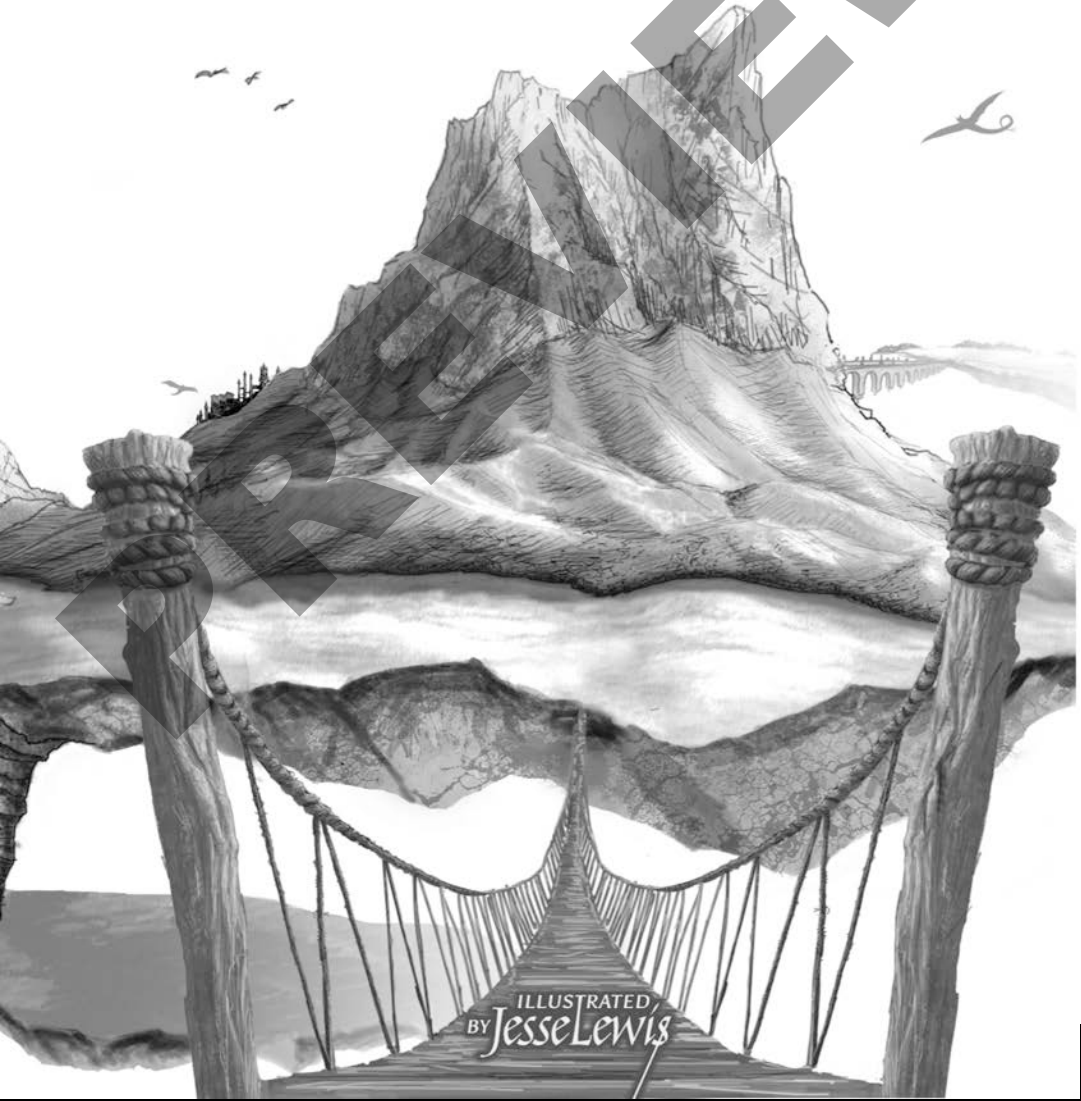


BLAKERS
OVERTWIXT™
WELCOME TO THE
WORLD OF BRIDGES



Copyright © 2018-2024 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including the use of information storage and retrieval systems, without express written permission from the copyright owner.

Cover design, internal design, maps, illustrations, and “Nachton Hand” fonts all original to this publication and ©2018-2024 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

The Orbital Defense Corps™, the concentric descending “O” imprint, OVERTWIXT™, the stylized Overtwixt text design, and the stylized R.L. Akers text design are all trademarks and service marks of The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, institutions, establishments, places, events, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination and/or are used fictitiously. Events or situations described in this book with reference to real locations, institutions, establishments, and/or actual living persons are historical, merely coincidental, and/or fictionalized with the intent to provide the reader with a sense of reality and authenticity.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid, without knowledge of the author or publisher. The author and publisher claim no rights in, and expressly disclaim any liability potentially arising from, the accessing and/or use of any referenced websites. Neither the author nor the publisher guarantees, approves, or endorses the information, products, and/or services available on such websites, nor does any reference to any website indicate any association with, or endorsement by, the author or publisher.

First Printing, TBD

ISBN-13: TBD

ISBN-10: TBD

table of contents

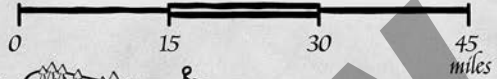
Map	iii
Dedication	xi
Author's Note	xii
Prologue	3
Part I: Questions	13
Part II: Quests	93
Part III: Quarries & Quarrels	163
Epilogue	277
Glossary	289
Intro to Ancient Languages	301
Reference Book	
Acknowledgments	
About the Fonts	
About the Author	
About the Illustrator	



prepared by the hands of the Cartographer, updated by the Loremaster,
 on behalf of the Baron Nachten, in the 782nd human epoch
 Ollivander

OVERTWIXT

The United Lands



LEGEND

- port niland (portland)
- hub niland (hubland)
- road or path
- bridge to real world

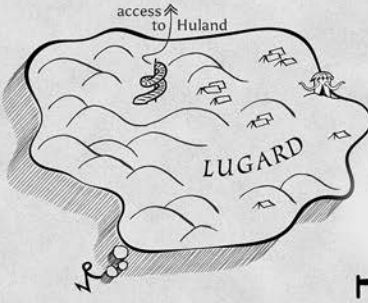
CITIES & SETTLEMENTS

- Pastoral City
- The Grove
- Castle of Hucentia

REPOSITORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

- Grand Library of Huland
- Archives of the Eqmen

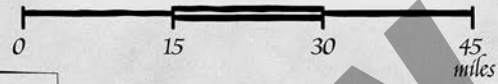
From what I've seen, the scale of these maps is variable, often distorted by perspective. -N



prepared by the hand of the Cartographer, updated by the Loremaster, the Baron Nachten Ollivance, on behalf of the Baron in the 782nd human epoch

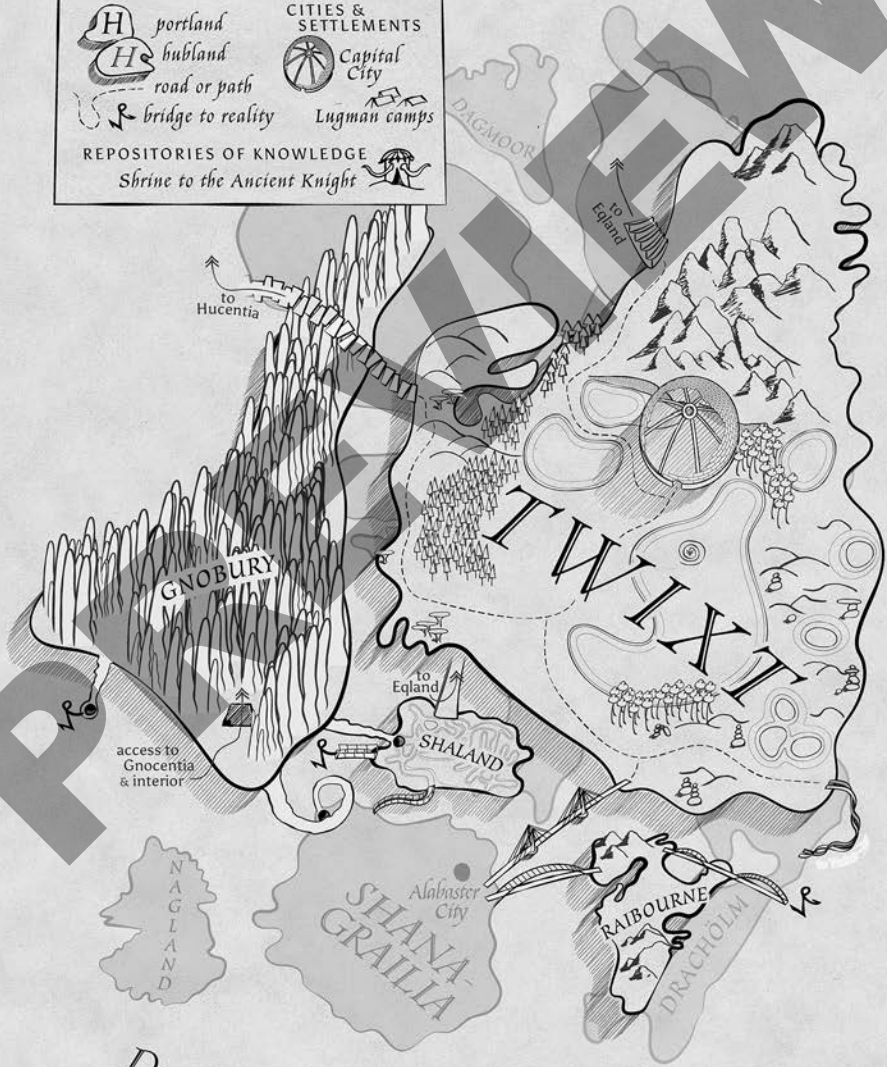
OVERTWIXT

The United Lands



LEGEND

portland	CITIES & SETTLEMENTS
hubland	Capital City
road or path	Lugman camps
bridge to reality	
REPOSITORIES OF KNOWLEDGE	
Shrine to the Ancient Knight	

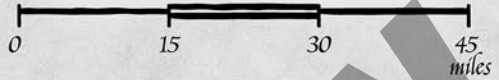


Domain of the Little Peoples

prepared by the hand of the Cartographer, updated by the Loremaster,
 on behalf of the Baron Nachten
 in the 782nd human epoch Ollivander

OVERTWIXT

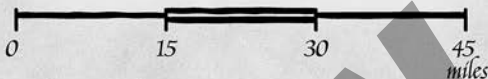
The United Lands



prepared by the hand of the Cartographer, updated by the Loremaster,
on behalf of the Baron Nachten
in the 782nd human epoch Ollivander

OVERTWIXT

The United Lands



LEGEND

- portland
- hubland
- road or path
- bridge to reality

CITIES & SETTLEMENTS

- The Fastness
- Dagmoorian swamps



For Ian, Sadie, Emme, and Nate...
my own personal Knight, Princess, Empress,
and—yes—Loremaster

Author's Note

The main characters of this story were very definitely inspired by my four children, and as such, these characters reflect some of the traits I love best in my kids—their enthusiasm and wonder, their abilities and most passionate interests, their loyalty to one another.

