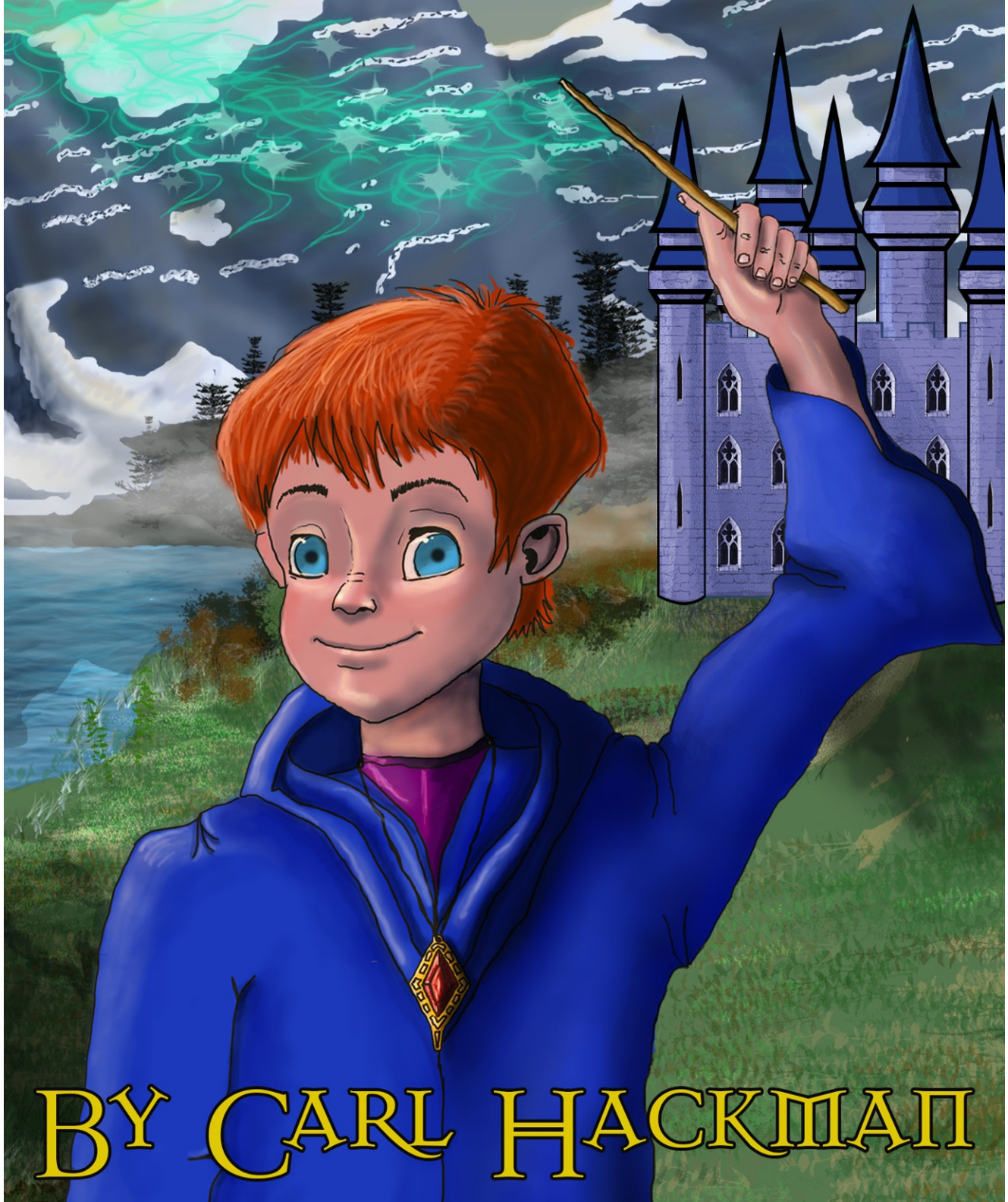


GERALD

BECOMES A WIZARD



BY CARL HACKMAN

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this short story and first chapter of Gerald and the amulet of Zonrach are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

GERALD BECOMES A WIZARD

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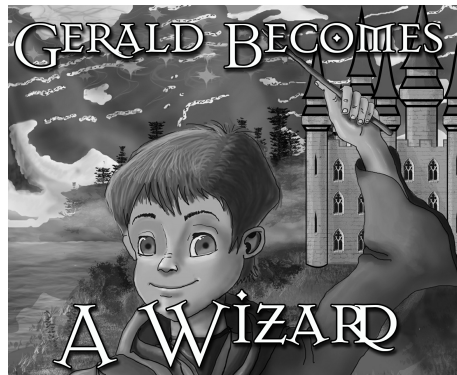
www.carlhackman.com

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Gerald leaned against a soft tower of straw reading his latest wizarding text. He would have called it an educational piece, but due to it being mainly constructed of colorful images, we would have called it a comic. Gerald devoured these valuable stories of famous wizards with gusto, every penny he acquired as gifts and wages from his father was saved in an old wizard's pouch hidden under a floorboard beneath his bed. He didn't earn much, but what he did he saved until he could afford a text book—one of the floppy ones filled with pictures.

