. “Mum, dad, Isn’t this place incredible?” she shouted.

“You’re right,” the king said. “That entertainment was first class. I need to consider commissioning them for some of my events.”

“Hello dear, how good it is to see you,” a familiar voice called out.

Annie turned and discovered Guido standing there. “I didn’t know you were a Draco,” Annie said.

“Please come with me dear and I’ll show you the dress I would love you to wear. It’ll look darling on you,” Guido said.

Annie followed him to a bedroom. “Please step in and try the dress out. I’ll be waiting in the living room,” Guido said and waited for Annie to step in. He closed the door after her.

Alone in the room, Annie changed and looked at herself in the mirror. She loved the dress. It had the flavor of the island in it. She couldn’t wait to show it off to her new best friend.

Annie stepped out of the room and into the living room. She twirled around to show everyone the dress.

“That looks beautiful on you Annie,” the mother said.

“Thank-you mum, I can’t wait to show it to my new best friend,” Annie said.

“What’s her name sweetie?” the mother asked.

What’s her name? Annie drew a blank. She couldn’t think of any name to supply. Adam came to the rescue. “She spent most of her time with a girl named Laura, I was told,” Adam said.

“What kind of girl was this Laura?” Mama asked and headed to her room. Annie followed.

In the room, the mother put makeup on and fixed her hair.

“She has beautiful red hair that came down to her waist,” Annie said.

“That’s nice dear,” Mum said and continued fussing with her face.

A lady came in and asked, “Is there anything I can do for you, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, please fix Annie’s hair, it’s a mess,” the queen said.

Annie sang a popular kid’s song while her hair was fixed.

“Honey, it’s time to go. I don’t want to delay the concert,” the king said. A king is always punctual and mindful of times and rules.

“Yes dear,” Queen Marjorie said and put down her comb. “Men,” she mumbled to herself. They don’t understand the important things in life.

Both stepped into the living-room. “My, don’t the two of you look just divine,” Guido said and clasped his hands near his chest.

“Jane, aren’t you finished yet,” the father said. “I don’t want to be late.”

“If you wish, Landry can escort her when she’s finished,” Guido said. “Shall we go, Your Majesties?”

Guido bowed and opened the door to the Corridors. Annie instinctively stepped back. The slight wavering in the air near the door was disturbing to look at.

“Your Majesties, with your leave, I shall take Princess Annie to the Great Hall,” Adam said.

“I’m ready,” Jane said and stepped out of her room.

“My, don’t you look stunning,” Guido said. “Shall we be going?”

“See you later,” Annie said and stepped out onto the patio.

As they flew away, Annie commented, “You look really stiff around my parents.”

“That’s because I hate being around royalty,” Adam said. “I always feel they are better than me, but I guess that’s just being stupid. They blow their noses just like the rest of us.”

Annie giggled. “You’re weird,” she said.

As they approached for a landing, Adam said, “Remember to wear your rose. I think it will look good with your dress.”

Annie pulled down the windshield blind and looked at herself in the mirror. She took the rose and placed it in her hair. It lodged there perfectly and stayed in place.

They parked at the balcony and stepped off. Annie stepped in and looked around. She spotted her family and headed there.

“That’s a beautiful dress you have on, Annie,” Jane said.

“Thank-you Jane, you’re looking very pretty as well,” Annie said, admiring her sister.

“Mark is here,” Annie called impulsively. She turned around and looked at the entrance. Mark had just stepped out from the Corridors. He looked good in his new clothes.

“Who’s Mark?” the mother asked, as she spread butter on a slice of bread.

“Mark is a fellow student at the Academy. He’s the current VP of Education of the student council and is rather brilliant,” Jane said. “He also has excellent leadership skills.”

King Ravenswood took note of the last comment. He was always looking for new talent to manage civil projects. Running a country was exhausting work, and half the people he had to work with were idiots.

“Please call him here,” King Ravenswood said and watched a comedian run around on stage.

“I’ll get him,” Annie said and ran.

“Mark, daddy wants to talk to you, come on,” Annie said and dragged Mark by the hand.

Mark arrived at the table, placed his right hand across his chest and bowed. “How may I be of service to you, Your Majesty?”

King Ravenswood looked at the young man standing in front of him. He had short ruby red hair that was military short and piercing green eyes. He bore himself well, indicating good up-breathing. His height, form and moustache indicated that the boy was at least eighteen. This should be his graduating year at the academy.

Did he have the ability to handle the civic and military projects that couldn’t be started for lack of leadership?

“Jane told me that you serve as VP of Education for the student body,” King Ravenswood said.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I felt I could contribute to the school in my own humble way,” Mark said. He straightened out but kept his hand on his chest.

“Tell me of projects you helped manage,” King Ravenswood asked and took a sip of wine.

“In the summer break, before school started, I was doing work at an orphanage. They needed some help managing their books, since the last person had to be let go. At the same time, I tutored the students and did some necessary work at the place.

“Right now, I can only devote time during the weekend and an hour or two during the week. Do you wish to hear about other projects, Your Majesty?” Mark said and waited.

The waiting staff brought out soup.

“Why was the last person let go?” King Ravenswood asked.

“They found he was cooking the books. I don’t know what happened to him after that,” Mark replied.

The king looked as if he was arguing with himself. He couldn’t talk business outside of normal business hours, but he could find out more about this potential hire. “Please sit down and join us for dinner,” he said.

Annie looked as if she wanted to clap, but Mark gave her a silent warning.

“Waiter,” King Ravenswood called. The waiter came and the king asked for a chair. Less than a minute later, the chair came and was placed next to Annie. Mark sat and the waiter placed a setting in front of Mark. Moments later, soup was brought.

Mark looked at the soup and knew he wasn’t going to like the meal. He took a sip when the king asked the next question. “What do you do as the VP of Education?”

There was no question in Mark’s mind. He was in a lunch interview for a position the king needed filling.

Mark put down the spoon and spoke of his various duties. After that was done, Mark resumed eating his soup as quickly and politely as possible.

“What do you plan on doing once you graduate?” King Ravenswood asked.

Damn. Mark didn’t have an answer to that question. After all, he only just started schooling and he still had almost three years of school left before he graduated.

In a lunch interview, you’re not required to speak immediately. Mark finished the last of his soup, while thinking furiously.

“I haven’t fully decided my path in life, Your Majesty. The most important thing for me is being able to utilize my newly acquired wizard’s skills for my career. I have considered teaching, since I feel I’m good at that. However, my field is still very open,” Mark said and grabbed a piece of bread.

The waiter brought salad and refilled Mark’s coke.

“Have you considered a career in the military?” King Ravenswood asked.

“No, Your Majesty, that thought didn’t cross my mind,” Mark said. He looked at his plate, and wondered, w*hy are people obsessed with salad?* He didn’t like salad. He especially hated broccoli.

This was the perfect time to talk, since that gave him an excuse not touch the rabbit food in front of him.

Mark looked around the table. The king, queen and Jane were enjoying the salad, covered with blue cheese dressing and other expensive, but disgusting tasting things. Caviar should only be served as a form of punishment.

Mark looked at Annie. She definitely didn’t want to eat the salad. Thankfully, Mark had learnt a simple teleportation spell. It could only work for tiny objects and only for distances of less than a foot and others must not see it being done.

“I don’t know anything about the military,” Mark said and placed his napkin on his lap. He wiggled his fingers under the table and tiny pieces of salad disappeared from both his and Annie’s plate and landed on the napkin. “Do they require wizards there?”

“That’s a good girl, Annie. You must always finish your salad,” the mother said.

“I’m not surprised she finished it. This is good caviar,” the king said.

Annie stifled a laugh, because she knew what Mark had done. She couldn’t understand why adults fed salad to kids.

Mark gave the napkin to the waiter when the main dishes came.

“There is some unrest in some of the nearby kingdoms and we are looking for good people who can become officers. They also help when needed in civil emergencies,” the king said.

“You’ve been working with Jane for a week on the student body council, haven’t you? How is she doing?” the king asked.

Mark wasn’t sure how to answer that, and so focused on eating.

“You can be candid with me,” the king added.

“Your Majesty, I think your daughter has great potential as a leader. However, I feel she is very unsure about herself and her ability to lead others. I’m trying my best to help her. I’ve suggested some leadership training, but that will take some time to master,” Mark said. He turned to Jane. “That reminds me, Princess Jane. You should join a local toastmasters club. I was planning to join one myself once I settled down.”

“Where did you get your leadership training?” King Ravenswood asked.

Before Mark could answer, the queen said, “Please dear, let the poor boy eat in peace.”

“Thank-you for your concern, Your Majesty, but I’m glad to entertain you,” Mark replied.

Mark glanced at Annie and was happy to see that she was enjoying her food. “My parents were always pushing me to excel. They are amazing people, and I always try to be just like them,” Mark said.

“Didn’t they ascend just a few years ago?” Laura asked.

“That’s right. They became ascended beings at the young age of 435. They want me to beat that record,” Mark replied.

“I remember it mentioned years ago in the news that a wizard couple had ascended at an unusually young age. What were their names?” Queen Marjorie wondered.

“Baldwin and Susan Lucas, Your Majesty,” Mark said.

“I thought your last name was Draco,” Annie said abruptly.

“Draco is the clan name, Princess Annie. In our clan we have…I have no idea how many families. We all have different last names. Can you image the confusion if we all had the same last name?” Mark smiled at Annie.

“That was their names. They said that was a record age that hadn’t been broken for over 600 years,” Queen Marjorie said. “So you’re their son – it’s such a small world.”

Desert came and the empty plates were removed. The entertainment continued.

“Annie, you haven’t spoken all meal. How’s school life? By the way, where did you get that rose broach in your hair?” the queen asked.

“It’s pretty isn’t it?” Annie said. “My best friend gave it to me.”

“The one with the beautiful red hair,” the queen said. “Mark, are you by any chance related to a girl named Laura?”

“I do have a baby sister named Laura. She has the same hair color as me,” Mark said and glanced at Annie. Annie giggled.

“How come she’s not here?” the mother asked.

“I’m guessing because she’s too young, Your Majesty. I don’t see anyone younger than sixteen here,” Mark said.