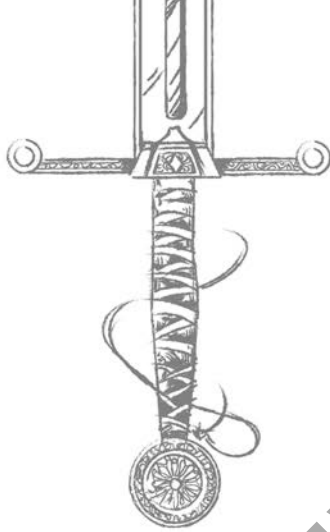
As in all good stories, however, the heroes of *Overtwixt* must also suffer from character flaws, or else there's no opportunity for character development and growth (which makes for a boring story!). While it's also true that real people suffer from character flaws as well, the flaws of my four main characters are *not* necessarily the same ones suffered by my children. Rather, they reflect the sorts of struggles common among young men and women their age.

As you embark, therefore, upon this journey with Nachton, Amélie, Cécilie, and Ewan—and as you occasionally see them at their worst—don't wonder too much what this story reveals about my children, for it's not meant to showcase anything but the best in them. Rather, ask yourself whether *you* identify with these fictional characters... and whether you yourself face the same opportunities for development and growth.

Welcome to *Overtwixt*! I hope your visit is meaningful!

OVERTWIXI™

PREVIEW



• prologue •

The Baron sat down heavily on his throne and buried his face in his hands. He was a grandfatherly man, a good ruler, well-loved by most of his followers. How had it come to this?

Even as he asked himself that question, he knew the answer. While his intentions had always been good, he had not always been wise. “I’m only the *Baron*... I was never meant to be a king,” he muttered.

“What was that, your majesty?” a strong voice called, echoing across the vast marble floor of the audience chamber. It was the Captain who spoke, the leader of the Baron’s honor guard. He and his three soldiers were stationed at the tall doors on the far side of the room from the throne.

“Nothing, Captain,” the Baron said tiredly. He took a deep breath and pondered his next move briefly. Then he spoke. “You and your men are dismissed.”

The Captain half-knelt, inclining his human head in a kind of bow. “I will keep a man posted in the hall throughout

the night. The rest of us will be in our chambers, in case you need us. You will remain protected at all times, my lord Baron.”

The Baron offered his most loyal servant a sad smile. “You misunderstand me, Captain. You are not merely dismissed for the night.” He hesitated. “You are dismissed *for good*.”

The Captain stiffened.

The Baron sighed. “I mean you no insult, my old friend. Quite the opposite, in fact. You have served me well for many years, and I would like to see you rewarded for that. Therefore... I dismiss you, and all your men, from my service. Go home to your people.”

“But... my lord Baron. You know what the Vizier* is planning.”

The Baron squeezed his eyes shut. “Yes, I do. And brave though you are, my friend, your presence at my side will make little difference in that fight. It is far too late to change the outcome, I fear.” He sighed. “Please, grant me this one final happiness, knowing that you are safe.”

The Captain’s face clenched, but he slowly nodded.

“Thank you,” the Baron said, letting out his breath. “Besides, I have another task for you. I need you to pass the word on your way out of the city—*quietly*. I’m ordering the evacuation of all who remain loyal.”

“I will see it done.” The Captain straightened to his full height, as did his soldiers behind him. “It has been the greatest honor of my life serving you, my lord Baron.”

“Go in peace, my old friend.”

* Pronounced **viz-ZEER**. Find other pronunciation clues in the Glossary of Persons, Places, and Things on page 271

And with a clatter of hooves on the marble floor, the four guardsmen departed. The Baron was alone.

Well, *mostly* alone.

“You mean to go through with it, then?” a raspy female voice called from somewhere high above, its owner hidden among the rafters of the grand, vaulted ceiling.

“I do,” the Baron responded. “And do you remember your part?”

“Of course,” the voice responded. She did not speak to the Baron with the same respect as the Captain, for that was not the way of her people. But actions were more important than words. The Baron knew she would do the right thing.

“Get in and get out while I have everyone distracted,” the Baron said, repeating the instructions he had given her earlier. “Keep going no matter what. Don’t look back. Once you’re away, hide those awful things where they’ll never be found, and speak of them to no one.”

“And destroy his research while I’m at it, so he can’t simply make more of them,” the raspy voice added. “Yes, I know what I must do.”

“Very well.”

The Baron waited an hour, enough time for the Captain and his men to flee Capital City, but not enough time—he hoped—for word of the evacuation to reach the Vizier. Then, with a feeling of dread, the Baron rose to his feet and strode out of the audience chamber.

The Vizier’s tower was located on the far side of the huge capitol building, and it was almost as big as the Baron’s own throne room. Unlike the throne room, however, the Vizier’s chambers were full of servants and lackeys. A miserable, horse-faced creature strummed a musical

instrument in one corner, while the Vizier's followers made fun of him.

"Summon your master," the Baron ordered one of the lackeys. He offered the musician a sad smile, then stepped to a nearby stained-glass window. Turning the iron latch, he pushed open the window to let in the cool night air. Then he stood there, leaning on the stone window sill, looking out at the night sky as he awaited the man who was supposedly his advisor.

Someone approached—a human, judging by the sound of his booted feet on stone. The Baron turned... and sure enough, there he stood: the Vizier. The only other human remaining in all of Overtwixt, apart from the Baron himself.

The Vizier had a looming, sinister presence. As always, he dressed entirely in black, a high-collared cloak draping from his shoulders to trail along the floor behind him. The color of a person's clothes meant little, of course, but why had the Baron never seen the evil in this man's *heart* before now? Back when the Vizier first arrived, he had quickly become a trusted advisor to all five rulers of this realm, not just the Baron; slowly but surely, however, the Vizier had worked to unite these lands into a single kingdom ruled by the Baron alone. Now, the Vizier was plotting to steal the throne for himself. Most likely, that had been his plan all along.

The Baron had been manipulated from the start. Well, it was time to return the favor, at least this once.

Striding away from the open window, the Baron spoke forcefully before the Vizier had a chance to get in the first word. "I've come for a report."

"A report, my lord Baron?" the Vizier asked lazily, raising one eyebrow.

“Yes. I’ve heard disturbing rumors,” the Baron explained, frowning. “What exactly have you been doing these last few weeks?”

“Why, my lord Baron,” the Vizier said with a mocking smile, “everything I do is for the good of the United Lands.” This drew quiet laughter from the Vizier’s lackeys. Ugly laughter. The music faltered, and the room plunged into silence.

Moving suddenly, without warning, the Baron bolted for one of the doorways that lined the Vizier’s main chamber—the entrance to the Vizier’s laboratory. He moved so quickly that no one tried to stop him until he was already through the door.

Inside, he found a long, silvery table lined with bubbling chemicals and wicked-looking tools. Behind that table, giving off a sick green glow as they hung from pegs in the wall, were the terrible inventions the Vizier had spent so many years perfecting: his collection of amulets.

The rumors were true, then. If only the Baron had found out sooner.

Someone coughed, and the Baron’s attention was drawn to a small figure tied by straps to a chair in the corner of the room. What was this? One of the Vizier’s victims was here right now? Dashing over, the Baron began unfastening the straps that held the creature in place—another of the little people that lived in this realm, like the musician outside. “My lord Baron?” the child-sized person asked in confusion. He was clearly terrified, his cheeks wet with tears.

“Run when you have the chance,” the Baron whispered. “You’ll know when.”

“How dare you!” the Vizier thundered as he entered the laboratory.

The Baron finished with the last strap before turning around. “How dare *I?*” He began striding toward the younger, taller human. “What have you done to this poor creature?”

The Vizier spared a glance for the little figure the Baron had just rescued. “I was helping him,” he lied smoothly. “He complained of headaches, and as you know, I’m a master of—”

“Enough lies!” the Baron shouted. Uncertain, the Vizier backed out of the laboratory as the Baron continued marching toward him. Soon, both humans were back in the larger chamber with everyone else. “I know all about the things you’ve done in my name,” the Baron hissed. “The people you exiled, the others you imprisoned or forced into work crews. Your mining projects and your sick experiments...” He shook his head, disgusted. “And the bridges—it was *you* that destroyed them.”

The Vizier straightened, and the expression on his face became ugly. He was done pretending. “Seize him,” he ordered his lackeys, pointing at the Baron.

“You would dare to lay a hand on me?” the Baron cried indignantly, though he wasn’t really surprised. The dark creatures who served the Vizier began closing in on him, reaching for him with taloned fingers.

“I will not suffer your bumbling any longer,” the Vizier sneered. “You were always a fool. Now you’ve proven it, coming here tonight without guards or allies.”

In answer, the Baron drew a magnificent Great-Sword from the sheath at his waist. For one impossibly long moment, everyone froze, staring in wonder at the glittering diamond blade; it actually *glowed* with a soft blue light. “Now!” the Baron cried, then began swinging the Sword at the dark creatures who were about to harm him. With all

eyes on the Baron, the little person he'd rescued was able to escape through the exit, the musician following after him quickly. And no one else but the Baron glimpsed the flutter of wings through the open window behind the Vizier. Grinning tightly, knowing his plan had succeeded, the Baron focused his full attention on the fight.

With a dignified shout, he drove his Sword into the chest of a huge dragon-like beast coming at him from behind. There was a puff of yellow smoke, and the creature disappeared. Whirling, the Baron swung at two others, missing one, but catching a gray-furred man across one of his leathery wings. That creature puffed into smoke as well, banished from Overtwixt by the Baron's blade.

And then the Vizier was there, moving to block the Baron's Great-Sword with his own elegant saber. It shouldn't have worked. The Baron's diamond blade was supposedly capable of cutting through anything when wielded for the greater good—but it bounced right off the Vizier's saber in a small explosion of green sparks.

"Surprised?" the Vizier sneered.

"Perhaps yesterday, I would have been." The Baron didn't have a chance to say more, for the Vizier kicked him then, launching into a dizzying counterattack.

The duel raged back and forth across the stone floor of the Vizier's tower, the villain's dark minions diving out of the way now that their master had entered the fight personally. The two humans hurled insults as they swung their swords, and each scored small cuts on the other's clothing. But as the Baron told the Captain earlier, the outcome of this fight was never in doubt. The two magical blades were both powerful, but the Vizier was far more skilled wielding his. All too late, the Baron recognized a crucial truth: this matter never should have come to a fight at all. If only he had chosen

a different Relic all those years before, he would have been quicker to see the Vizier for what he was. But the Baron had foregone Wisdom in favor of the Sword... and now his time in Overtwixt would be cut short by a sword.