The huge pile of straw he had secreted himself behind was the perfect place to read, and he knew that he must study hard if he was to become a famous wizard. The fact that he was just an eleven year old boy living in a little dream world had no effect whatsoever on his aspirations. Also, the small detail that not one person in his family had ever been a wizard didn't detract from his ambition.

This was quite a large problem because the only way to become a wizard was to reach the dizzying height of four-foot-eight; well that and the requirement of the family tree to contain a magical gene in it somewhere down the line. But, the apparent absence of such a gene in any of Gerald's forefathers made no difference to him; he was going to be a wizard.

He sighed with pleasure as the story of *Graadval The Elder* unfolded before his eyes, which were actually beginning to water now. Gerald had been leaning against the straw mound for so long that the smell, which you would have originally said was just the smell of the countryside was actually becoming a bit too much to bear. His father's job was a horticultural expert, and the main ingredient of his famous fertilizer came from the rear end of horses. This meant very little to Gerald, unless you counted the fact that mixed in with the straw was at least one third of his father's complete stock of Arce Qwik Grow Fertilizer. That would also account for the rather damp, brown stain on the back of his tunic, and of course the pervasive smell which was now making Gerald's eyes stream.

"Gerald!" the voice boomed around his family's smallholding; a powerful, deep voice which made Gerald cringe.

His father was not known for his patience and people around the realm always said that his brash manner and fiery temper was due to the flaming red hair covering his head like a tatty mop; straggly and quite patchy. What did remain attached to his father's skull could not be tamed and stuck out at all angles. Unfortunately for Gerald, he had inherited this feature, and even though he was only eleven you could see the wildness in his most visible feature. Gerald had tried many different methods of disguising it including coloring, very unsuccessfully because the witch he had bought the recipe from was usually more interested in her home-brew than the remedies and potions her customers paid for. Luckily for Gerald his hair grew back as if

it had a regular doses of his family's famous product.

"Gerald Arce, get your ar—"

"Coming!" Gerald jumped up, fear of a thrashing making that certain area of his anatomy, which usually received the thrashing, tingle. He stuffed the rolled up wizard text book down the back of his tatty breeches and walked around the straw to greet his father.

If Gerald's father had been a wizard his powers would have been mediocre at best. His family was not known for their stature and at only five-foot-two, his father would have needed to be very careful with regard to his use of magic. There wasn't much wiggle room for any demotions he might receive, and if he had any of Gerald's tendencies to see what happens then those inches would probably disappear at an alarming rate.

Gerald, at only four-foot seven still only had another inch to grow before his—nonexistent—wizarding gene kicked in, but his family's growth rate was pretty much against him getting there before he could grow a beard—or hair in other less visible places.

"Let's get going, Gerald," said his father, his wafer thin patience showing signs of wearing through. "We've got to get to Sendora before the end of the week and I still have to visit Molehaven before we get there."

"Molehaven?!" Gerald swallowed hard. Lord Moleheart scared the hell out of Gerald and had made it plain that he wasn't a fan of the little red haired boy who'd rather skulk away and practice incantations than do any honest work. It wasn't Gerald's fault that the outside privy exploded when he tried to test the black powder he'd bought during his last visit to Sendora. How was he to know that Lord Moleheart would be sitting on it reading at the time. Gerald presumed that time would allow the memory to fade, but his last visit to the Lord's stables managed to dispel any such illusion.



The road to Molehaven skirted the western edge of the Rogaat Mountains and Gerald shivered at the frigid wind blowing through his tatty robe as he sat next to his father. The rickety old cart bounced along the uneven surface of the poorly maintained track; poorly maintained because Gerald's family were the only ones that used it and his father couldn't be bothered to spend valuable horse poop picking up time keeping it smooth. Gerald remembered a winter evening when his father stood by the roaring fire in their home and Gerald had been daft enough to ask why they didn't look after the road; it was theirs after all. His father had looked at him as if he had suddenly turned into a new species of rodent. "For every shovel of dirt I put in the holes in that track I could have had a shovel of quality product, and that means coin in our pocket...you see?"