“I am,” Annie said.

Mark turned to Annie and said, “You’re sixteen years old? Congratulations, Princess Annie.”

“No, I am not sixteen,” Annie said, slightly annoyed. “Oh, never mind,” she said.

Hammer returned to central stage. “Your Highnesses, Princesses, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for the main event, the event everyone has come here for.”

Hammer paused for dramatic effect. “Every year, dozens of our children enter wizard’s school. It is a coming of age for us. As such, we celebrate it with our families and friends.

“Without further adieu, I would like all our sixteen year olds to come up on stage and present themselves.” Hammer applauded. Everyone followed suit.

A stepped platform arose from the stage as the applause continued.

Mark got up immediately. The king looked at Mark in surprise but didn’t say anything. Mark walked towards the stage, but people kept getting in the way.

First year students filed onto stage and a woman directed the first students to stand on the top most step of the platform. Soon enough, the top step got filled, then the next lower step.

Finally all steps were filled. Mark, being the last to step onto the stage, had nowhere to go.

“Oh, my,” Hammer said. “We don’t have enough space. Son, please stand front and center of everyone.”

Mark, face bright red with embarrassment, did as instructed. He didn’t like being singled out just for being late on stage.

“Your Majesties, if you would, I would like your daughter Princess Jane to come and keep the red-faced boy company. Did I say red face? I meant red hair,” Hammer said. Everyone laughed. Mark’s face got redder.

“Since Princess Jane is also a first-year student, I thought it would be appropriate,” Hammer continued.

Jane jot up and headed to the stage.

“I’d hate to leave Princess Annie out, since she looks so beautiful in that dress and with that ruby rose in her hair,” Hammer continued.

Annie happily got up and walked forward. Indeed, she was feeling left out.

“Princess Jane, would you please stand to the right of Markus,” Hammer said and pointed where to stand. Jane did as instructed.

Annie stepped on stage. “Princess Annie, would you please stand to the left of Markus,” Hammer continued. Annie stood next to Mark and smiled at her parents. They in turn smiled back at her.

“Now that all the honorees have been assembled, it’s time to call out the heads of our clan,” Hammer said.

“Your Majesties, Princesses, clan members, please let me introduce Lord Draco and Lady Lilith, our first parents.” Hammer clapped and everyone followed.

A bearded, grey-haired man in his late sixties and a beautiful woman in her early twenties stepped on stage. The man looked like God, as painted on the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The woman looked like an attractive dancer from one of the bible stories.

Lord Draco spoke. “Children of the clan of Draco, you have taken the first step in becoming full-fledged members of our clan.”

Lady Lilith continued. “Magic isn’t about doing cool things, like flying. It’s about transforming ourselves into better versions of ourselves.”

Lord Draco followed. “Our motto is, learn through doing, learn through experience, become all that you can be.”

Back to Lady Lilith, “Princess Jane, you may not be my children, but I think we are related in our love for magic and our love for life.”

“The initiation is a ceremony that takes us beyond our physical selves, and into a world beyond anything you can possibly imagine. It is a secret that sadly, few people in the outside world fully appreciate,” Lord Draco said.

Back to Lady Lilith, “The initiation is about life and the joy of living. It’s about growing and exploring and new discovery.”

Both spoke in turn for over an hour. Annie listened raptly, feeling that the First Parents were speaking directly to her, and including her as one of their children.

Lady Lilith said, “Princess Jane, children, in our clan, we are officially recognized as adults when we become Junior Sorcerers. Why is that?”

Lord Draco answered. “It’s because this allows us to go beyond our initial biology. We extend our lives into a whole new world.”

Annie gazed at the First Parents with a mixture of awe and wonder. There was something radiating from them that was beyond description.

The overwhelming presence of the First Parents was giving her a high that was beyond words to describe. She felt they loved her completely and utterly.

Annie fully understood why there was no one under the age of sixteen in the room. Anyone under that age would want to take the initiation right then and there. She herself wanted to beg for permission to perform the ceremony now.

The First Parents stopped speaking. Annie felt as if she would explode if she didn’t do something. She ran to the First Parents and gave one of them a hug and then the other.

“I love you First Parents,” she screamed aloud.

The two looked at her with both love and sadness. *We love you too, little one*, the First Parents said in unison in her mind.

Back in the audience, the king tried to get up and stop Annie’s embarrassing behavior, but something prevented him.

“Let’s give a big applause to our First Parents. Their love for us is always overwhelming,” Hammer said and clapped. Everyone got up, clapped and shouted hysterically.

The First Parents disappeared from view.

Jane got off the stage and returned to her chair. She and her parents were escorted to another location where more entertainment was prepared.

Annie ran to Mark. He was standing behind the stepped platform, away from view of Jane, the king and the queen, as they left the room.

“Aren’t the First Parents incredible?” Annie said. “I wish I could take the Initiation now.”

Annie raised her hands to Mark and he picked her up and carried her in his arms. Annie wrapped her legs around Mark’s waist and her hands around Mark’s neck and hugged him as tightly as she could. He returned the favor. He could feel Annie trembling with excitement.

“I know the feeling. I remember back when I was eight years old. I heard some of the grownups talk about this event. “I was curious, so I snuck in. I hid behind the stepped platform while the First Parents gave their speech.

“They knew I was there and they loved me for coming. I resolved right there and then that I need to be a wizard too,” Mark said. “I think some of the first-years are a little jealous of you, since you got the privilege of hugging our First Parents. I know, since I felt a little jealous as well.”

Annie grabbed Mark’s face in both hands and planted a kiss on his lips. She then covered the rest of his face with kisses.

After an intense kissing frenzy, Mark said, “Your body isn’t shaking as much.”

Annie nodded, “I’m calming down a bit, but I don’t think I will be able to sleep tonight.”

“I know what you mean,” Mark replied.

Mark looked around. “I wonder what your parents are doing. I have a feeling that the elders will prevent them from bothering with us as long as we stay here. I wonder where they went.”

Annie rested her head on Mark’s shoulder and Mark heard Annie’s heart. Annie straightened up and said, “I didn’t know your name was Markus.”

“I’m not sure why my parents named me that. It makes it sound as if I’m a Roman gladiator or something,” Mark said. “Are you ready to go back?”

“I don’t want to go back. I want to stay here forever,” Annie pouted.

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible,” a voice said from behind.

Annie turned and discovered a portly, middle aged man with pink hair and twinkling blue-green eyes looking at her. The hair was over two feet long and tied in a ponytail. He was wearing flamboyant colors and was the perfect example of a hippy.

“Hi Annie, I’m Author, Mark’s Uncle,” the man said. “I’m surprised to see you here, but I guess that’s only because you’re Mark’s girlfriend.”

Uncle Author laughed when Mark blushed. Annie winched at the strident sound. “Mark, I didn’t know you went for younger girls.” Uncle Author laughed again.

“Hi Uncle Albert,” Annie said when the laughing died down. “Our First Parents spoke to me. Aren’t they incredible?”

“I think so. Then again, all Dracos think so. They are the glue that binds us all together,” Uncle Author said. “Annie, I know you would like to spend the rest of your life in Mark’s hands, but that will have to wait. We need to return to your parents and pretend we are strangers.”

“Do we have to?” Annie asked.

“There is a huge gap that separates us Dracos from them,” Uncle Author said. “It’s going to take a lot of time and effort to bridge that gap. It won’t be easy, but I know you can do it.”

“All right,” Annie said reluctantly.

“What’s going on you two,” a voice spoke.

“Anna Cortes,” Annie cried and clapped her hands. “I’m one of your biggest fans. Thank you for sending me those dolls.” Mark positioned himself so that Annie could easily see Anna.

“You’re quite welcome Princess Annie. Albert asked me to send them,” Anna said and smiled at her.

“Annie, I have a little surprise for you. Anna and I are getting married,” Uncle Author said.

“I know,” Annie said. “Mark told me this morning.”

“The wedding will be in about two months. We’ll think up an excuse to invite you that your parents will believe,” Uncle Albert said.

“Mark, how come you’re carrying Princess Annie?” Anna Cortes asked.

“Why are you being so formal? We are all Dracos, aren’t we? You, because you’re marrying Uncle Author, and me because our First Parents adopted me,” Annie said.

Without warning, Annie began wiggling, shaking her head and clapping. “Yah,” she screamed hysterically.

“Calm yourself Annie or you’ll explode,” Mark said and hugged her as tightly as he could.

Uncle Author looked at Annie and said, “Now I see why children aren’t allowed direct contact with the First Parents. Annie is the first person I know who was given this privilege.”

“That’s not true,” Annie said while resting her head on Mark’s shoulder. “Mark said he sneaked in when he was eight and heard the First Parents talk about the Initiation.”

“Is that true Mark?” Uncle Albert asked.

“I heard the grownups talk about the Initiation celebration and was curious,” Mark said. “The First Parents knew I was standing behind the stage and they welcomed me. I felt then what Annie is feeling now.”

Mark turned to Anna. “Aunty Anna, how was it for you?” At this, Annie got up and turned to Anna.

“You’re right; it was the most incredible experience in my life. I only wish this idiot had proposed to me sooner,” Anna said and hit Uncle Author’s arm with the back of her hand.

Someone stepped up to them and spoke. “I hate to interrupt this touchy-feely event but Annie’s parents are looking for her. They think it’s time for her to go to bed.”

“Thanks,” Author said. “Please tell them we’ll be there in five minutes. By the way, where are they?”

“They are in the Rocco Reception Hall,” the man said.

“We can’t go there. Annie doesn’t like the Corridors,” Mark said.

“I don’t mind now,” Annie replied.

The man left. They followed after him. This time, Annie didn’t get bothered by the corridors.

Mark put Annie down at the doors and everyone stepped through. Annie’s parents were talking to some important business leaders.

“Mummy, daddy, Sister Jane, weren’t the First Parents incredible?” Annie burst out.

“What do you think you were doing hugging those people? I was so embarrassed,” the mother scolded Annie.

“Your Majesties,” Uncle Author said. “I don’t know if this is good news or bad news, but Lord Draco and Lady Lilith have chosen to adopt Princess Annie. What this means is that she has access to the resources of Draco.”