Stepping into the Baron's very next attack, the Vizier used his saber to block a Sword thrust, then grabbed and *twisted* the Baron's wrist with his free hand. The Baron yelped and dropped his magnificent Diamond Sword. Within moments, he was being forced to his knees, dark creatures standing on either side to hold him in place.

The Vizier wiped a single trickle of sweat from his forehead and flicked it aside. He sheathed his saber before picking up the Baron's fallen Sword, inspecting it briefly, then shoving it through a loop in his own belt. The diamond blade's blue glow slowly faded.

"Now... what was I saying?" he asked the Baron with a cocky smile. "Ah, yes. You're a fool." His eyes shined victoriously as he stared down at the Baron. "But I *am* grateful to you—for all you've done over the years to advance my plans, *and* for your actions tonight. By delivering yourself into my hands, you've saved me a great deal of trouble."

The Baron shook his head. "I *was* a fool," he agreed. "But no longer."

The Vizier stroked the pointy black beard on his chin, studying his captive for a moment. Then he looked up, over the Baron's head. "You," he ordered one of his minions. "Fetch me a blank."

"Yes, my lord!" the creature cried, scurrying toward the laboratory.

The Vizier turned back to the Baron. "You mentioned my experiments. Well, before I eject you from my new empire, I think it only fitting that you be allowed to experience the harvesting process for yourself." He smiled.

“From you... I will take your ability to inspire loyalty in others. It’s the only worthwhile attribute you have, sadly.”

“My lord Vizier!” the minion cried, returning to the room. “They’re... they’re gone!”

“*What’s gone?*” the Vizier replied in annoyance.

“Your amulets—the blanks *and* the infused ones. They’re gone, all of them!”

“What?!” the Vizier roared.

The Baron began to laugh quietly. “I believe you’ll find your notebooks destroyed as well—everything you need to create new amulets, gone.” The Baron felt like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “This much, at least, I can do for the people of Overtwixt.”

“But how?” the Vizier demanded. Then he whirled suddenly, looking straight at the open stained-glass window. He spun to face the Baron again.

“Who’s the fool now?” the Baron asked quietly.

“All of you, out!” the Vizier shouted furiously. “Take to the skies. Chase down the traitor responsible for this disaster. Bring me back those amulets!” The various dark creatures moved to obey, flooding toward the open window, but the Vizier caught one of the dragon-like beasts by his huge arm. “Not you. *You* will fly to Huland. Destroy the final bridge.”

“But what about this one?” the beast asked, indicating the Baron.

“Fear not. His story will come to an end long before you get there,” the Vizier assured his minion. “Now go, and waste no time. Close the portal as soon as you arrive. Do this thing, and I will make you supreme commander over *all* my forces—I will name you *Warlord*.”

The hulking, dragon-like creature smiled, revealing pointy teeth. “Yes, my master.” And then he was squeezing through the window to fly after all the others. When he was gone, no one remained but the two humans and the lackeys who held the Baron’s arms.

The Vizier turned back to the Baron, angry. “You think you’ve accomplished something here? One final act of heroism and sacrifice?” he spat. “This is just a temporary setback. I’m only annoyed that I cannot harvest your ability before you go.”

The Baron smiled sadly. “For all your intelligence, that’s the one thing you’ve never understood. We are more than our raw skills and abilities. We’re defined by the *choices* we make, the *way* we use the talents we’ve been given.”

The Vizier swept his cloak behind himself, freeing his sword arm and raising his elegant saber high.

The Baron shook his head. “Even if you stole my leadership ability for yourself, you could never use it to its greatest potential. Because there is no love in your heart—only evil.”

The Vizier ignored his words, smiling wickedly. “Enjoy being nobody again,” he spat, then swung his blade in one smooth sweep.

The Baron lowered his balding head, an expression of peace and acceptance on his face as the sword struck him. In an instant, he was transported back where he came from all those decades before, leaving nothing behind except a small cloud of yellow smoke.

Part I

Questions



PREVIEW



The Children and their Guide

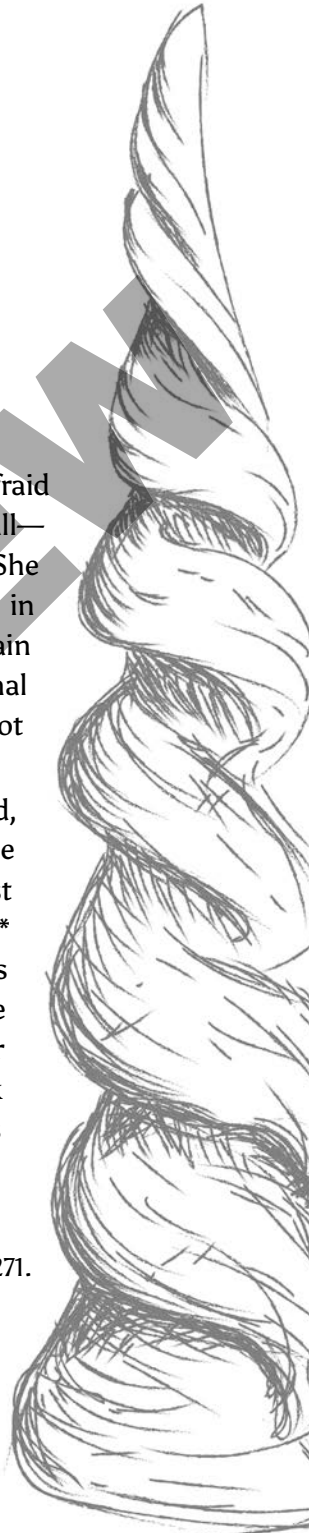
• one •
(Cécilie)

Cécilie Ollivaros held on for dear life, afraid she might lose her balance and fall—which would be *very* embarrassing. She and her family were deep below the airport in Atlanta, Georgia, riding the underground train that carried travelers rapidly from one terminal to another. It was not a very smooth ride. Not for an 8-year-old, at least.

As she waited for the tense ride to end, she tried to distract herself by watching the people on the train around her. The nearest ones were all members of Cécilie's family:* Mom and Daddy, who seemed almost as nervous as she was, but probably because the family was late for its plane flight; her older brother Nachton, who had his nose in a book like always; her older sister Amélie, who was peering just as intently at the screen of her cell

* Find pronunciation clues in the Glossary on page 271.
The names of the Ollivaros kids are pronounced:

1. **NAWK-tuhn** (Nachton)
2. **AWM-uh-lee** (Amélie)
3. **SESS-ill-lee** (Cécilie)
4. **YOO-wun** (Ewan)



phone; and finally, Cécilie's younger brother Ewan, who caught her looking and smiled back instantly.

Ewan was only 5, but as soon as he realized he had an audience, he cried, "Watch dis, Sessy!" Ripping his hand free of Mom's, he began stumbling toward Cécilie, pretending like he was walking on a balance beam at the playground—even though the train was bouncing and swaying. Cécilie giggled at his antics, but Daddy yelled at Ewan to "come back and hold Mommy's hand!" Then he got upset at Cécilie just for laughing!

On the other side of Mom and Daddy was a family they didn't know, a mother and father with just *one* child, a girl around Cécilie's age. Cécilie wondered what it was like to be that girl. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes, and she didn't have to share her parents with three siblings. Cécilie supposed she didn't mind sharing; she loved her brothers and sister, even if they made her angry sometimes. But she would *die* to have blue eyes like that blonde girl.

Sighing, Cécilie turned the other direction and saw another girl, this one taller and older. She looked totally different from the first, with chocolate-colored skin and elaborate braids in her hair. This girl's eyes were almost green—no, what was the word for that color? *Hazel*. And she didn't have a single freckle on that beautiful skin...

"Cécilie!" Amélie hissed. "Stop staring!"

Cécilie stuck out her tongue. Even Amélie was beautiful, though she had the same straight brown hair and brown eyes as Cécilie. Cécilie's looks were just *boring*.

And this ride was taking *forever*. So Cécilie decided to pass the time by making jokes. At least *she* thought they were funny, even if they were meant to embarrass Nachton and Amélie, just a little. But her siblings ignored her, as usual,

and she got in trouble with Daddy *again*. Then the whole family accused her of being a drama queen!

Cécilie folded her arms and huffed.

When Mom and Daddy finally finished lecturing her, Daddy tried to get everyone else's attention. "Listen up, kids. We're late for our next flight, so we'll need to *run*. As soon as the tram stops, we'll go straight out that door and up the escalator, then run all the way to Gate 3. You got it?"

Cécilie looked at her older brother and sister, but they were ignoring Daddy just like they ignored her, still focused on their book and phone.

"Cécilie!" Daddy said, "are you listening?"

She opened her mouth, but she wasn't sure what to say. Of *course* she was listening.

"This is important, Cécilie. I need you to listen when I talk. We cannot be late for this flight!"

Cécilie bit her lip to keep it from trembling. This was so *unfair*. She was the only kid who *was* listening. Nachton and Amélie certainly weren't, and Ewan's attention span didn't last longer than five words.

She didn't get a chance to say any of this, however, because that's when the train slowed to a stop and the door slid open. "Okay, let's go!" Daddy cried.

All six members of the Ollivaros family dashed from the train. Daddy took hold of Cécilie's hand as they began



running up the escalator, and that made her feel a little better. It seemed like he was usually disappointed with her, for one reason or another, but Cécilie knew he loved her very much.

Then they reached the top of the escalator, and she didn't have time to do more thinking. They began to run *hard*, and even Nachton and Amélie focused on running instead of books or phones.

They passed airplane gates on both the left and the right, and Cécilie counted down the numbers as they ran: Gate 18... Gate 16... Gate 15... The even-numbered gates were on their right, the odd-numbered on their left. There was Gate 14, and... wow. They had to go all the way to Gate 3?

"I don't think I can make it!" Cécilie gasped. "Go on without me!"

"C'mon, Cécilie, keep up!" Daddy said. He was practically dragging her along. "You're slowing us down!"

"Yeah, *Cécilie*," Nachton added. "You don't wanna get left behind." He smiled at her in that way she didn't like, as if he was about to make fun of her. "If you're left behind, you'll probably be *kidnapped*—"

"Nachton!" Daddy said angrily.

"What?" Nachton asked innocently. "It's true! They keep making announcements over the speakers. There are two kids missing in the airport, one of them since this morning, and I *bet* they got kidnap—"

"You're not helping, Nachton."

Nachton made a face, but of course no one saw it but Cécilie.

"Just a little bit farther, princess," Daddy told her. So she gritted her teeth and tried to run faster.

Gates 12 and 11... Gate 10... the Ollivaros family was getting there. Daddy released Cécilie's hand, and they all just focused on their running and breathing. Gate 7, Gate 6... Cécilie saw it! Gate 3—all the way at the very end of the terminal, near the back left corner. Why did it have to be at the very *end*?