The tatty old horse which pulled the cart was deceptively fit and Gerald's father had pretty much stolen it from an elfling who owned a silk worm farm on the outskirts of Sendora. Apparently elflings may be the most astute fellows when it came to selling dodgy gear to unsuspecting folk like Gerald, but when it came to horse flesh they were lucky if they could figure out which end of the horse to point down the road. Gerald's father knew horses, and all that came out of them, and he knew a strong horse when he saw one. Although, to all outward appearances, this was an old nag, his father saw the strength in its eyes, and also the rippling muscles beneath the tatty coat were a bit of a giveaway.

So, they ended up with Jason, as his father had named him—something to do with a famous hero in the days of yore, although Gerald wasn't sure who Yore was, but he must have been a great person because so many people spoke about him.

Soon enough they approached the outskirts of the village and Gerald kept a wary eye out for Lord Moleheart. As they reached the crossroads just outside he breathed a sigh of relief when his father took the left hand fork. This was the main road to Sendora, but it was also the location of the stables where his father wanted to pick up his first load.

His father leaned over and spoke into his ear in a low voice, Gerald had no idea why because there was no one else around, apart from a suspicious thrush that had been following them since they left home.

He sighed when he knew what was coming, and as usual the story of this breeder's prize stud came flooding out; a huge black stallion named Spot, which, to Gerald, was a very strange name. Firstly because the horse had only one color—black—and not a spot could be found on it anywhere, including an area that Gerald checked, but wouldn't like to spend any length of time near, and secondly because it was the most evil beast he had come across in all the time he'd worked with his father. Names like *Biteyerfaceoff* and *Kickyourbloodyheadoff* came to mind when trying to give a more appropriate name for this animal. All that mattered to his father was the prize poop that came out of this beast, due to that fact that it was in prime condition and that the breeder only gave it the best food he could buy. This, in his father's words, *'gave it a certain consistency which made plants grow like bloody weeds'*—especially weeds—which is why every bag of fertilizer sold contained a few lumps of Spot poop. The name for their product obviously used this fact as part of their company slogans.

'Arce Qwik Grow Fertilizer - definitely hits the Spot' and *'Arce Qwik Grow Fertilizer - knocks the Spots off the competition'*.

They pulled up by the stables and his father jumped down, shovel in hand—the special Spot poop shovel that wasn't used for anything else. Gerald was very happy about this as he wasn't allowed to handle Spot crap. It was his father's job alone, and would only be handed down to the eldest son when his father was pushing up daisies, obviously fed with large doses from Spot. The minor detail that his father would outlive Spot by a large margin hadn't seemed to cross his mind, and it seemed to Gerald that he was the only one in the whole family to have figured it out. The Arce family wasn't known for its foresight, nor its intelligence, but it did a great job of picking up poop. Ne'er a crumb was to be found when they were on the job because, as his father always said, *there's coin in muck and I intend to pick up as much as I can*.

Anyway, these visits meant that Gerald could do a quick bit of studying, and as his father entered the stable, shiny shovel over his shoulder, Gerald settled down to read.

As the colorful images flashed through his mind he managed to transpose the impressive picture of the famous wizard for himself. The fact that he was sat on a manky old cart wearing a set of wizard's robes he had made for himself from sacks, didn't detract from the vision of him being the perfect wizard. One other small, important detail that escaped his notice, but no-one else's was the stench coming from his prized set of robes; using old sacks that had been used to collect Arce Fertilizer ingredients gave him that unapproachable air, which he believed was because everyone thought he was going to be famous. He still hadn't figured out that their distance from him had a lot to do with wind direction. He may have had a bit more in the old noggin than the rest of his family, but only about a teaspoon more.

Gerald quickly put the bendy manual away when he heard the usual sounds coming from the

stable indicating that his father had almost finished. For some reason, mostly because it was an evil git, Spot would stand sedately in his stall while his father worked around the horse, but Spot had this knack of knowing when his father was about to make a run for it. It appeared that once the first two sacks were thrown over the door of the stall, Spot realized that his father was on the last one—three bags of poop was the maximum Spot produced between weekly visits, which made Spot's crap more valuable than gold, his father had said—and then all hell broke loose. Splinters of wood would come flying out of the stable doors and ear shattering whinnying could be heard above his father's screams of pain from the glancing blows of Spot's hooves as he dove over the stall gate.