Uncle Author looked at the queen. “Princess Annie’s rose is beautiful, isn’t it? We have treasures other than that that Princess Annie has access to.”

Uncle Author looked at the king. “We are now allowed to offer you the types of assistance we can’t offer any other government or organization. This is only because of Princess Annie. You understand what I mean, don’t you?”

Uncle Author continued, “Your daughter is still your own. She will still live her life as before. We will not interfere with the free will of others. Other than access to additional resources, nothing has changed.”

“Why would they want to adopt my daughter?” the mother asked.

“I assure you, I have no idea,” Uncle Albert said.

“What about Jane?” the mother asked.

Uncle Author turned to Jane. “Princess Jane, did the First Parents speak to you?”

“No, they said nothing. They only gave that…speech,” Jane said, making sure she didn’t say anything insulting. She found the event rather boring. She only enjoyed the entertainment.

“I’m sorry Your Highness, but…” Uncle Author trailed off.

“If we choose not to accept this offer,” the king asked.

“You don’t have to do anything. We will continue our business relationships with you as before and won’t say anything about this.”

Still not satisfies, the king asked. “What is required of us?”

“Nothing at all,” Uncle Author replied. “We are offering this to Annie…Princess Annie because we like her. We don’t expect anything you don’t want to give of your own free will.”

“I’ll think about it,” the king said.

“Shall I escort you to your rooms now, Your Highnesses?” Uncle Author asked.

Uncle Albert stepped to the doors and opened them. The king, queen, and Laura followed. All three looked sleepy.

Annie took hold of Mark’s hand and they followed.

Annie felt very little fear or discomfort as the dimensions destabilized around her.

They stepped into the guest house and walked into Suite #1.

Mark gave the royal family his formal bow. “Good night, Your Majesties, it was a pleasure talking to you during the meal. Good night Princess Jane, see you Monday night at the council hall. Good night Princess Annie. My sister said she had fun playing with you.”

“Give your sister this for me,” Annie said and hugged Mark. She stepped away and Mark stepped out the door.

The door closed and Mark gave a deep sigh.

“What’s the matter Mark, you look Depressed?” Anna asked.

“I just realized something. The only non-aunt to like me for me is a little girl. I can see it now. I’m old and gray, entirely covered with wrinkles and age spots. I come up to a sixteen-year-old girl and say, ‘Hello little girl, would you like some candy?’”

Mark demonstrated by hunching over and pretended to be a decrepit old man with a cane.

Mark continued his skit. “The girl says, ‘I’m sorry little boy, but you’re too young for me. Come back when you’re no longer in diapers.”

A tear rolled down Mark’s face.

“I’d like some candy, you dirty old man,” a sexy voice spoke from behind. A woman hugged him from the back and kissed him on the neck. She was a beautiful sixteen-year-old blond with a sexy body.

Mark turned around and gave the girl a hug. He snuggled his face against her neck. “Hi Aunty,” he said.

“Come on, let’s go home,” the aunt said.

The aunt led the way, with arm around Mark’s waste. Uncle Author wrapped his arm around Anna and they followed.

As they walked, the woman introduced herself, “Hi Anna, I’m Flowing Waters. Please call me Flo. I’m both Mark’s father’s and your hippie boyfriend’s older sister.”

They stepped into Flo’s home. “How come you look younger than Author?” Anna asked.

“That’s because my baby brother likes looking like a middle-aged hippie,” Flo said and tossed her shoes to the side. “I’m dressed like this because I want to comfort Mark.”

“I took over guardianship of Mark when his parents ascended,” Flo explained and sat on a reclining couch.

“Mark, come here and sit on my lap,” Flo said and Mark did as instructed. He cuddled with her and buried his face in her neck again.

Author removed Mark’s shoes and socks and sat beside Anna on the couch.

Everyone could hear Mark breathing heavily in the silence of the room as he drifted towards sleep.

“I don’t understand Mark,” Anna said. “He has the physical appearance of an eighteen year old boy at least. I know he’s sixteen, since he just did the Initiation. Yet when I’m with him, I feel I’m with a sweet lovable child who has just turned ten.”

“I love you, Aunty Flo,” Mark mumbled and his breathing slowed down.

Just then, Mark’s appearance wavered. Anna blinked, and found herself looking at the cutest little boy she had ever seen, with unbelievably long ruby-red hair.

The fact he was dressed in over-sized clothes made him look even cuter. “Oh – my – God, he’s so cute,” Anna said. “I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

Flo and Author looked sadly at Mark. “I believe Mark’s body stopped growing just around when he turned ten,” Flo said. She turned to Author and said. “Author, please help me undress Mark.”

“Why are you undressing him?” Anna Asked.

“I’m preparing him for bed,” Flo replied.

Flo lifted Mark off her lap and his pants and underwear fell down. Author removed them and Flo sat Mark down again. Mark continued sleeping. Next, uncle and aunt removed his shirt. That done, Flo adjusted Mark on her lap and rubbed his chest.

Flo looked at Anna. “Don’t worry; he won’t wake up…For some reason, he can only fall asleep if he’s in a girl’s arms or if he’s holding his teddy bear. I always sleep with him when I visit him, because I know that makes him happy. Unfortunately, I have such a busy schedule that I can only visit him once a month.”

“I don’t understand,” Anna said. She felt embarrassed by Mark’s nudity, as well as how Flo was holding him. She was also feeling sorry for him.

Just then, Mark’s body twitched. “No mama, I don’t want to go back. Please don’t send me back to the Garden. I’ll be a good boy,” Mark mumbled in his sleep.

Anna couldn’t take it anymore. She sobbed uncontrollably. Author hugged her and tried to comfort her.

“I might as well start at the beginning. You need to know this,” Flo said. “We raise our children in a special area on the Tree of Life. It’s called the Garden of Eden. Children leave the Garden when they turn twelve.

“Mark grew up in the Garden surrounded with caretakers and friends. Then something happened, we don’t know what. As I mentioned, Mark stopped growing when he reached ten.

“As you can imagine, all his friends left him behind. No one wanted to play with him. His former friends left the Garden when they turned twelve. He, on the other hand, stayed.

“For one whole year, he stayed in the garden beyond the time he should have left. After begging his caretakers, they finally allowed him to leave.” Flo kissed Mark on the forehead and continued her story.

“Shortly after that, his appearance began changing. Physically, he looked more mature than anyone else. At age fifteen, he got the moustache he’s so proud of.

“Unfortunately, his appearance is the product of his sub-conscious mind. When he sleeps, his sub-conscious mind relaxes and his true form is revealed.

“He moved to a school in Washington, and thankfully, made a friend. His name is Harry Banks. I think that Harry secretly always wanted a baby brother, and so adopted Mark, for which I’m eternally grateful. We have someone who can look after Mark, without Mark feeling self-conscious.”

Anna could say nothing. She just nodded and tried to wipe her face.

“My heart breaks to see how much effort Mark puts into trying to be grownup,” Flo continued. “He has studied more, trained more, than most people twice his age. Right now he’s trying to get a girlfriend because his best friend has a girlfriend.”

“He should be in the Guinness Book of World Records for the number of times he asked out and was rejected by woman,” Author said.

“Would you like to carry Mark?” Flo said. “I think he will be happy to be in the arms of a new girl.”

Author got up and picked Mark up. Anna stood up and Author placed Mark in Anna’s arms. Mark wrapped his legs around Anna’s waste and his arms around her neck. He snuggled is face against her neck. “I love you, Aunty Anna,” he said and continued sleeping.

“I love you too, sweaty,” Anna mumbled and rubbed his silky smooth back.

“Last week, Mark’s father, Baldwin contacted me. He asked me to buy Mark a set of clothes from *Pilchards and Sons* for the Initiation celebration. For some reason, it was going to be a formal event with the king and queen of Washington attending.

“When we came to my place, Baldwin once again contacted me. He said to get Mark dressed in the new clothes and send Mark to the landing platform of the Gate House to greet a cute visitor.

“The next I saw him, Mark was sitting with the king and queen. That was a surprise, Ha.” Author said. Mark flinched, but kept sleeping.

“Sorry,” Author covered his mouth and whispered in embarrassment.

Flo said to Anna, “A lot of people are upset that outsiders were invited to this sacred event. No one knows why this has happened. Sometimes the Elders can be a little too tight-lipped.”

“I have a feeling this was all for the benefit of Annie…Princess Annie. Did you notice how they got Mark to stand between the two princesses? I don’t think their Majesties or Mark knew that it was set up,” Author said. “After the event, I found Annie in the arms of Mark. You should have felt the love between them. It was beautiful.”

Author whipped a pretend tear from his eye. “I remember speaking to Annie on the phone. I was joking to her that she was Mark’s girlfriend. I can’t believe that was the truth. Ha-ha.”

Again Mark jerked his body and again Author had to apologize.

“I’m convinced that the Elders have chosen Annie to be Mark’s wife,” Author said.

Author turned to Flo and said, “I talked to the king and queen and told them that our First Parents have decided to adopt Annie for some unknown reason. I think they were fooled.”

“Anna, as far as I know, there are only two ways to become a Draco. The first is to be born into our family,” Flo said to Anna. “The second is to marry into the family, like you did, or will do shortly.”

“You said Mark is stuck at the age of ten forever. How can he marry…Oh – my – god,” Anna said in shock and covered her mouth with a free hand.

Author nodded. “Annie is destined for the same fate as Mark. She will be stuck as a ten-year-old forever. If Mark were to find out, he would do everything in his power to stop it.”

Just then Mark spoke. “You smell nice, Aunty Anna.” He kissed her neck and continued sleeping.

Just then, the unfairness of it all got to Anna. The Elders were responsible for all the suffering that Mark has gone through and all the suffering Annie will eventually go through. For what reason, only the Elders knew.

“That’s horrible,” Anna screamed aloud, right in Mark’s ear.

Mark jerked upright. His body reverted to teenage form but his weight remained the same.

Mark looked around, confused. One minute he was cuddling in Aunty Flo’s arms and the next he was in Aunty Anna’s arms.