There was an airline employee standing at the doorway to Gate 3, a man with a beard, wearing a blue uniform. Cécilie knew from their last flight that this was the person who would look at their tickets and decide whether they were allowed to get on the plane. As Cécilie's family got closer, the bearded gate agent noticed them running in his direction, and he smiled. He began waving urgently, and Cécilie put on a final burst of speed, grabbing Ewan's hand and running on ahead of the family with all her remaining strength.

The man in the uniform waved them through the open doorway, and Cécilie slowed to a fast walk as she entered a narrow hallway, breathing hard. The plane should be at the other end of this corridor, but she didn't want to slow down *too* much. Cécilie had learned that these hallways, which were called "jet bridges," were actually capable of moving—on *wheels*. If her family didn't keep going, the jet bridge would be rolled away from the plane, and they would miss their flight after all.

Cécilie turned a corner and almost ran into a red-headed boy a little older than Amélie. He looked dizzy, walking unsteadily in the opposite direction with one hand on the wall. Cécilie pulled Ewan out of the way and stepped around the boy... but Amélie didn't notice him in time.

Amélie's eyes were already glued to her phone screen again, and she walked right into the red-headed boy. They both yelled in surprise and fell to the floor—even as Nachton came around the corner, *his* attention already on his *book*

again. *He* tripped and landed on top of the boy and Amélie. Their backpacks, book, and phone went flying in every direction.

“Quickly, quickly!” the bearded gate agent said, coming up behind them all, helping the kids to their feet. “It’s almost too late!” Nachton and Amélie collected their stuff from the floor as fast as they could, and the red-headed boy kept going the other direction, toward the inside of the airport. The gate agent saw Cécilie watching and winked at her.

Cécilie smiled and turned to begin running again, Ewan’s hand still clutched in hers.

She stopped almost immediately. There was something very strange going on here. For one thing, she could see the other end of the bridge now, but... there was no plane parked there. Had they missed their flight after all? No, this bridge... that was the other strange thing. It didn’t even *look* like a jet bridge anymore. The walls were gone, leaving nothing but *rope* as railings to keep the kids from tumbling over the sides. And the floor had changed from carpet to *wooden planks*.

“Go, Cécilie!” Nachton said angrily as he pushed her from behind. Meanwhile, Amélie sounded like she was on the verge of tears, complaining that her phone screen had gotten cracked when she ran into that strange boy.

Ewan tested one of the wooden planks, a delighted smile on his face. “Cool-awesome-neat!” he decided. “C’mon, Sessy!” Then he ripped his hand from her grip and started bouncing rapidly down the bridge away from her.

The entire bridge began swaying dangerously from side to side, causing Nachton and Amélie both to yell in alarm. Cécilie hurried after her little brother, even as Amélie called after them. “Ewan, Cécilie, wait!” She sounded scared—*really* scared—and Cécilie wondered if this was the first time

she'd looked up from her phone long enough to see that their surroundings had changed.

Cécilie caught up with Ewan at the other end of the bridge, stepping off the last wooden plank and collapsing onto a blanket of soft grass beside her brother—who was rolling around in that grass, squealing with delight. Chest heaving, Cécilie tried to catch her breath as she stared up at a majestic mountain towering over them. The sky was gray, like it was really early morning.

“What in the *world*?” Nachton breathed, dropping to his knees beside her. “There are no mountains in the Atlanta airport!”

Amélie joined them, eyes wide with fear. “Nachton?” she asked quietly. “Where are we? And... where are Mom and Dad?”

Cécilie heard the clip-clop of hooves on the rope bridge behind them—like the sound a horse makes when trotting—and everyone turned to look. There was no sign of Mom or Daddy, but the gate agent was stepping off the bridge behind them, and he looked very different now.

“Good morning, and welcome to Overtwixt!” the bearded man said... except he was no longer a *man* at all.

Cécilie still recognized him as the gate agent, but he wasn't wearing his blue uniform anymore; he was now a *horse*, with only the top half of a man's body coming out of the horse's neck where a horse head should have been! Cécilie stared in wonder, while her mind tried to understand. There was a word for this kind of creature. Her older brother had talked all about them when he studied Greek mythology in school. If only she could remember—

“You're a centaur!” Nachton blurted.

The tall man-horse nodded. “Now hurry, we don't have much time. Everyone back on your feet!”

The children just stared at him with wide eyes. Amélie tried to say something, but no sound came out. She ripped her gaze away from the strange creature and looked back down the rope bridge, but there was still no sign of Mom or Daddy, no sign of the airport at all. The bridge just faded to nothingness in the distance, like it was disappearing into a cloud. “We’re going back, right?” Amélie asked finally, her voice as scared as Cécilie had ever heard it. “We need to find Mom and Dad—”

A terrible roar came from above, and everyone looked up—to see a *dragon* swooping out of the gray sky!

Amélie stumbled away from the bridge, and Nachton fell over backwards in surprise. The half-man/half-horse turned as well, moving to place himself between the children and the flying creature, but the dragon didn’t seem to notice any of them. Its attention was focused entirely on the bridge. It swooped down like it was going to land somewhere in the middle, but instead it grabbed hold of the ropes with both its muscular forearms. With another roar that sounded victorious, the dragon swept its powerful wings forwards, *heaving—*

And the ropes holding the rickety bridge together began to snap.

Just like that, before Cécilie could even scream, the bridge back to the airport—the bridge back to their *parents*—collapsed into the endless nothingness below. Leaving the children stranded here...

Wherever *here* was.

• two •
(Nachton)

“Quickly,” the centaur said, “get into the trees before you’re spotted.” His voice was strained as he watched the dragon, which wheeled around in midair to inspect its handiwork. “Quickly now!”

Nachton didn’t need to be told a third time. Coming face to face with a centaur was one thing. Facing a *dragon* was something else entirely. Seizing hold of Ewan, he picked him up and *ran*. “C’mon!” he hissed. “Cécilie, Amélie, let’s go!”

Amélie grabbed Cécilie’s hand and followed as Nachton dashed for the trees at the base of the mountain. It was a good thing they didn’t have far to run because Nachton was still tired from their race through the airport, and Ewan was a little chunk—he was *heavy*.

Nachton ran several feet into the forest and dropped his brother behind a bush, then lay down quickly beside him. The girls joined them a moment later.



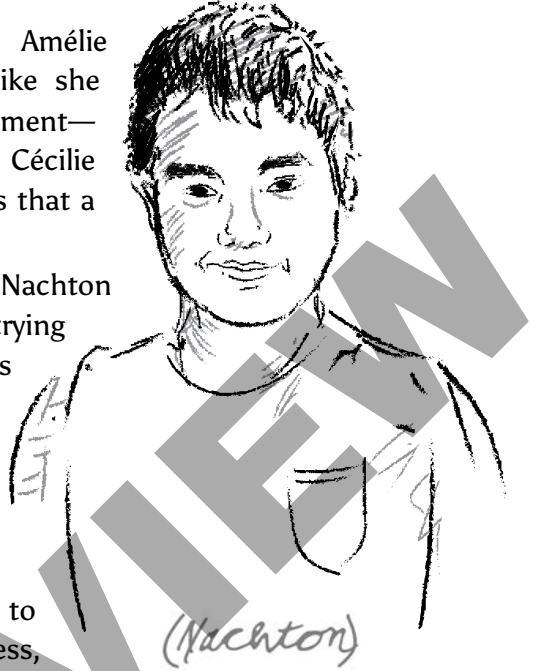
“What’s going on?” Amélie demanded. She looked like she might start crying at any moment—and if *she* started crying, Cécilie definitely would too. “Was that a dragon? Where *are* we?”

“I don’t know, okay?” Nachton hissed back at her. He was trying to see through the branches of the bush, to get a look at what was happening with the centaur and the dragon. “Now be quiet!”

Amélie wanted to argue—she *always* wanted to argue—but thank goodness, this time she didn’t. Even Cécilie and Ewan stayed quiet, eyes wide with fear.

The centaur still stood on the grassy field between the forest and the chasm the bridge had fallen into. The half-man/half-horse cut a regal figure, chin held high, arms clasped calmly behind his human back... even though the dragon had landed and was now looming over him. The two fantasy creatures were *talking*, Nachton realized; it was too far away to hear what they were saying, but from the way the dragon was smiling and licking his long fangs, Nachton doubted it was a friendly chat.

They did not talk long. When they were done, the centaur nodded respectfully to the beast and turned to walk calmly toward where the children were hiding in the forest. The dragon flapped its powerful wings and leapt back into the sky. Nachton got his first good look at the creature and realized it wasn’t a dragon at all, but... something else.



Something more like a bat—a *huge* bat—but with muscular forearms and a long, sinuous tail, its whole body covered with midnight-black fur.

The girls started jabbering questions almost immediately, but Nachton shushed them. Bats had excellent ears, and he guessed that any creature with a bat-like body would have good hearing too.

Nachton thought he had picked a good hiding place, but the centaur must have seen them anyway, because he walked straight towards them. “Quickly,” he said again, his voice very soft. “Come with me. Speak not; make no noise at all.” Without asking, he reached down and picked up both Cécilie and Ewan, one child in each of his thick human arms. Twisting at the waist, he set them down on his back, letting them ride like he was a normal horse. He said nothing further, just kept walking calmly, deeper and deeper into the forest.

“But—wait!” Amélie whispered furiously. “Where are we going? Who *are* you? We—we need to go back *that* way. We need to get back to our parents!”

“The bridge to your home is destroyed, young huwomán,” the centaur said. He didn’t stop moving, but he did glance over his shoulder and give her a sad smile.

“Can’t we repair it?” she asked, and Nachton rolled his eyes. As if it would be that simple.

The centaur stopped and offered Amélie a patient smile. “Take a good look back there, then tell me if you really want to return and begin a construction project today.”

All four of the children turned and looked back through the trees, to find that the dragon-creature was no longer alone. It had been joined by dozens of... gargoyles? Hairy, gray man-shaped creatures with bat-like wings of their own, though Nachton was too far away to get a good look at them.

The gray bat-men were swooping in circles above the site of the destroyed bridge, where they began to yell and whoop and *sing*. They were clearly celebrating, and yet the sound of their music—very soft, because of the distance—was enough to raise goose bumps on Nachton’s arms.

Amélie swallowed so hard that Nachton was able to hear *that* too.

“They are quite excited about destroying your bridge,” the centaur said quietly. “But that’s nothing compared to what would happen if they saw *you*. You would be in chains before you knew it, then flown away to meet their dark master.”

“But they let *you* get away,” Amélie blurted.

“I am no threat to them, or so they think,” the centaur said softly. “Just another citizen of Overtwixt. But you four are human, like their master—who has plotted for many years to make himself the *only* human in the land. Your arrival threatens to undermine all he has worked to achieve.” The centaur cocked his head. “*Now* do you understand the danger you’re in?”

Nachton and Amélie shared a look, and Amélie shivered visibly.

“Good,” the centaur concluded. “Now please, for your own sakes, be silent until we put more distance between ourselves and those creatures of the night.”

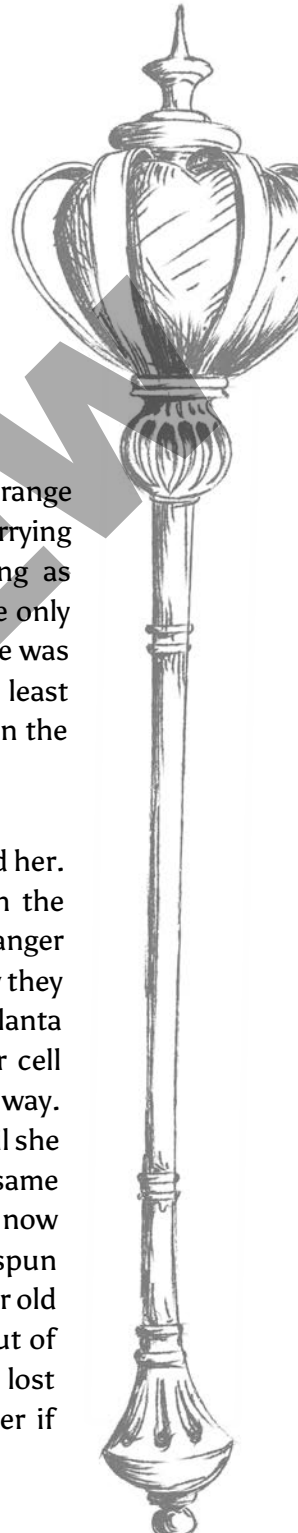
Amazingly, every one of the four children did exactly as the centaur asked.

• three •
(Amélie)

Amélie and Nachton followed the strange creature for so long it felt like hours, hurrying between trees and bushes and making as little noise as possible. Following him was the only choice they had, as far as Amélie could see. He was carrying Ewan and Cécilie, and besides, he at least *pretended* to be nice. Those flying creatures, on the other hand...

Amélie shivered again.

Almost everything about this place scared her. It was bad enough that the kids were lost in the woods without their parents, following a stranger who wasn't even human. She had no idea how they even *got* here; they definitely weren't in Atlanta anymore! What was worse, she had lost her cell phone and backpack somewhere along the way. She thought maybe she'd dropped them... until she discovered she wasn't even wearing the same *clothes* anymore. All four children were now wearing stiff woolen trousers and rough-spun tunics. The colors were about the same as their old clothes, but the style looked like something out of an old storybook. And all the other kids had lost their backpacks too. Amélie began to wonder if



anything from home had made it across the bridge aside from the four Ollivaros children themselves.

They had not traveled far through the trees before Amélie was breathing hard, only partly from fear. This was no easy stroll, like the walks her family sometimes took through their neighborhood. This was a *hike*. The farther they went, the higher they climbed up the forested slope of the mountain they had seen when they first arrived.

“Can we stop, please?” Amélie asked finally, and Nachton nodded eagerly.

The tall man-horse nodded. “There’s a good place up ahead.”

A few minutes later, they stepped out into a small clearing and the man-horse—the *centaur*, Nachton had called him—came to a halt. Cécilie immediately slid down from his back, but Ewan had somehow fallen asleep, face buried in the braided mane that grew from the centaur’s human back. Nachton collapsed to the ground, trying to catch his breath, but Amélie faced off against the strange creature. “I think it’s time we got some answers,” she declared, voice wavering only slightly.

The centaur did not react at all to Amélie’s challenging tone. He simply nodded his head, with the same polite respect he had showed the dragon earlier. “Very well. What would you like to know?”

Amélie licked her lips. “What did you call this place? Overtwixt?”

“Overtwixt*,” he corrected her gently. “The world of bridges, where all parallel universes intersect.”

Nachton sat up, suddenly looking very interested. “We’re in an alternate *dimension*?”

* See complete Glossary of Persons, Places, and Things on page 271.

“Not quite,” the centaur said with a smile. “You’re in a place where men and women *from* alternate dimensions can come together. *You* cannot travel to a parallel world any more than someone from that world can travel to yours. That is why Overtwixt exists—so you can meet in the middle.”

Amélie felt dizzy just hearing all these words, none of which made sense to her. Nachton sucked in a breath to ask another question—something scientific, she was sure—but she spoke first. “Who cares? I want to know how and *why* we’re here!”

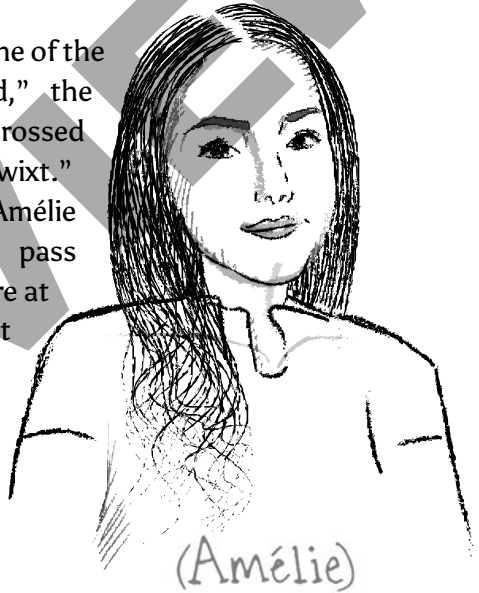
“You passed through one of the portals in your real world,” the centaur explained, “then crossed the human bridge into Overtwixt.”

“We... *what?*” Amélie demanded. “We didn’t pass through any portals. We were at the airport... we went through Gate 3, because that’s where our plane was boarding.”

“What is a gate, if not a portal from one place to another?” the centaur asked. “However... it was actually the Pi Gate you passed through, just *next* to Gate 3.” He said this with a twinkle in his eye, a playful smile on his lips. “And so you find yourselves here, rather than on your plane.”

“Pie?” Ewan asked suddenly from the centaur’s back. “*I* want pie!” Apparently, just hearing that word was enough to wake him from the deepest sleep.

“Oooh, I get it,” Nachton said, ignoring his little brother. “*Pi*. Roughly equal to 3.14—that *would* be very close to Gate 3.”



“I don’t get it,” Cécilie complained.

“You wouldn’t,” Nachton said with a cocky smile. “It’s a math thing.” At least *he* was acting like his normal self, even if nothing about this situation was normal.

“There no pie?” Ewan asked, getting upset now. “But I hungry—”

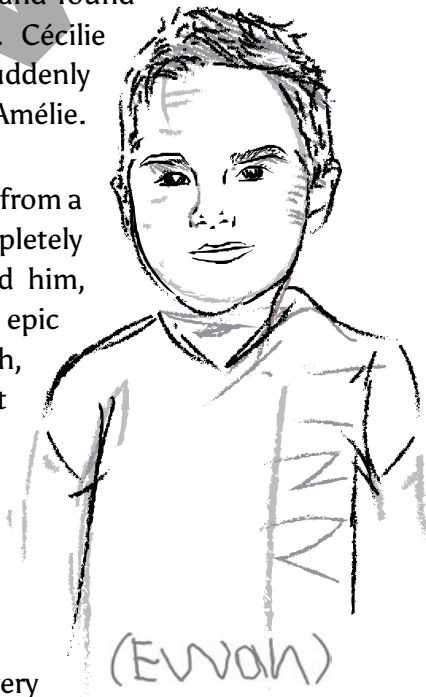
“Can we please get back to the point?” Amélie said impatiently, her voice cracking with emotion. Was *no one* else terrified that they were in this strange place with this strange creature?

The centaur’s smile faded, and he nodded seriously. “Very well. You want to know why you’re here? I invited you here, because Overtwixt needs you.” He took a deep breath and seemed to grow even more serious. “You see, a great evil has overtaken this realm.”

Amélie glanced at Nachton and found her own fear mirrored in his eyes. Cécilie hugged herself, like she was suddenly cold, and stepped closer to Amélie. Ewan...

Ewan had broken two sticks from a low-hanging tree branch. Completely ignoring the conversation around him, the 5-year-old was narrating an epic swordfight under his breath, banging the sticks violently against each other like they were held by enemy swordsmen.

The centaur went on with his explanation. “A man known as the Vizier has seized control of this realm, destroying all bridges back to reality and stranding every



person left behind—forcing many of them into slavery. Your human bridge was only the last to be destroyed.” He nodded towards Amélie. “You asked before about rebuilding your bridge, and that is exactly what must be done if you ever hope to return home. But the Vizier will never allow it, not while he rules in Overtwixt.

“Your mission, therefore—and the reason I brought you here—is to overthrow the Vizier,” the centaur concluded. “That way, *all* the bridges can be rebuilt and *everyone* can go home, not just you.”

There was a long silence following this pronouncement, and Amélie felt her fear growing. “Just to make sure I understand,” she said with as much calm as possible, “you’re saying that the bridge, the one the... dragon... destroyed”—she swallowed convulsively—“was the only way to get back to our parents.”

The centaur nodded.

“And there are no other bridges?”

“There are no other bridges that go back to the real world, no,” he confirmed.

“And if we try rebuilding our bridge”—not that Amélie had the first clue how to do such a thing, she was forced to admit—“we’re gonna get arrested.”

The centaur nodded again.

“By dragons and bat-people, who work for an evil tyrant.”

“That is a fair summary of the situation, yes,” the centaur said gravely. “Which is why you must first overthrow the Vizier and end his reign of terror.”

Amélie sat down carefully on the ground, lowered her head, and hugged herself closely.

Nachton cleared his throat. “What exactly does that mean, overthrowing the Vizier?”

The centaur turned to face the oldest Ollivaros child. “Exactly what it sounds like. Only you four, working together, are capable of fighting back and defeating this villain.”

Ewan gasped loudly enough that Amélie jumped to her feet, looking around for some new danger. But the little boy was just reacting to what the centaur said; of course the prospect of *fighting* sounded fun to him. He had dropped his sticks and was sitting up straight on the centaur’s back now, listening very intently. At least Cécilie’s reaction made more sense; she was staring at the centaur with her mouth hanging open.

“But... why *us*?” Amélie asked in a begging tone. “What’s so special about *us*?”

The centaur smiled gently. “Everything... and nothing. Each one of you is special, no more or less than any other person from any world. However, the Vizier came from *your* world, which makes you four uniquely qualified to face him. You are exactly what Overtwixt needs in this time of peril.”

“And why should we trust *you*?” Amélie demanded angrily. In truth, part of her wanted to trust him, but she didn’t want to believe what he was saying. His words scared her... and Amélie often got angry when she was scared. “We don’t even *know* you.”