Mark quickly regained his composure, and smiled down at Anna. “Aunty Anna, have you been doing naughty things to me?” He rested his hands on Anna’s shoulders. “You know your husband will get jealous if you fool around with another man.”

Anna burst out crying. “Are you okay Aunty? I’m sorry if I hurt you,” Mark said in a worried tone and wiped a tear form Anna’s face.

“They’re all horrible,” Anna screamed. She lowered Mark’s feather-light body to the ground and ran into the Corridors. Author hesitated for a moment and then followed.

Mark realized something adult had just happened and knew not to comment. He just stood there and waited.

“Mark, go to bed. You had a very long day. Remember to brush your teeth,” Flo said.

“Yes Aunty,” Mark said and headed for the washroom.

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As expected, Annie couldn’t sleep. She sat on the bed and played with her dolls.

“Hello Mr. Dragon, did you have fun today?” Anna spoke for the princess.

“Yes Princess Annie, I loved playing hide-and-seek with you,” the dragon replied.

“Annie, please go back to sleep,” the mother called. “It’s 2:00 AM.”

“Okay mum,” Annie said. She looked at the rose sitting on the table, turned off the lights and lay in bed. She reviewed the events of the day. In due course, the room brightened as the rays of the sun entered.

A thought occurred to her. How come there was a sun orbiting this island, when there was none when they approached?

Finally Annie felt sleepy, when it was almost time to get up. She barely closed her eyes when her mother called. “Annie, it’s almost 10:00 AM. Get up and have some breakfast.”

Annie closed her eyed and pretended she didn’t hear that. Unfortunately, her mother was too annoying to ignore.

Annie got up, went to the bathroom, brushed her teeth and took a shower.

She stepped into the living room and found her father, mother, and Jane sitting down and looking at the news.

“Young lady, what do you think you’re doing? Aren’t you forgetting something?” the mother scolded her.

Annie was confused. “I took a bath and brushed my teeth,” she said.

“What about your clothes?” the mother scolded.

Annie looked down and realized that she was naked. “Oops,” Annie said and returned to her room.

Annie quickly dressed and returned to the living room. “Princess Annie, Breakfast is ready,” a woman called from the kitchen.

Anna entered the kitchen and saw the woman. She made sure that she was alone, hugged the woman, and smiled at her.

The woman smiled back at her and whispered, “Good morning Annie. Finish your breakfast before it gets cold.”

“Yes Aunty,” Anna said and did as instructed.

As she was eating, she saw two other women come and take their luggage away.

“Are you finished dear? It’s time to go,” the mother called.

“Yes mum,” Annie called. She hugged the woman in the kitchen one more time and left the kitchen.

Adam was there, waiting to take the family away.

Annie ran to Adam, but he stopped her with a formal bow. “Good morning Princess Annie. I hope you slept well.”

Adam turned to the rest of the family and said, “Are you ready to go? Everything should be packed now.”

“Thank you for your hospitality. The entertainment was excellent,” the king said.

Adam opened the door and waited for everyone. Annie went to the front and stood next to Adam. Adam stepped out and everyone followed.

They walked through several corridors and arrived at the Gate House lobby.

Mark, Uncle Author, Anna, and a woman Annie never saw before greeted them.

Adam turned to the king. “Your majesties, Mark will fly you back home…”

The king interrupted Adam. “Isn’t he a little young…”

“I’m sixteen,” Mark said angrily.

“Markus Lucas Draco, calm yourself down,” Uncle Albert scolded Mark.

Uncle Albert turned to the king and apologized. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty, but Mark is very sensitive about his age.”

The king looked at Mark in shock. “He’s sixteen? I thought he was eighteen.”

A huge grin broke across Mark’s face. He couldn’t help it, he was so happy. He ran to the king and gave him a big hug, “Thank you dad.”

Mark pause, realizing what he had just done. Mark stepped back, made a fist with his left hand and placed it against the flat of his right palm. The arms were horizontal to the floor. Mark bowed. “Please forgive, Your Majesty. I don’t know what came over me.”

The king seemed a little confused. He wasn’t used to being hugged. He was also not used to people not fearing him.

“It’s that moustache, isn’t it daddy?” Annie asked, giggling.

“Yes dear,” the king said, regaining his senses. “I didn’t know a sixteen-year-old could grow one like that.”

High praise indeed! Mark gave the king the Draco bow. “I assure you, Majesty, that I’ll do everything in my power to keep your two daughters, as well as your beautiful wife, safe.”

“Mark started flying when he was your daughter’s age. He took his first solo flight through the Sea at the age of fourteen. He has a commercial flying license, and can fly all our military vehicles we sell,” Uncle Albert said, proudly. “He’s crazy about flying.”

It’s all about freedom, Mark thought to himself.

King Ravenswood nodded. “I’m impressed. Very well then, I shall trust in your judgment.”

“Thank-you for your faith in my nephew,” Uncle Albert said and bowed. “Have an uneventful trip home, Your Majesties, Princesses, Mark.”

They stepped onto the landing area. There in front of them was the promised chariot. It was painted in the royal colors of purple and blue.

The side of the chariot had the name, *Princess Annie*, written in large letters. Beside it was the royal insignia.

“As promised, here is the *Princess Annie*,” Adam said.

“Cool, that’s named after me,” Annie said and clapped.

The king looked at the present and wondered once again what their angle was. A thought occurred. They mentioned that Annie had a unique ability that only one other person had. Maybe they wanted that talent. The king was finally satisfied, convinced he understood the situation.

Annie pressed a panel and the door opened. Her family stepped in.

“See you later Uncle Author, Aunty Flo, Aunty Anna,” Mark said and hugged them.

Mark and Annie stepped in and Annie pressed a button. The door closed. Fear gripped Mark. He was transporting royalty. The only ones he had transported before were uncles and aunts.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen, I shall be our hostess for this flight. Pleas follow me to your seats,” Anna said and led the way.

Annie stopped at some presidential style seats and said, “Please have a seat as we entertain you with an in-flight movie.”

“Thank you stewardess Annie,” Jane said.

“If you’ll excuse me, I shall navigate this ship back home,” Annie said and bowed. She turned to Mark and said, “Let’s go captain. It’s time we left this rock.”

Mark smiled and went forward. Annie followed.

They stepped into the next compartment and closed the door. Two compartments later, and they were in the cockpit. Mark dropped off his backpack in a cargo storage bay and sat down in the pilot’s chair.

Annie sat in the co-pilot’s chair and said ‘Home’. The compass appeared.

Annie looked at Mark. He looked terrified. “What’s the matter, Mark?” Annie asked.

“I’ve never transported such important people in my entire life. I’m a little nervous,” Mark said.

“They’re only my parents and sister,” Annie said.

“That alone makes them important. They are also the king and queen of an entire country.” Mark closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. “Please mum and dad, let everything go well.”

Mark opened his eyes, took a deep breath, and did an instrument check. Seeing that all was in order, Mark started the engines. The craft rose gently from the platform.

Mark oriented the craft in the direction pointed by the compass and they moved forward.

Mark focused all his attention on the instruments and the feeling in his guts. He carefully guided the craft around as many unstable areas as he could find, trying to make the trip as smooth as possible.

Annie looked at Mark. “Calm down Mark, you’re making me nervous.”

Turbulence buffeted the chariot. “Tig-poo,” Mark cursed.

“Tig-poo?” Annie asked.

“Tiger Poo,” Mark said. “Don’t tell your dad I thought you that word.”

They continued. Ten minutes passed.

Annie tried to distract Mark. “Mark, you looked really cute in your long hair, just like a little girl.”

Mark frowned at her and said, “Thanks a lot.”

Annie giggled, realizing that boys don’t like to be told that.

They continued flying. Finally, they burst out of the Sea of Chaos and into a sunny day. Mark gave a sigh of relief. That felt like the longest trip in his life. They continued flying.

Soon they landed at the front gate of the palace grounds. Mark waited as a guard approached. “I’m transporting Their Majesties,” he called. “I don’t know where to park to let them off.”

The guard spoke to someone on a walkie-talkie. That someone said that everything was in order. Seconds later, the palace doors opened wide enough for the chariot to enter.

“Let me on, and I’ll guide you,” the guard said.

He got on and looked at Mark in surprise. “Aren’t you a little…”

“Don’t say it,” Annie warned.

The guard turned and looked in surprise at Annie. “Princess Annie,” he said under his breath.

“Move forward, then left, and then right…stop there,” the guard said.

“I’ll need you to tell me where to park this vehicle,” Mark said.

“I know where to go, I’ll show you,” Annie said.

“If you’ll excuse me,” the guard said and left.

Both Mark and Annie walked back to the passengers. “Thank-you for flying Air Annie,” Mark said. “I hope you had a comfortable flight. Princess Annie said she will show me where to park the chariot, if that’s okay with you.”

The king nodded. The royal passengers got off. “See you at the council room tomorrow,” Jane said and waved.

“Okay,” Mark said and waved back.

Seconds later, staff entered the chariot. Mark showed them where the luggage was stored. They got off and Annie closed the door. They both went forward to the cockpit. Annie directed where to go.

“I wish I could fly. It looks like fun,” Annie said.

“I doubt your parents would allow it. The only reason my parents allowed me to learn was because they are kind of strange. Then again, all Dracos are strange. As Uncle Albert likes saying, ‘to be a Draco is to be strange’.”

Mark entered the royal hangers and parked in an empty spot. He shut off the engines and powered off the plane. He pocketed the keys.

Mark slumped all the way down in the chair, exhausted. “Man, I haven’t been that scared in all my life. I think I almost peed my pants when that turbulence hit.”

Mark turned and looked at Annie. “That was some excellent navigating. I think I shall hire you permanently.”

Mark got up and placed his backpack on.

Mark stepped out of the plane and Annie followed. Mark locked the chariot and handed the keys to Annie. They headed back to the palace.

“How do I become strange?” Annie asked.

Mark thought about that for a few moments. “Let’s see now. You could start by watching some immersive novels,” Mark said, speaking slowly.

“I would recommend watching the immersive novel, the Air and Me. It’s about a woman named Amelia Earhart.