The centaur twisted at the waist and took Ewan from his back, setting him gently on the ground. Then the half-man/half-horse backed away several steps and knelt forward on his front horse legs, spreading his human arms to either side in an elaborate bow. “Allow me to introduce myself, then. I am the Guide,” he said, “and I am genuinely delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Ewan shrugged and started climbing a nearby tree, but Nachton and Cécilie turned to look at Amélie. *She* had taken the lead in asking the centaur all these questions, even though Nachton was the oldest. They wanted to see what she would say next.

“The *Guide*?” Amélie demanded. “Do you have a real name?”

“Many, in fact.” The centaur cocked his head to the side. “But in this place, *what* you are matters more than the name people call you. And *what* I am, at this moment, is your Guide.”

The sheer strangeness of this whole situation threatened to overwhelm her. “Our guide,” Amélie repeated dumbly. “Like a tour guide?”

The half-man/half-horse chuckled. “If you wish, though my responsibilities are considerably more substantial than giving tours.”

“I don’t want a tour, and certainly not from a half-horse freak that can’t possibly exist!” Amélie blurted. “I just want to go home!” And she buried her face in her hands.

Of course Nachton had to correct her again, as usual. “I told you before, Am. He’s a *centaur*.”

The centaur cleared his throat. “That’s... not quite true, young human. Certainly, your world has legends of creatures who look like this, and you call them centaurs. But no such creature has ever set foot on your world. As I told you earlier, no man or woman can ever visit a parallel universe.” He shook his head. “Many of your myths were inspired by tales brought back from Overtwixt by visitors such as yourselves. In *this* place, the very real people who look like me are called centmen and centwomen. Just as you four are called humen and huwomen.”

Nachton gave the tall creature a strange look. “You mean human men and women,” he corrected. “I’ve never heard anyone say *humen* or *huwomen*.”

The centaur... or centman... or Guide—whoever or *whatever* he was—didn’t respond to Nachton’s correction. He only smiled.

Amélie tried to control her frustration and panic. First Nachton was concerned with scientific explanations; now he wanted to talk grammar or vocab or whatever? “We’re not men *or* women,” she interrupted. “We’re just *kids*.”

That made Nachton flush angrily. “Speak for yourself, you preteen brat. *I’m* already learning to drive a car—”

“Peace, young human,” the Guide told Nachton, raising a hand. He was still half kneeling before the children; now he folded his back legs and settled the rest of the way to the ground, bringing himself much closer to Amélie’s level. “You are wise not to trust strangers,” he told her. “Caution is always warranted, especially in this place, during these difficult times. I suppose you will have to decide for yourself whether or not to trust me... or the things I’m about to tell you.”

There was so much seriousness in the Guide’s voice, Amélie felt her own eyes get even wider. It wasn’t enough that the four kids were stranded in this strange place, separated from Mom and Dad, and tasked with overthrowing an evil ruler. Now this centman had *more* to tell them, and he thought it might be harder to believe than what he’d *already* told them!?

Whatever it was, it would have to wait... because Ewan chose that moment to start shouting from up in his tree.

• four •

(Cécilie)

Cécilie climbed up next to Ewan in the tree, making room on the branch for Amélie too. Nachton climbed another tree nearby... and then everyone stared at the thing Ewan had seen.

“Is... is that... a *floating island*?” Cécilie asked in amazement.

“Are those *horseys* on the floaty island?” Ewan asked in excitement.

“Are *we* on a floating island too?” Amélie asked in horror.

The Guide laughed and smiled at their questions. “Yes, yes, and yes,” he answered all three. “All of Overtwixt is made up of these floating islands,” he explained, “which we call *nilands*.* And that’s also why we call Overtwixt the world of bridges—because bridges are the only way to get around!” His smile was huge as he winked at Ewan. “And we don’t call them horses here, young human. They may *look* like the horses from your world, but horses are just animals. *These* creatures—the

* See complete Glossary of Persons, Places, and Things on page 271.



ones you see galloping around on that niland over there—are eqmen. And they’re people like you, capable of thinking and talking.”

Cécilie couldn’t believe her eyes. Apparently Nachton couldn’t either. “When we crossed over that rope bridge earlier,” he said slowly, “I thought we were just really high up. All the whiteness I saw below the bridge... I assumed it was the tops of clouds!” He shook his head and pointed at the floating island. “But this—it’s impossible!”

Cécilie didn’t know much about science, but she had to agree. Then again, she was looking at the proof, wasn’t she? A big grassy field full of horses, with trees on one side and boulders on the other, and beyond that... *emptiness*, all around. It’s like the grass and trees and boulders were on top of a big cliff, but there was nothing at the *bottom* of the cliff. It just... floated.

“Overtwixt need not obey the physical laws you are used to,” the Guide explained. “This is not truly a physical place, after all; Overtwixt is a conceptual realm only.”

Nachton could only keep staring, muttering the word “impossible” under his breath.

Cécilie looked back at the Guide again, and found him watching *her*. “It’s known as Eqland,” he said with a smile. “That floating island, I mean. We call it *Eq*-land because it’s the port niland of the *eq*-men, those creatures that look like horses.” The Guide stomped a hoof and pointed at the ground below them. “In much the same way, the niland we stand upon right now is called *Hu*-land, because it’s the portland of you *hu*-men.”

“What’s that over there?” Amélie asked in an unsteady voice, pointing down the mountain the four kids were on, at a path running through the trees. Cécilie followed the path with her eyes, all the way to a big bridge.

“That,” the Guide answered, “is the bridge linking Huland with Eqland.”

It was *beautiful*. Like... marble, *brown* marble... with statues standing on top of the railings: human statues on one side, horse statues on the other. And unlike the bridge they crossed earlier, this bridge started halfway up the mountain, because the island it connected to floated higher in the air than *this* island did.

“I thought you said all the bridges were destroyed?” Amélie asked.

“All of the bridges back to the real worlds, yes,” the Guide responded. “Fortunately, many of the bridges *between* nilands remain intact.”

“What’s *that*?” Amélie asked again, now pointing a different direction. “Buildings? Are there *people* there?”

Again, Cécilie looked where her sister was pointing. The island they were on—Huland—stretched away out of sight, too big to see all at once, but Cécilie could make out another mountain in the distance. In between that mountain and this one was a forest valley—and in the middle of the woods there was a group of buildings, just like Amélie said.

“No,” the Guide said apologetically, “there are no people there. If you’ll recall what I told you before, there are no other humen in all of Overtwixt, save for yourselves and the Vizier.” Amélie’s excitement died. “But those buildings you see there,” he added enthusiastically, “are the famed towers of the Grand Library of Huland.”

The word *library* got Nachton’s attention again.

“Oh yes,” the Guide told him with a sly smile. “The Grand Library of Huland is the most complete repository of human knowledge in all the cosmos, either here *or* in your world. It was once rivaled by your Royal Library of Alexandria, but—”

Nachton's eyes got big. "The Library of Alexandria? It burned down two thousand years ago!"

The Guide nodded. "That was a great shame. So many priceless works of antiquity lost. Fortunately, most of that knowledge survives in the ancient texts stored here."

Nachton's eyes got even bigger. "Can we go there next? The Library?"

"I wanna see da horseys!" Ewan interrupted loudly.

"Are you *kidding me?!?*" Amélie shrieked. "We're a million miles from Mom and Dad, *floating on islands* that could fall out of the sky at any moment, and you guys want to go *sightseeing?*" She was gripping the tree trunk so hard it made her fingers white. "Focus, guys, *please.*"

"There will be time for exploring Overtwixt soon," the Guide promised calmly, "but your sister is correct. There is a matter of great importance we must address first."

"Yeah," Amélie said. "Like how exactly a bunch of kids is supposed to overthrow this Vizier guy so we can go home." She even laughed as she said the words, but Cécilie knew her sister was on the verge of losing control... and that scared Cécilie more than anything that had happened so far.

The Guide did not answer Amélie's question, however. Instead, he got all official-sounding. "Humen and huwomen, visitors to Overtwixt," he intoned. "Before you proceed, you must each make a decision."

"*What* decision?" Amélie moaned.

"The same decision every visitor faces, the first time he or she sets foot in Overtwixt." The Guide looked around at each of them in turn. "Who will YOU choose to be?"

• five •
(Nachton)

Nachton knew instinctively what the Guide meant, and he felt a powerful excitement in his belly. They got to choose what roles they would play here? This place was starting to sound exactly like an RPG, his favorite type of video game—the kind where he chose his character, picked out his clothes and gear, and led his squad into battle. Except this place was even better, because it was *real*. Amélie might be freaking out right now, but as far as Nachton was concerned, this trip through the Pi Gate might just be the best thing that ever happened to him.

Hopping out of his tree, Nachton helped the girls down from theirs. They were being very quiet, but Ewan seemed just as excited as Nachton. With no warning at all, the little boy flung himself out of the tree in a maneuver that would've broken both his legs if Nachton hadn't caught him in time.

The centman eyed each of the children in turn, stopping finally on the youngest. Ewan was literally jumping up and down, giggling.



“Ewan Ollivaros,” the Guide intoned seriously. “Three paths stand before you. Will you be the Swashbuckler, the Knight, or the General?”

Ewan’s excitement turned to confusion, and he looked at his older brother. “What a sosh— sosh—?” He struggled to pronounce the word.

Nachton traded a glance with the Guide. “A swashbuckler is kinda like a pirate.”

Ewan got excited again. “And... um... da uvver one?”

“The other one? You mean the general? That’s the person in charge of an army. He orders troops around, telling them who to fight.”

“Do gen-rals get to fight too?”

Nachton glanced at the Guide once more, but the Guide didn’t say anything. “Um... no,” he told his brother. “Generals don’t usually fight personally.”

“But *knights* fight.” Ewan looked from Nachton to the Guide with a mischievous smile on his lips. “And knights get horseys and armor and *swords*. Right? Right?”

The Guide chuckled. “Yes, young human. If you choose to become the Knight, one of the quests you undertake will be to earn a sword and armor—”

“*Shiny* armor?”

“Yes—”

“And do *soshbuckles* get shiny armor?”

“Well, no—”

“I wanna be da knight!” Ewan decided.

The Guide studied the little boy for a moment. “This is a momentous decision. Be sure you give it adequate thought before—”

“Da knight!” Ewan insisted. “I wanna be da knight!”

“Very well,” the centman said solemnly, but Nachton could tell he was smiling on the inside. “I hereby recognize you as the Knight. Bear this responsibility wisely.”

The Guide turned to Cécilie next. “Cécilie Ollivaros, three paths stand before you. Will you be the Princess—”

“The princess!” Cécilie blurted. “I want to be the princess. All I’ve *ever* wanted to be was a princess.”

“But—”

“The princess,” she said again, her voice firm and her eyes fiery—as if daring the centman to argue.

The Guide almost couldn’t hide his smile this time. “Very well. Bear this responsibility wisely.”

He turned to Amélie, and his expression grew serious again. “Amélie Ollivaros, three paths stand before you, and your choice will be difficult.”

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted, “but why does this matter? I just want to *go home*.”

“It matters,” the Guide explained, “because who you choose to be will impact how you fight the Vizier.”

Amélie wrestled with her emotions for a long moment, then took a deep breath and nodded jerkily.

“Three paths stand before you,” the Guide repeated. “Will you be the Bard, or the Dancer...” He trailed off, giving her a chance to think about her first two options.

“What the heck is a *bard*?” she demanded.

“It’s like a minstrel,” Nachton explained. Thanks to all the books he had read—not to mention the *many* video games he had played—Nachton was familiar with the term. “They were both types of musicians, in medieval times.”

Amélie seemed confused. “But... how could being a musician—or a dancer—help us defeat the Vizier? I mean, a knight can fight,” she said, looking at Ewan. “And a princess

probably has her own soldiers she can send into battle,” she added, looking at Cécilie. “But... what good can a *bard* do?”

The Guide smiled gently. “A purveyor of the arts—whether musician, dancer, painter, writer, or something else—can accomplish things no Princess or Knight ever could. You see, artists have the power to bring joy to many, lifting their spirits. And in this time of darkness and despair, that is more valuable than ever.”

Amélie nodded slowly, expression thoughtful but grim. “What’s my third choice?”

The Guide met her eyes calmly. “The third path standing before you is that of Empress.”

Nachton’s eyes bugged out, and Cécilie gasped. “Empress?” Amélie asked weakly. “Like... I’d be in charge?”

“If you earned the loyalty of those peoples currently ruled by the Vizier... yes,” the Guide agreed. “You have the gifting to be a great leader, if you choose to take that responsibility upon yourself.”

Amélie thought this through for a long moment, before the Guide spoke into the silence.

“Please understand something. In normal times, Overtwixt would have no need for an Empress. Overtwixt already *has* a Sovereign, supreme ruler of all the infinite dimensions of the cosmos. But he is distant from the thoughts of most men and women, and some of the bridges the Vizier destroyed were the ones leading from this realm to the rest of Overtwixt—an act of rebellion, to keep the Sovereign’s armies from returning to these nilands.” The Guide glanced from child to child before returning his gaze to Amélie. “Indeed, the Vizier has named *himself* Emperor of this realm, though he’s still just the Vizier. By accepting the mantle of Empress, you would make yourself his rival—someone for the peoples of this realm to rally behind.

“If it helps you make your choice,” the centman went on, “the role of Empress is no more important than that of Bard or Dancer... you can do much good in any of these roles. But there is, perhaps, a greater need for an Empress right now than there is for an artist... if you are brave enough to face the greater danger.”

Amélie swallowed hard, and Nachton could guess what she was thinking. Of the four Ollivaros children, Amélie was the one who lived most in fear—fear of something happening to herself or the people she loved, fear of what others thought of her. At times, she seemed to jump in fear at the slightest unexpected noise. It was hard to imagine *her* as a fearless *Empress*, facing down an evil Vizier. She was going to choose Dancer for sure, Nachton knew. She was *already* a ballet dancer, after all.

“I’ll do it,” Amélie whispered, to Nachton’s absolute shock. “I’ll be the Empress, if that’s what’s needed to get us back home safe.”

The Guide nodded gravely and turned toward Nachton. “Nachton Ollivaros, three paths—”

“Wait,” Cécilie interrupted. “You’re not gonna ask *her* again and again if she’s sure, like you did with me and Ewan? You’re not gonna tell *her* to take her job seriously?”

The Guide’s eyes flicked to Cécilie and back to Amélie, as if measuring her. “No.” He turned again toward Nachton. “Nachton Ollivaros, three paths stand before you.”

Nachton was almost jittery with anticipation. Hard as it was to believe, his sister was now *Empress* of this place, and the little kids were Princess and Knight. What would that make *him*? As the oldest and most responsible of the four Ollivaros children, he would have to play the most important role. But what could be more important than the ruler of everything? Some sort of superhero? A magician of awesome power?

The Guide was watching Nachton like he knew exactly what the teenager was thinking. “Nachton Ollivaros, will you choose to be the Medic?”

Nachton blinked. “What?”

“Or perhaps the Sage?”

“What?”

Amélie was confused too. “Like... the spice you use in cooking?”

“No!” Nachton turned on her. “Like a very wise man. But still—”

“Or will you choose to be the Loremaster?” the Guide concluded, offering Nachton his final option.

Nachton felt himself growing red in the face. “Are you kidding me? These options are garbage. *That* little squirt gets to be a knight in shining armor,” he said angrily, pointing at his siblings in turn, “and *those* brats are *royalty*? But you want to shove me into some minor *support* role?”

The Guide held Nachton’s gaze evenly, not even a hint of humor in his expression. “And what *would* you be, if you could pick any role you wanted?”

Nachton threw his hands in the air, frustrated. “I don’t know! Some sort of mage or sorcerer?”

“Magic interests you,” the Guide said, studying Nachton with a discerning gaze. “Magic... and power.” He took a deep breath. “*Those* paths are dangerous. With great power comes great responsibility, and many who pursue the easy paths—to fame, riches, power—fall quickly. I would not see you make such mistakes, Nachton Ollivaros. Besides,” he shook his head, “Overtwixt already *has* both a Sorcerer and a Mage, whether they still answer to those names or not. *They* pursued magic as an end instead of a means, and the example they set is not one I would wish you to follow.”

Nachton was clenching his jaw so hard it hurt. “And if I choose one of those roles anyway?”

“That is not the choice you face.” The Guide’s expression seemed hard as stone. “Unlike what you were taught growing up, you *cannot* choose whatever you want to be in life. Rather, life presents you with specific opportunities based on who you are and what the world needs.”

“Make me a ruler too, then. I could be King, or—”

“*You*, Nachton Ollivaros, do not have the gifting to be King or Ruler, and the world doesn’t need another Sorcerer or Magician.” The Guide took a deep breath, then spoke more gently. “But a Medic or Sage? A *Loremaster*? These are very real needs that *you* are equipped to meet. And you will find no greater satisfaction in life than when you’re being who you were created to be—instead of trying to be someone you’re not. *That* is a path to misery.”

The centman finally stopped, and none of the four children were bold enough to interrupt the sudden silence.

Nachton turned away, hoping no one saw him blushing. “Fine,” he muttered. “I’ll be the Loremaster then.” At least it had *master* in the name. That had to earn him *some* respect, right?

The Guide nodded gravely. “So be it. I hereby recognize you as the Loremaster. Bear this responsibility wisely.”

The centman stepped back to face all four children again. “Your paths have been chosen. I will say it one more time, for all of you: Bear wisely your chosen responsibilities.” Abruptly, he smiled. “And know that I am proud of you all.”

Amélie spoke hesitantly. “We made the right choices then? The right decisions to get us back home to Mom and Dad?”

“No.”

Amélie blinked. “No?”

The Guide chuckled. “Not all choices are between right and wrong, or even between good and better. Sometimes, you demonstrate honor not in *what* you choose, but in how you follow through on whichever choice you make. I am proud of you because I know, in the end, you will perform your duties well.”

“So *now* what?” Nachton asked, annoyed and impatient and much less excited about this adventure than he’d been a few minutes ago. “Take on this Vizier guy? Where do we find him, anyway?”

“Trust me when I say you are not yet ready to face him,” the centman said. “There is much you must first do to prepare yourselves.” He was looking at Nachton as he said this, a twinkle in his eye. “There are... quests... you must undertake.”

Nachton perked up a little at this. Quests? Well... that didn’t sound so bad.

“Sir Knight,” the Guide said to Ewan, “there are three things a knight usually needs, as you already noted—armor to protect, a sword to defend, and a squire to help you bear the load.”

“And a horsey!” Ewan blurted. “Knights need horseys!”

The Guide broke into a big smile. “Yes, precisely. Acquire these things and learn the use of them before your family seeks out the Vizier.”

Ewan whooped with excitement and began running around like a crazy person, yelling battle cries.

“Princess,” the Guide said to Cécilie. “You must win back the throne of Eqland... and you must discover for yourself a truth that no one else can teach you.”

Cécilie took a deep breath and nodded, looking only a little confused as she raised her hand. “Eqland?” she asked. “So... I’m the leader of the horses?”

The Guide’s eyes were definitely twinkling now. “The horses... *and* the unicorns, yes.” He tapped the center of his forehead. “Eqwomen grow beautiful horns, which is what gave rise to the legend of unicorns in your world.”

Cécilie looked so excited about this that *she* started bouncing up and down on her toes. Ewan gave her a high-five in passing. “Horseys, horseys!” he chanted.

The Guide rested a hand on Amélie’s shoulder. “Empress, your quest is both the simplest and the most difficult: you must build trust and loyalty among the peoples of Overtwixt, overcome prejudice, and unite the races beneath your banner. Before the Vizier can be overthrown, oaths must be sworn. But which oaths... and to whom? That is part of your quest to determine.”

Amélie nodded, wide-eyed and visibly shaking.

“Finally, Master of Lore...” The Guide focused his gaze on Nachton. “Two things only must you seek: knowledge... and wisdom.”

Nachton waited a long moment. “That’s it?” he finally asked. “*They* get all sorts of guidance, and all I get is ‘knowledge and wisdom’?”

“Yes.”

“*Seriously?* That’s not even two things. That’s like *one* thing.”

The Guide cocked his head. “Perhaps, once you’ve obtained both, you will understand the difference.”

Nachton turned away angrily, throwing his hands into the air again.

“Above all,” the Guide concluded, speaking now to all the children, “you four must be united in purpose, or your efforts against the Vizier will be in vain.”

“Wait!” Amélie cried out suddenly. “Everyone, where’s Ewan?”

It *had* been a little too quiet these last few moments. Nachton spun back, looking around quickly, but there was no sign of his little brother. Typical.

“He went that way!” Cécilie said, pointing toward the path they had seen earlier, the one leading down the side of the mountain.

“And you just *let* him?!” Amélie demanded.

“Way to go, Cécilie,” Nachton said, disgusted. “You could’ve at least *said* something!”

“I *tried* to tell you—” Cécilie began, but Nachton ignored her, quickly climbing a tree with Amélie so they could search along the path with their eyes. Unfortunately, Ewan wasn’t on the path. There *was*, however, a child-sized figure running across the brown marble bridge to Eqland, little legs churning for all they were worth.

“No!” Amélie cried. “Ewan!” she screamed. “Stop!” She whirled on Nachton, as if this was somehow *his* fault. “Where’s he going?” she demanded.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he shot back. “*Eqland.*”

“But why!?”