“She comes from an alternate reality very similar to our own world. In their world, there is no magic. It seems the secret of the initiation was never made public.

“In that world, Washington is just a…what they call a state in a mega-country country called the United States. Also, there are no kings or royalty…”

“A world without royalty, that’s impossible,” Annie laughed.

“It’s true. They elect a person they hope will do a good job running the country…Coming back to Amelia Earhart; she was a pioneer of aviation in her world and famous for many reasons.” Mark said. “One day she accidently flew into the Sea of Chaos…”

“How could anyone accidently fly into the Sea of Chaos?” Annie asked.

They stopped in front of the palace.

“In that reality, the Sea is almost non-existent. It appeared rarely and so most people didn’t believe it existed,” Mark replied. “She was flying near the tiny country of Bermuda when the Sea opened up around her. She fell in. An hour later, she appeared in our world.

“See you later Annie,” Mark said.

“Have you ever been to that world?” Annie asked.

“Twice, with my parents,” Mark said. “I didn’t like their world. I found it lacked color and vitality…Did you know only humans could talk there? They don’t believe in magical creatures and so magical creatures don’t visit.

“Everyone has drab looking hair and eye color. For instance, you won’t find beautiful eyes such as your own there, or even hair like your own. Come to think of it, I doubt that your particular shade of pink even exists in that world. I’m very glad to be born in this world with its magic.

“See you later Annie,” mark said.

“Okay Mark,” Annie said and hugged him. She ran up the stairs and into the palace.

Mark walked away, feeling slightly depressed. He needed a girl. The only way to do that was to become more like an adult, more like Harry.

That was for later. Now he had to go eat and maybe gain some weight. Seventy-three pounds was too little for a 6”2’ man.

Mark opened a physics book he just bought, entitled, *the* *Dimensional Flow of Matter*. It appeared in the second screen in his head. He read while walking.

Just then Adam emailed Mark information on the *Princess Annie*. It included technical information, as well as the users’ manual.

Mark sighed. That was just two more books in his backlog of books he needed to read.

Speaking of work, he still had his volunteer job at the orphanage to do, and then there was wand practice.

Mark chuckled humorlessly – wand practice without a wand wasn’t fun.

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“Hello Mrs. Windermere, hello kids,” Mark called out as he greeted the residents of the local orphanage he did volunteer work for.

Some of the kids, notably the younger ones, came and greeted him.

“Hello Mark,” Mrs. Windermere called from the kitchen. She was cooking something. “You didn’t have to come today. Aren’t you tired from moving yesterday?”

“I didn’t do any moving. That was just an excuse to get me to go to the island…Dragonia. It seems they were having a party for us first year students who just went through their initiation ceremony. The clan heads were there as well and made a speech,” Mark said.

“Listen up everyone,” Mark called aloud. “You’re not got going to believe who my uncle is going to marry.”

“Anna Cortes,” a girl with purple ponytails and green eyes said.

That surprised Mark. *How did you…*, Mark thought, but spoke aloud, “You’re very smart Josephine. How did you know?”

“They said on the news that she was going to marry someone from the Draco clan,” Josephine said.

“Well Josephine, just for being smart, I’m going to invite you to the wedding,” Mark said.

Josephine said, “Woo-Hoo,” and clapped her hands.

“Okay everyone else, which of you is smart?” Mark called out.

All the little kids put up their hands and jumped around. The older kids were more laid back.

“In that case, I shall invite everyone,” Mark announced. “Everyone is going to a celebrity wedding.”

Everyone started running around, jumping and screaming.

Mark looked at Mrs. Windermere. “I suppose I should have asked you first before inviting everyone. You’re of course coming. With the kids, that makes fifteen people.”

“Please dear, you shouldn’t have. Such high-floating events aren’t for the likes of us,” Mrs. Windermere complained.

“No problem, Mrs. Windermere,” Mark said, already composing an email to his uncle with the list of people to invite. In less than a minute he completed it, but did not send it. Instead, he called his uncle.

“Hello Uncle Author,” Mark said and placed his phone on speaker mode.

“Hello Mark, always good to hear you,” Uncle Author shouted so loudly, the sound became distorted. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m at the orphanage where…” Mark started.

“And you wanted to invite some of your friends. No problem. Just send me the names and I’ll give them official invitations. That reminds me, do they have anything to wear? No problem, I’ll think of something,” Uncle Albert said.

Mark pressed the send button and the email was on its way. “Okay everyone, say thank-you Uncle Author.”

Almost in unison everyone screamed, “Thank-you Uncle Author.”

“You’re quite welcome, kids. I always love making kids happy. Bye,” Uncle Albert said and hung up.

“Okay kids, it’s time to play. What games do you want to play?” Mark called out.

As expected, everyone wanted to play a different game. Also as expected, everyone was overly hyper because of the invitation and promised clothes.

“Mark, you did your Initiation. Can you do any magic?” eight year old Brad asked.

“Yes,” Susan called. Others agreed as well.

“Okay kids, I only know the spells. That’s not surprising since I only started last week,” Mark said. “The first spell is teleportation. I shall make this coin disappear and reappear in Susan’s pant pocket.”

Mark covered the coin with one hand and made a throwing motion with his other hand. “Ala Ka Zam,” mark said.

Susan checked her pocked, and sure enough it was there. “That wasn’t wizardry,” Benjamin said. “That was just a magic trick.”

“Then how do you explain the coin in your hair,” Mark said.

“I don’t have a coin in…” Benjamin started, but then felt his hair. Sure enough, there was the coin.

Bark had to do the trick for the other kids. Finally they wanted the second trick. Mark went to the kitchen and brought back a glass of dirty water. He waved his hands over the water and spoke the magic words. The dirt disappeared from the water and Mark drank it.

“Okay kids, this is my third and final trick,” Mark said. He placed a bottle cap on the table and cast the spell. The bottle cap zoomed and hit a vase. The vase fell down and spilled water everywhere.

“Sorry Mrs. Windermere, I didn’t expect that to happen,” Mark said and ran to get a towel. He returned and cleaned up the mess. Fortunately there was no harm done. “The last time I tried that spell, the bottle cap barely moved.” Perhaps it was the group of kids expecting something to happen. The power of belief is the greatest tool in the arsenal of a wizard.

“It’s quite all right dear, we all make mistakes,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“I’m going to exercise them more, and then tell them some stories after dinner, unless you need me to something else,” Mark called.

“Okay dear,” Mrs. Windermere replied.

They continued playing.

“For a ten year old boy you’re quite cool,” twelve year old Billy said.

“That’s because I have a cool moustache,” Mark replied. For some reason, it didn’t bother Mark if a child called him a brat.

“Okay everyone, it’s time to wash up for dinner,” Mrs. Windermere called. They all did as instructed. Mark went to help set the table.

“What’s planned for the evening?” Mark asked.

“I want them to do some studying,” Mrs. Windermere replied.

“I’ll finish some of the chores on the to-do list. By the way, your cooking is always incredible. I can’t wait to eat,” Mark said and went to wash up.

As expected, the food was delicious.

Dishes put away, Mark headed started on the chores. He loved working with children because it made him feel manly. It was a man’s duty to care for children.

Soon enough the chores were finished. He headed to the laundry room. Mrs. Windermere was doing laundry. For reasons unknown to Mark, there was always laundry to do. It was like magic.

Mark only bothered to wash his clothes every two to three weeks.

“I guess I should be going Mrs. Windermere. I need to practice my magic,” Mark said.

“Thank you for everything dear. I don’t know how to repay you for all the things you do for me,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“I work by the hour, Mrs. Windermere. I expect one hug an hour and two on Sundays,” Mark replied.

“Here you go,” Mrs. Windermere said and hugged Mark. “I wish I could give you more.”

“You can always make love to me,” Mark whispered in Mrs. Windermere’s ear in the sexiest voice he could muster.

Mrs. Windermere chuckled. “No I mean it.”

“I mean it too. I want to make love to you,” Mark said in his huskiest voice.

“You’re a sweet boy,” Mrs. Windermere said.

Mark pulled back and replied in a pained voice. “Please don’t call me sweet. If you want to thank me, tell me I’m manly. Just, don’t, call me sweet.”

Mrs. Windermere seemed unsure of what to say. She knew she had badly hurt his feelings.

“I’ll go to the ends of the world for you, do anything for you, I’ll even donate my left kidney. I only ask that you treat me like a man,” Mark whimpered.

“I’m sorry dear. You really are the most mature person I know. You are helpful, loving, caring, generous,” Mrs. Windermere replied. “You’re more manly than most men I’ve date.”

Mark’s mood changed instantly. “Mrs. Windermere, thank-you for acknowledging me. So tell me, it’s the moustache, isn’t it?”

“Yes dear, it’s the moustache,” Mrs. Windermere replied and briefly wondered how it was possible for a ten-year-old to grow a moustache, or to go to the Magic Academy for that matter.

“Good night, Mrs. Windermere,” Mark said and headed for the door. “By the way, I was serious about wanting to make love to you,” Mark said and left.

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Wedding Bells

“Okay kids, who wants to go to a celebrity wedding?” Mark asked.

Everyone screamed, “Yay!”

“Okay everyone, get in,” Mrs. Windermere said. The children got on the well worn bus owned by the orphanage. Mark went next, and finally Mrs. Windermere.

“Okay everyone, before we go, I need to remind you of a few things. First, there is going to be media, so you need to be on your best behavior,” Mark said.

“Yes,” everyone called out.

“The second thing is, if anyone asks how old I am, what must you say?” Mark continued.

“Sixteen,” everyone called.

“Excellent everyone,” Mark said. “Mrs. Windermere, shall we get going?”

Mrs. Windermere got behind the wheel and Mark took an empty chair besides a little girl.

Mark got a license to drive busses over the summer, but he didn’t want to drive. He didn’t think he was experienced enough to drive such valuable cargo.

As expected, the hour long trip to the church was noisy.

As they entered the city, Mark called out, “Okay everyone, we’ll stop at the reception area before we go to the church.”

“That’s right kids,” Mrs. Windermere said. “We need to all go to the toilet before the wedding. It will be a long time before we can go again.”

As they approached the reception hall, Mark noticed plenty of people. Most of the people were media, setting up equipment.

As they stepped out, Mrs. Windermere called, “Girls, follow me. Boys, follow Mark. We’ll arrive back here when we’re done.”

As they approached the hall, an asshole guard tried to stop them. “I’m sorry, but this place is restricted.”

“Okay everyone, take out your invitations and show this person,” Mark called.

Mark wanted to use hasher language, but he knew the power of language and was always careful with words. After all, it was the word that created the universe, and it is by that same word that magic comes into being into the world.

“I am Markus Lucas, Albert Lucas’s nephew. May we pass?” Mark said.

“I’m sorry sir, I didn’t know you were guests,” the man apologized.

“That’s all right, my good man,” Mark smiled at the guard and headed in. The others followed.

The incident disappeared from mind as Mark relieved himself and waited for the other kids to finish. Once they were out, Mark inspected them. They all looked respectable, so they headed to the bus. Minutes later, they were on their way.

As they approached the church, Mark said, “I think we’re a little too early. We still have over an hour to start time.”

“Nonsense dear, there’s no such thing as too early,” Mrs. Windermere said.

“The good thing about coming early is that there’s plenty of parking,” Mark said as they pulled up to the front of the church.

Mrs. Windermere opened the doors and the children stepped out.

“Mrs. Windermere, I’ll move the bus to a nearby location,” Mark said and stepped into the driver’s seat.

As Mark walked back from the parking spot, he wondered where Harry was. Harry had decided to come by car with his girlfriend. However, it wasn’t surprising that they weren’t here. It was, after all, still over an hour till the event. There was going to be some impatient kids, Mark knew. Fortunately, Mrs. Windermere was entertaining the children with stories.

Mark looked around. Most of the people in the area were the media setting up equipment. A few guests wandered about. There was nothing for Mark to do but practice his magic.

Mark walked to a bald spot on the lawn and focused his attention on it. One of the thing earth magic does is gives you a green thumb. It can’t create life, but it can help make plants grow.

Mark took out his makeshift wand and held it in one hand. He placed his other hand over the ground. Shifting his consciousness slightly, he could see the life force flowing around him. He directed the force downwards, towards the struggling life below the ground.

Nothing happened. That was expected. He was after all only a student Earth wizard. Only senior Earth wizards could do it fast enough for people to see.

A royal limo pulled up. The chauffeur stepped out and opened the door for Jane and Annie.

“Yo James,” Mark called to the chauffeur. *I wonder what his name is*, Mark wondered and waved.

The man waved back and returned to the car. He drove off.

Mark walked up to the princesses and bowed. He winked at Annie and said. “Good morning Princess Jane, Princess Annie, you look beautiful this morning.”

Mark straightened up, aware that cameras were pointed at him.

“You’re looking good Mark,” Jane said.

“Un-huh,” Annie replied.

“Young man, may I ask your name and your relationship to the princesses?” a reporter asked.

Mark was expecting something like this to happen and spent weeks trying how best to handle it. In the end, he decided that the best way was always to go forward.

“My name is Marcus Lucas of Draco. I am a fellow student of Princess Jane. We both serve on the student council of the Magic Academy,” Mark said.

“What do you do on the student council?” another reporter asked.

“I am the VP of Education. My job is to help fellow students with their studies,” Mark said.

“How long have you known the princess?” reporter 3 asked.

“Since the beginning of the school year in September,” Mark said.

The next asked a question before Mark finished. “What kind of relationship do you have?”

“She is the president and I am the VP of Education. It’s my job to support her in doing her work,” Mark said.

“I mean personal relationship,” one said. “What kind of person is Princess Jane?” another said at the same time. A third asked a question but he didn’t catch it.

Mark was getting annoyed by all the personal questions about Jane and how they completely ignored her. What was worse, gossiping behind someone’s back, or in front of them?

“In my opinion, Princess Jane is a fine, outstanding human being and I consider it an honor and privilege to call her my friend,” Mark replied to both questions he heard.

“People say Princess Jane is a little cold and distant. Is that true,” reporter 5 said. She was a newcomer.

While this was happening, Jane just stood and looked uncomfortable. The kids huddled around her, feeling her pain and not knowing what to do. Mrs. Windermere was equally unsure of what to do.

Mark looked at the reporter in annoyance. “Princess Jane is a sweet, loving person who cares deeply for her fellow students and citizens. She spends long hours working to serve them. Because of her compassion, intelligence and wisdom, I think that she will one day make an incredible queen, when the time comes.”

Mark turned his back to the reporters and called to the children, “Okay children, isn’t Princess Jane a great princess?” Mark asked.

The kids screamed, “Yay” in unison.

Thinking quickly, Mark positioned himself in front of Jane. “Okay kids, do you all love Princess Jane?”

Again the children said, “Yes” in unison.

“In that case, show the world just how much you love her by giving her a great big hug,” Mark said.

The children huddled around Jane. Jane smiled, feeling the love. She still remained standing.

Mark caught her eye and discretely motioned her to get down. She did so and hugged several of the children back.

Mark turned back and gave the audience a big smile.

“Who are those children?” Reporter 2 asked.

“These children come from a nearby orphanage that our good and gracious king lovingly supports. My uncle Author invited them to come for his wedding,” Mark said.

“Have you met the king? What kind of person do you think he is,” Reporter 1 asked.

“I met the king once and can say…” Mark paused, unsure what to say. He turned to the children and called out. “Kids, Princess Annie came just to see Anna Cortes. She’s feeling lonely because Anna hasn’t come. Can you please go there and play with her? Don’t dirty your clothes.”

Mark turned back and said, “Sorry about the interruption. What did you say?”

“What kind of king is he?”

“He is a very caring king who works very hard for his people. When I spoke to him last, he was trying to find people to help him manage some projects he needs done for the country. It’s not easy finding reliable people,” Mark said.

Mark looked around the audience and noticed that they all looked disappointed. None of them were getting any juicy gossip.

“Can you tell me any secrets you know about Princess Jane?” Reporter 5 asked.

Mark stuck his thumb into his mouth for a moment. He pulled it out. “You mean like sucking her thumb?” he said and frowned at the reporters.

“Wait a minute. I’m the one who likes to suck his thumb, not her,” Mark struck a thoughtful pose and stuck his thumb in his mouth again.

The children laughed.

Mark glanced at Jane. She was surrounded by children. Mrs. Windermere was standing nearby. This was preventing anyone from asking her any questions. As a result, they were focusing all their attacks on him. Mark was happy with that.

“What do you think about King Ravenswood’s decision to choose Duke Benjamin’s son Jim as a possible spouse for Princess Jane,” Reporter 3 asked.

“I’m sorry but that question is a little too adult for me. I am after all only sixteen years old,” Mark smiled at the reporter.

All the reporters looked at Mark in astonishment, “You’re sixteen? I thought you were eighteen,” one reporter said.

“Yes, I thought this was your graduating year,” another said.

Mark beamed with pride. He bowed at them and said, “Thank you.”

“How come you seem so mature,” Reporter 7 asked.

“It’s because I have great role models I can fashion my life around. One such role model is of course, Princess Jane.”

By now, reporters were dispersing as more guests arrived and more targets became available. Also, they had pretty much run out of things to ask.

“Hi Mark,” someone called. It was Susan, one of his aunts.

“Hi Aunty Susan,” Mark said and gave her a hug and a kiss.

Other relatives came and he greeted them in turn. By now the reporters had pretty much dispersed.

Mark felt the presence of Uncle Author fast approaching. “Look everyone, they’re coming,” Mark pointed at the sky.

Everyone looked but saw nothing. “I don’t see anything.”

“They will arrive right…now,” Mark said.

An instant later, a huge flying vehicle zoomed in from nowhere and stopped above everyone’s heads. It was Uncle Author’s chariot.

A four-foot plate dropped from the vehicle and flopped two feet in front of Mark. Uncle Author was standing on it.

“Hello Mark, good to see you my boy,” Uncle Author called out. He stepped off the plate and it returned to the chariot. He turned to the children and bellowed, “Hi kids.”

They in turn screamed back and ran towards him.

“Okay kids, I just discovered that we don’t have enough flower girls and page boys. How would you like to do that for us?” Uncle Author called.

“Yay,” everyone screamed.

“Okay everyone, step on the board and return to the chariot,” Uncle Author said.

Everyone looked around but found nothing to step on. “Uncle Author, where is the board?” Annie asked.

Uncle Author looked confused by the question. “Why, the board is right over there.”

Uncle Author pointed and a large board fell from the chariot and plopped right where he pointed. The children got on.

“Mrs. Windermere, would you please join the kids?” Uncle Author said and Mrs. Windermere did as instructed.

Uncle Author motioned to Annie to come to him and she got off the plate. The plate flew skywards and docked an instant later.

Uncle Author turned to Jane and said, “Princess Jane, you know brides. They are always running around and forgetting everything. Well, she forgot a maid of honor. Would you care to be that maid of honor?”

“I’d love to,” Jane said.

“Thank you Princess Jane,” Uncle Author bowed. A plate fell in front of Jane. She stepped on and it took her away.

Uncle Author paused and stood as if in deep thought. He tapped his chin and said, “You know what, I think I forgot something. I wonder what it is. I know. I need a best man and a ring bearer.”

Uncle Author turned to Annie and said, “Princess Annie, would you kindly be my best man?”

Annie giggled, “Don’t you mean the ring bearer?”

“Actually I wanted Mark to be the ring bearer,” Uncle Author said and pulled a ring from his pocket. It was a gold wedding ring six feet in diameter. He hung it around Mark’s neck. Mark staggered with the weight. He looked as Annie and said, “Would you rather carry that ring?”

“No way,” Annie said and stepped back.

“In that case, you’re my best man. Please, you two, step on the plate,” Uncle Albert said and a plate fell in front of them. At the same time, the ring disappeared from around Mark’s neck.

They stepped on the plate and the chariot rushed downwards to meet them. The chariot docked with the plate with a click.

They were in a private bedroom. In front of them was Guido. On the bed were two sets of clothes.

“Guido, what are you doing here?” Mark asked.