“Well, let me think,” Nachton said sarcastically. “The Guide practically told him to, remember? He’s the *Knight*. He needs to get himself a *horse.*”

Amélie scowled back at him. “He’s only *five*, Nachton.” She whirled again. “Cécilie, stay here with Nachton. Don’t you move, either of you!” And with that, Amélie dropped out of the tree, and *she* bolted down the path to the bridge.

Chasing after their little brother.

• six •
(Ewan)

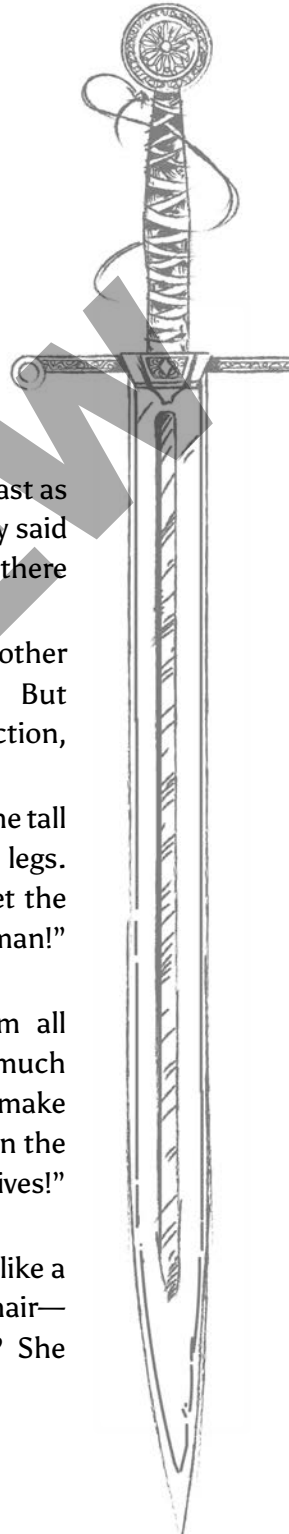
Ewan ran across the big brown bridge as fast as his little legs could carry him. Guide Guy said he could have a horsey of his own, and there was no time to waste.

He stared in surprise when he got to the other side—the grass here was taller than *he* was! But Ewan didn't let that stop him. He picked a direction, and the grass let him through easy enough.

It wasn't long before he stumbled out of the tall grass next to a dark red horsey with black legs. "Good heavens!" it shrieked. Ewan tried to pet the horsey, but it reared up on its back legs. "Little man!" it screamed, then ran away.

Other voices began crying out in alarm all across the field of grass. Ewan didn't know much about horseys, but these horseys seemed to make very unhorsey noises. "Little man! Little man in the herd!" one voice screamed. "Run for your lives!" shouted another.

A unee-corn ran past. It was shaped just like a horsey, but with a white body and long pink hair—and it had a *horn*, of course. Where was Sessy? She would think this was *so* awesome-cool.



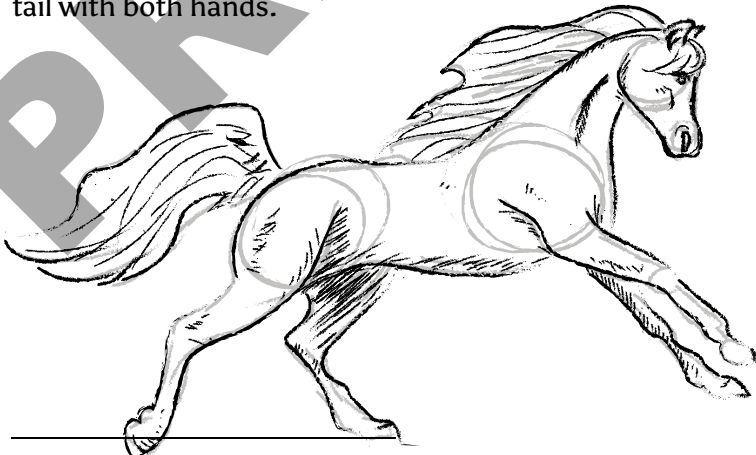
The unee-corn* saw Ewan, and its eyes got as big as dinner plates. “Ruuuun!” it screeched in a little girl voice. “He’ll kill us all!”

Ewan chased her, but she disappeared into the tall grass too. All around, he heard horsey galloping sounds, but they got quieter and quieter. He tumbled out into a big area of trampled grass and looked around eagerly, but he was all alone. His lip began to tremble. Why had they all run away?

Something moved in the grass, and Ewan saw there was one horsey left, coming his way. It was *huuuuge*, all black with a white mark on its forehead. It stepped out of the tall grass and started pawing the ground with one big hoof, snorting loudly.

Ewan’s lip stopped trembling, and he smiled. This horsey was *perfick*.

The big black horsey charged. Not knowing what else to do, Ewan charged right back. The two of them ran straight at each other, Ewan bellowing gleefully at the top of his lungs. At the last moment before they ran into each other, the horsey turned to the side, passing Ewan close enough to touch. So... Ewan reached out and grabbed the horsey’s long tail with both hands.



* Glossary on page 271 includes complete listing of “Ewanisms.”

“Yow!” the horsey yelled, and Ewan was jerked off his feet. The horsey began to run even faster, dragging Ewan in midair behind him. “Let go, you stupid creature!”

Ewan didn’t answer.

The horsey stopped suddenly, turning and trying to *bite* him. But Ewan, hanging from that tail with all his strength, was always out of reach of the horsey’s teeth.

The big black horsey screamed. “Let *go*.” It talked with a fancy accent. “Do you have any idea how much that *hurts*?”

Shrugging, Ewan let go—then grabbed the long black hair coming from the horsey’s head and tried climbing onto its back. Now the horsey *really* couldn’t bite him. Ewan made it halfway up before the horsey screamed again and took off at full speed.

Ewan almost fell off, but he tangled his fingers in the horsey’s long hair and held on for dear life. The horsey ran faster and faster, its hooves sounding like thunder on the ground. Ewan’s arms started to hurt from all the bumping and bouncing.

“Slo-o-o-o-ow dow-ow-ow-ow-n,” he tried to shout, his words interrupted by every bounce of the horsey’s feet.

“Let goooo!” the horsey called back to him.

“Nev-ev-ev-ev-er!”

In the distance, Ewan thought he heard his sister Ommie screaming. *She* was telling him to let go too, but he was too busy taming a horsey to listen to *her* right now.

The big black horsey ran *forever*, but Ewan held on no matter what. Nock and Ommie might be older and smarter, having gone to school and learned stuff—like *reading*—but there was one thing Ewan and Sessy did better than either of them. They were *stubborn*.

The land began to change as the horsey left the grassy plain behind, going into a rocky area. Its running slowed

down as they went uphill, and Ewan saw more and more boulders and cliffs coming out of the ground all around. Ewan was still hanging from the side of the horse's neck, and suddenly, he saw what the horse was planning—it was going to run next to one of the boulders and try to *scrape* Ewan off.

Ewan's arms were *really* hurting now, but with all of the strength he had left, he pulled up and jerked down hard on the horse's hair.

"Ow!" the horse cried, coming to a stop and rearing up on its back legs again. When the horse landed, before it could start running again, Ewan saw his chance and took it. Using all of his jungle gym skills, he scrambled the rest of the way onto the horse's back.

The horse started shaking, but it didn't move. "How *dare* you?" it whispered, furious. "I am not some stupid animal to be ridden. I am a *person*."

Ewan didn't answer. He just tangled his hands more tightly in the horse's mane, burying his face in the long hair and holding on tight. Then, taking a deep breath, he kicked with both feet. "Giddyup!"

"What?"

"Giddyup, horsey!"

The horse lost all control and began bucking wildly. Fortunately, Ewan knew all about this; he'd watched a video about taming horses one time. When a man picked his horse, he had to *break* him first. The horse would jump around a lot, just like this, trying to throw off its rider. But after a while, the horse got tired, and then the man and the horse were best friends.

So Ewan held on tight, even biting a mouthful of hair in his teeth, just in case.

Again, the wild ride took *forever*, but after a while—just like in the video—the big black horsey got tired. Finally, it stopped moving at all and lowered its head in defeat.

Smiling from ear to ear, Ewan let go of the horsey's hair and leaned back. His arms were *eggzawsted*, but he had won. He had a horsey of his own. Now all he needed was a sword and—

Screaming, the horsey bucked one last time—and Ewan, no longer holding on, went flying.

He flew right into a boulder, hitting so hard that he saw stars, then rolling down the big rock and landing on the ground below. A little puff of yellow smoke came out of his mouth, then disappeared.

The horsey stepped in front of him, spread its legs again, and lowered its head. It shoved its snout right into Ewan's face and bared its teeth like a dog.

"Why you do dat?" Ewan complained, fighting back tears.

"Why did I... *what*?" the horsey repeated, still talking in that fancy accent.

"What I ever do to you?" Ewan asked, shaking his head to clear it.

The horsey stared at him, confused—then backed up fast when Ewan stood up. It obviously didn't want to risk Ewan grabbing hold again.

"What was all dat stuff you were yelling 'bout?" Ewan asked.

The horsey blinked its big black eyes. "I... I said I'm a person. Even *gnomen* don't ride other gnomen."

Ewan stared back. "What's a no-man?"

The horsey cocked its head. "Why... I thought *you* were. But you're clearly young, and a gnoman your age should still have a beard. But if you're not a gnoman—"

"I'm a human!" Ewan said loudly. "*Duh.*"

"Yes! Yes, I see that now," the horsey said, suddenly very excited. "Forgive my confusion, young human. We eqmen hate gnomes, you see. It's a long story."

Ewan grinned suddenly. "No prob," he assured the horsey—the *eck*-man. "So... can I ride you now?"

The big black horsey tossed its head and blustered. "I don't know about *that*. Only the greatest of humen and dagmen are ever given the honor of riding an eqman."

"But I'm da *Knight*," Ewan said. "I *gots* to ride a horsey!"

The *eck*-man horsey guy didn't say anything for a second. Then it danced to one side, picking its feet up high as it moved. "You?" it asked him. "*You're* a Knight? Overtwixt hasn't had a Knight in millennia!"

"Minnie-what?"

"Thousands of years!" the horsey blustered. "*Really?* You're a *Knight?*"

Ewan shrugged. "That's what Guide Guy said."

The big black horsey *eck*-guy shook his head and laughed. "You're certainly brave enough." He reared suddenly, neighing loudly with glee. "A *Knight*. Why didn't you say so?"

Ewan shrugged again.

"Did the Guide give you a mission?" the horsey asked.

"Yeah," Ewan began. "I gotta—"

"He gave *me* a mission too," the *eck*-horsey interrupted. "And *my* mission was to find the Knight."

This... actually confused Ewan a little. "Huh?"

"Don't you see?" the big black horsey demanded. "I'm your *Squire*, and it would be the greatest honor of my life to bear you into battle!"