“I guess you don’t recognize me dear, but I’m your aunty Jeanine. I changed genders two years ago,” Guido said.

Annie looked at him in surprise. “Why did you do that?” Annie asked.

“Well dear, it’s a well known fact that the best fashionistas are effeminate men,” Guido said.

“You really are a Draco,” Annie said and giggled.

“Why thank you dear, now get dressed. We have a wedding to attend to,” Guido said.

“Okay,” Annie said and undressed.

Mark stripped as well. “I guess the children are dressing in another room,” Mark said and put on his pants.

Annie picked up the dress and said, “This is so pretty Uncle Guido.”

“Thank you dear. Now lift up your hands and I will help you put it on,” Guido said.

“Uncle Author loves doing stuff like this at the last minute,” Mark said as he buttoned his shirt, and tucked it into his pants.

“Well don’t you look like an angel, Princess,” Guido said and buttoned up the back of the dress. He adjusted the fairy wings in the back and positioned the halo over Annie’s head. “Okay dear, put your new shoes on.”

Once done, Annie looked at Mark. He was completely dressed, except for the bow. “Men,” she said and signaled Mark to come down. Mark sat on a chair and Annie worked on the bow.

Guido laughed, “Annie dear, where did you learn that expression?”

“From my mother,” Annie replied. “She always says that when she has to fix daddy’s tie. She told me to learn to tie bows for the useless man I would eventually marry.” Annie finished tying the bow and said, “All done.”

“My, don’t you two look like a wonderful couple. Okay you two, you’re now ready for the wedding, unless you have to go to the toilet,” Guido said.

“You go first,” Mark said. Annie went through a nearby set of doors. A minute later, the toilet flushed. She went out and Mark went in. While Annie waited, Guido fixed her dress.

Mark stepped out and Guido adjusted him as well.

“Okay you two, step on the plate,” Guido said.

They stepped on and the chariot jumped skywards.

“Okay Princess Annie, Mark, it’s time to enter the church,” Uncle Author said.

They stepped in and walked to the front. The church was filled with people. Mark spotted quite a few relatives.

They waited.

The wedding song played.

Down the aisle walked the bride. The room was filled with flashes of light as photographers took pictures. Jane walked beside Anna.

Behind them both walked the pages and the flower girls, all dolled up in their new clothes.

Anna stepped to Author’s side and the wedding started. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the presence of God and these witnesses to join this man and this woman in the bonds of holy matrimony…”

The mass commenced. The vows were said. Finally came the time to exchange the rings.

*Annie, reach into your pocket and take out the ring*, Uncle Author said. *Now hand it to Anna.*

Annie handed a ring to Anna and Mark handed a ring to Uncle Author. The couple exchanged rings, and then kisses. Everyone clapped.

The newlywed couple headed for the door as music played. Annie and Mark followed them. “Weddings are fun,” Mark said. “Now comes the party. I hope you know how to dance.”

“Mark,” Harry called and ran to the two. He was with Stephaney. All four stepped out of the church and guests threw confetti at the newlywed couple.

The couple walked to a large plate resting on the grass. “Okay kids, mama of the kids, maid of honor, ring bearer, best man, get on. Now wave and smile at everyone,” Uncle Author said.

“Harry, Stephaney, get on too,” Mark said and dragged them aboard. “You two missed some fun getting here.”

“No thanks,” Harry said. “I know how noisy school busses can get.”

“You sound like an old fart,” Mark said and Annie giggled. “See, even Annie…Princess Annie agrees.

“See you all at the reception,” Author said. Uncharacteristically, the plate rose slowly as pictures were taken.

They docked. After a few seconds, the platform lowered. They were at the reception hall.

The hall was filled with a head table and multiple tables. People mingled, looking for their seats.

Finding seats wasn’t easy. Although all places had name tags, none had actual names. One said ‘Cigar Man’ and another said ‘Doll Face’.

The kids ran around like wild things. One spotted their table and signaled to the others. Their name tags had nicknames only they knew. Being fifteen people, they had two tables to themselves.

“Mark,” Annie called and pointed at the head table.

Just like the other tables, there were no names. In the center was a sign marked ‘Hippie. On the right was the sign, ‘Hottie’, followed by ‘Maid of Honor’. Beyond that was ‘Mother in Law’, ‘Father in Law’, and a few other in-laws.

To the left was the card saying ‘Best man’, then ‘Ring Bearer’. After that was ‘Ring Bearer’s Sidekick’, ‘Ring Bearer’s Sidekick’s Main Squeeze’, and finally more in-laws.

Mark looked at the signs and said, “Well best man, would you like to take your place?”

“After you ring bearer,” Annie said.

“Yo ring bearer’s sidekick and main squeeze, you get to sit here,” Mark called out to them.

They approached the table and Harry said, “I’m not a sidekick.”

Stephaney didn’t like the title given to her either. “I’m no one’s main squeeze,” she said.

“Well I guess these seats don’t belong to you. Isn’t that right my good best man,” Mark said. He didn’t need to be quiet because the room was so noisy. There was no chance that anyone would hear them.

“That’s right ring bearer,” Annie replied.

Sidekick and Main Squeeze took their places. All four sat down and waited for everyone to settle down.

“I can’t believe Mr. Lucas names Princess Annie his best man. The press and comedians will have a field day tomorrow,” Stephaney whispered.

“That’s because Uncle Author is strange. All Dracos are,” Annie said and giggled. She rested her arm on Mark’s leg. Fortunately, the table hid that from the rest of the room. Harry and Stephaney saw.

“How come you’re so friendly with the princess,” Harry asked. Stephaney nodded.

Mark shrugged. “For some unknown reason, Annie has taken a liking to me, and so I have decided to adopt her as my baby sister,” He said.

“It’s convenient since now I have a date for the wedding. Isn’t that right, Annie?” Mark added.

“That’s right, I’m his girlfriend,” Annie said.

“Don’t you mean best man? Corrections, you’re Uncle Author’s best man, not mine,” Mark said.

“I can’t believe you can be so informal with the princess,” Stephaney said aloud, trying to talk over the crowd.

“I can explain the details later, but it’s top secret,” Mark said. “Speaking of secrets, when will lunch be served? I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” Harry said. “I doubt there is enough food here to satisfy you.” Harry turned to Annie. “You should see him eat. He’s like a machine.”

Uncle Author stood up and sneezed. The sound was deafening. Some of the guests literally jumped from their chairs. It had its effect. The room went silent.

“Everyone, I have an announcement to make before we start eating,” Uncle Author said. “I HATE SALAD. Therefore there will be no salad. It’s my wedding and I’ll dine as I want to.”

“Yeah!” the kids screamed.

Stephaney frowned, questioning Uncle Author’s adult status.

Uncle Author continued. “Also, my ring bearer’s sidekick was worried that we may not have enough food to satisfy his master. I assure you, we have plenty.”

Uncle Author turned to his new wife and grabbed her hand. He nibbled on her fingers. “Delicious,” he said. “Okay, my beautiful and sexy wife, do you have anything to say before we start eating.”

Anna said a pleasant but boring speech.

“Don’t worry, she’s much more exciting in the bedroom,” Uncle Author said and everyone laughed.

Harry and Stephaney laughed as well.

“I don’t get it,” Annie said.

“I don’t get it either. It must be an adult thing,” Mark replied.

The first course out was a green cake with strawberry ice-cream.

“Same color as your hair,” Mark said and started eating.

“Same color as your eyes,” Annie replied and began eating as well.

Mark looked up and realized that only the children were eating freely. The adults seemed unsure of what to do.

“What’s going on? Why are we eating desert first?” Stephaney asked.

Just then, people started tapping their glasses. The newlywed couple got up and kissed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have desert for desert as well. I’m sure of it,” Mark said.

Just as the children finished desert, the next course came out. It was soup – the regular kind.

“Finally normal food,” Stephaney said.

“You shouldn’t say things like…” Mark started.

“Eek,” Stephaney said and jumped up. In her soup was an eyeball. It winked at her.

The same thing was happening throughout the hall. Anna just rolled her eyes and sighed.

“There’s nothing like eyeball soup to make everyone feel alive,” Mark said.

“Yup,” Annie said and ate an eyeball. “It tastes like chocolate,” she remarked.

A live band played in the background.

The main course was served. It was the traditional chicken and steak shaped like hearts.

“I’m afraid of touching it,” Stephaney said. That was the right response. Nothing strange happened.

Followed this was a second main meal of pasta, meatballs and seafood.

A third course had people wondering how much they could eat.

Mark finished everything quickly, while Annie struggled. She swapped plates with Mark, feeling disappointed in herself in that she couldn’t keep up with him.

Harry and Stephaney passed food to Mark as well. Being at the head table, everyone saw and was impressed.

“Don’t worry everyone. If you can’t finish it, just give it to the ring bearer. He’ll finish it faster than you can blink. Watch your fingers though,” Uncle Author said.

Everyone laughed, knowing it was true. That didn’t bother Mark.

“Okay everyone, who wants desert?” Uncle Author called out.

The adults looked at him as if he was nuts. Even the children didn’t respond, since it was apparent that they were stuffed.

Mark glanced at Annie and raised his hands. “Yah,” he said and Annie followed his lead.

Desert came. It was a floating boat. On it was chocolate cake, topped with Sundae dressings. Steam flowed from the water. That wasn’t magic. It was just dry ice.

Uncle Author got up and started telling jokes. All the jokes had a covert sexual theme that few of the children noticed.

“Weddings tend to have boring food, but this was quite good,” Mark commented.

“I wish I could eat as much as you,” Annie said.

Mark considered a response and said, “That’s because you’re a beautiful princess and I’m a mighty dragon. Roar…”

“That’s not true. The reason he can eat so much is because he’s entirely empty,” Harry said and tapped Mark’s head.

Uncle Author got up and announced, “I don’t know about you but I’m ready to get down and boogie.” He held his stomach and gyrated like Elvis. Everyone laughed.

“Speaking of empty, I’m starving,” Mark said.

“But you just ate,” Stephaney said in astonishment. Annie giggled.

“I’m joking. I definitely won’t be able to eat for the next five minutes,” Mark said and got up.

He headed towards the dance floor and stopped. “Annie, we better get your sister. I don’t want her to feel alone.”

They walked towards Jane and Mark spoke softly to her. “Let’s go dancing, show the world how cool you are. Remember to dance with as many guys as possible, and smile.”

They went to the dancing floor and Mark formally bowed. Mark signaled to the band and waited. The next dance was a waltz.

As expected, Mark danced like a pro. Soon, the dancing floor emptied as a stranger danced with the princess. Once the dance finished, everyone clapped.

“Where did you learn to dance so well? You’re dancing at a professional level,” Jane said.

Mark started, “I cheated. I used an immersive novel to learn…”

“You did what?” Jane asked in a shocked voice.

The room went quiet.

“It’s no big deal. I just used the immersive novel, *You can Dance*, to learn to dance,” Mark said into the silence.

“Excuse me Mark, but what is an immersive novel,” one of the children asked.

“An immersive novel is the recordings of another person’s experiences. In my case, the novel I used was from a professional dancer named Matt Barber,” Mark said.

“Aren’t those illegal?” someone asked.

“It’s not illegal, but there are special restrictions you must deal with.

“First, you must get a psyche test before and after the experience.

“Second, under the age of twenty one, you can only watch a novel from someone of your same gender.

“Third, the person must be of your same elemental type, or you can suffer serious psychological damage.

“The same is true for gender, of course, but in this case, the gay community got special laws passed to deal with that.

“Finally, you may only watch a maximum of one every 67 days, or your brain will explode.

“There are several government approved locations where you can watch these novels. There are guidelines you must follow, but if you follow them, you won’t have a problem,” Mark finished.

“How many have you watched?” someone asked.

“Enough to give me a stomachache,” Mark said. “Don’t worry; I have full written permission from my parents.”

Mark turned to everyone. “Come on everyone, this is a wedding. Dance and sing and have fun. Don’t forget to dance with the princess or you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Mark turned to Annie. “Princess Annie, may I please have the next dance?”

Mark bowed to Annie and Annie curtsied. The music started and they danced to a slow waltz.

“Okay Annie, dance with those boys standing there,” Mark said.

Annie was reluctant to go but went, just to please Mark.

Mark found another partner and danced.

The dancing was interrupted for the cutting of the cake. The cake was a traditional layered cake, with figurines of the bride and groom. The figurines were not traditional.

The groom looked like Uncle Author in a tux. Normally men looked good in a tux. Uncle Author was the exception. He looked like a bum.

The bride was hot and sexy. She had a broom in her hand and she chased her groom around the cake.

The newlywed couple cut the cake and ate the first piece.

Next came the removal of the sacred garter. Anna sat on a chair and Uncle Author slowly crept towards her.

Uncle Author placed his head near the bottom of Anna’s dress and stuck out his tongue. It extended to six inches and wiggled in a perverted manner. It was clear to all the adults what such a tongue could be used for.

The children were off course, clueless. They thought the tongue was funny.

The tongue transformed into a green snake. It spoke with a romantic French accent. “Mon Cher, let me invade your Garden of Eden. Let me steal your Red – Delicious – Apple.”

Anna looked like she was enjoying the show. Some of the guests were unsure of how to react.

The snake tongue went under the dress and wiggled all around. It even went all the way and popped out the top of Anna’s dress. “Oops,” the snake said. “I missed the Garden altogether. I better go back.” This time it stopped at Anna’s crotch. It wiggled around and said, “Oh year, Baby, do it to me again.”

By now the adults were trying to cover the eyes of their children. No one expected such a raunchy magic act.

Anna was standing beside Mark and was sneaking peaks from behind him. It was clear, even to her, what was going on. She could only watch and giggle. She was grateful her parents weren’t there. They would have prevented her from watching.

Jane looked for her sister, but couldn’t find her. That wasn’t surprising, since Annie was hiding from her.

The snake retreated from under Anna’s dress. It had Anna’s garter in its mouth. It dropped the garter in Uncle Author’s hands and turned back into a regular tongue.

“Okay men, get ready to catch the garter,” Uncle Author said. “The man to catch the garter will marry the girl he’s with.

A fan appeared on the ceiling. It spun like crazy. Uncle Author shot the garter into the air. It got stuck on the fan and spun around.

“Okay men, spread around the room and get ready to catch the garter when it lands,” Uncle Author said.

After a few seconds, the garter flew off the fan, but got caught by another fan. It flew to a third fan. By now, no one knew where it would land.

Right then, it went flying straight at Mark and hit him in the face. He took it and placed it in his pocket. Everyone clapped.

Dancing commenced.

“Can I see that?” Annie asked and Mark handed it to her.

“Princess Annie, can you please get Anna her bouquet?” Uncle Author bellowed over the crowd.

“I don’t know where it is,” Annie replied.

“Mark, please show the princess where the flowers are,” Uncle Author called.

*Okay Mark,* Uncle Author said, *go to the hall, and then enter the room to the right. I’ll give you some time to talk to Annie. She really wants to talk to you in private.*

Mark led the way and Annie followed. They stepped in the room and Mark closed the door. He sat on a chair and Annie ran to him. Mark gave her a hug and a kiss.

“I missed you Mark,” Annie said.

“I missed you too, sweaty,” Mark replied and gave her an extra tight hug. “I must say you look very pretty in your angle clothes. I think all the ladies were jealous of you.”

Mark picked Annie up and placed her on his lap facing him. They cuddled for a few minutes.

“I can hear your heart beat,” Annie said.

“I can hear yours,” Mark replied.

*Sorry to interrupt the love birds, but Jane is starting to wonder if you two have gotten lost*, Uncle Author said in their minds.

“Okay Uncle,” Mark said. “Come dear, Uncle Author will find a way for you to see me if you’re feeling lonely.”

“All right,” Annie said reluctantly and got off Mark’s lap.

Mark got up and a bouquet appeared on the chair.

“I have to say Annie that you were very well behaved. I don’t think anyone suspects that we’re adopted brother and sister,” Mark said. “You know the saying, don’t you?”

Annie nodded and picked up the flowers. “Where there is a will…Where there is a Draco, there is a way.”

Mark opened the door and they stepped out. They entered the hall and Jane spotted them.

“I thought you two got lost,” Jane said.

“Okay you two, bring the flowers here,” Uncle Author interrupted.

Annie gave the flowers to Anna and Mark went and stood by Harry and Stephaney.

“Will you two be the next people to get married?” Mark asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous, we’re too young to get married,” Stephaney said. “Besides, I have too many things to do before I get attached to any ball and chain.”

“Okay everyone, It’s time to catch the bouquet,” Anna said. “All you single ladies who want to marry, get ready.”

Anna tossed the bouquet into the air and the bouquet seemed to explode. From out of that one bouquet, dozens of bouquets flew.

A bouquet fell into the hands of everyone who wanted one. This included some of the young boys, who thought it was just a fun game.

The dancing continued, interrupted only by some line dancing. While dancing, Mark discovered something annoying. It was very difficult to dance and read a textbook at the same time.

Evening approached. The music stopped.

“Okay everyone, all good things must end,” Uncle Author said. “But don’t worry, my beloved nephew still needs to get married. I think I will have fun preparing his wedding. If you think this wedding was fun, wait for his wedding.”

Everyone went out to wave the newlywed couple goodbye.

“Okay kids, Mrs. Windermere, I’ll take you home,” Uncle Author said.

The royal limo pulled up. The chauffeur stepped out and closed the door. This time Mark checked his name. Surprisingly, his name turned out to be James.

“Yo James,” Mark waved and James waved back.

The limo flew up into the sky and the chariot swallowed it.

“Don’t worry everyone, I’ll be driving the Princesses back,” Uncle Author said.

A large plate came down and everyone stepped on.

“Is it okay if Harry and Stephaney came as well,” Mark asked.

“Of course, my dear boy,” Uncle Author said. “Where is their car?”

The chariot moved over to the indicated location and abducted the car. It returned to its original location.

The plate slowly rose and the guests waved.

Once docked, Uncle Author said, “Well kids, how did you like the wedding?”

Everyone screamed how much fun it was.

“I bet you didn’t expect to play with two real life princesses,” Uncle Author said. “Okay everyone, hug the princess goodbye. Oh, and Jane, remember to smile more. You look too stiff.”

The plate lowered and everyone found themselves in the yard of the orphanage. The bus was in the driveway.

“Mrs. Windermere, your children’s clothes are in the bus. As for the clothes they’re wearing, they are a wedding present to you. I hope you have plenty of uses for them,” Uncle Author said.

When the plate rose, only eight people remained.

Uncle Author bent down and looked at Annie in the eye. “Who wants to hug the world’s looniest uncle?”

“I do,” Annie said and hugged Uncle Author.

“I can’t believe you’re such good friends with royalty,” Stephaney said.

“Royalty is just like everyone else. We pick our noses just like everyone else,” Annie said.

Uncle Author gave a hearty laugh. “Annie, you’re a sweetheart, and I love you.”

Uncle Author sobered up and said, “I wish I could take you with me, but your parents would worry. Annie, go hug Anna. It’s about time we left.”

Uncle Author turned to Harry and gave him a hug. “We’ve never met, but I’m glad you’re taking care of my beloved nephew. I know he can be a pain sometimes.”

Uncle Author turned to Stephaney and said, “What, no hug?” Stephaney smiled and he gave her a hug.

Finally he turned to Jane and held out his hands. Jane smiled and got a hug as well.

“Okay Mark, give your new Aunt a hug. Don’t forget to hug the best man. She did an incredible job, better than the ring bearer, I might add.”

Once all the hugging was done, the plate lowered.

Everyone except Uncle Author and Anna got off. The plate returned and the chariot was gone in an instant.

“Goodnight everyone,” Harry said. “I’m driving Stephaney home. See you later Mark.” Stephaney and Harry waved and drove away.

“See you Monday Mark,” Jane said and entered the waiting limo.

“Bye Mark,” Annie said and stepped in as well. They drove off.

Mark felt lonely as his friends left. He entered his apartment and headed for the kitchen. The only remedy for loneliness was food in the gut.

Destiny moves,   
and what was once strange,   
becomes an everyday occurrence