Every time he exited the stable a huge grin would be spread across his face, along with a large amount of blood. It was amazing how a small scratch on the head looked as if someone had buried an axe in your skull. According to the owner of the stable, Spot must like my father a lot because the stallion was very accurate with its hooves and if it wanted to really hurt Gerald's father there would be little left of his head. What his father received was a playful love tap and the noise and destruction of the stall was Spot's way of say that he didn't want Gerald's father to leave.

Gerald was extremely happy that no-one liked *him* that much.

Gerald's father stored the precious Spot poop in a special compartment. He didn't want it contaminated by inferior horses. Gerald just couldn't understand how another horse's crap could be inferior, but his father guarded Spot's jealously. *Thank the gods I'm going to be a famous wizard.* This fascination with equine excrement was beyond Gerald's comprehension.

It took his father a good thirty minutes to ensure that Spot's deposits were secure and quarantined. Gerald breathed a sigh of relief when they set off on the next stage of their journey; especially as they were camping out for the night, which to Gerald was really adventurous, although his father said that putting valuable coin into a scabby inn-keep's pocket was a complete waste. They had everything they needed with them; who needs a warm hearth and mugs of ale; only one silver coin per night, lute player included. By the time they reached the glade outside Peakhaven and settled down for the night, the sun was waving goodbye to Wyverndawn; apparently it had been a tiring day so instead of sliding peacefully behind the trees it dropped like a rock thrusting the whole forest into darkness. The tiny little fire his father had built gave off little light and even less warmth.

"Not wasting good coin on kindling, Gerald," said his father.

"I can't think of a better place to get kindling or big fat logs than a forest, dad."

"Don't get clever with me, boy."

"Right," Gerald looked around at the abundance of fire making material, and shook his head in dismay before snuggling under his sacking cover.



The following morning the sun appeared to be in a better mood and painted dappled patterns across the forest floor as it gracefully raised its head above the horizon.

Gerald yawned and stretched his arms as the warmth of the sunny morning massaged the nighttime chills from his body. He could hear the musical refrain from the crystal clear stream as it leapt from rock to rock on its journey through the woodland. His eye caught sight of the

thrush that seemed to have attached itself to the party of adventurers—because that is how Gerald saw he and his father; he was a famous wizard and his father was his trusty follower; an eleven year old boy was allowed his dreams after all. He smiled at the thought of this new feathered friend flying high above them as they made their way to Sendora. If this was a real quest then the faithful bird would be his eyes from the sky, warning of any potential dangers lurking ahead.

Splat!

Gerald jumped out of his bedding as if someone had lit a fire underneath him. “What the—“

“Gerald!” his father covered the distance between them in only two steps, grabbed Gerald by the scruff of the neck, and then marched him to the crystal clear, bubbling stream.

Gerald blinked rapidly—almost as rapidly as the wriggling he was doing in his attempt to escape his father’s vice-like grip—he knew exactly what was coming and the deep pool created by the stream skirting a large set of boulders loomed large. He was intimately familiar with this pool because his father thought it an amusing interlude to dump him in it whenever they passed. It was fine on those scorching days of summer, but his father didn’t have that switch which differentiated between a refreshing dip and a life threatening immersion through layers of ice. Luckily for Gerald it was spring, so when he made his undignified entry it was just enough to make certain areas shrink a bit, rather than strip away all feeling in his body.

Once he managed to exit the pool he disrobed and hung his, much cleaner, prize robes over the lowest branch of the tree he had slept under. Underwear was a strange phenomenon in Wyverndawn, it was based around any material left over from other uses. Gerald had his eye on a pair he’d seen in the wizard’s market—a place he was not allowed, yet—and he was convinced that the silk boxer shorts he coveted would still be there when he became a wizard. But, the only source of spare material in the Arce home was rough hessian that was left over from making the very important sacks to carry their product. Therefore Gerald found himself stood below a huge old oak tree with skin the color of a set of robes he wanted, wearing the scratchiest pair of underpants that had seen the light of day with the word *Arce* stamped on the back of them.

He waved his arms and ran on the spot trying to get his blood flowing again, until his father threw a rather anorexic rabbit at him and instructed him to skin it. Once it had bounced off the ribs rippling down his chest, he picked it up and noticed that the skin was probably the meatiest part of it. He shrugged his shoulders in resignation and prepared it for the spit. Once the stick was though it he placed it over the fire, it took a while to sink in that he’d need to lower the little beast quite a long way to be anywhere near the flames from the fire his father had built, but eventually they did manage to break their fast.



The road from Peakhaven was little more than a rutted, muddy track but Jason had no problems pulling their cart through the mire. As the sun warmed the road it became harder, which also meant bumpier, but Gerald was in a happy mood. By sunset they should be entering the gates of Sendora, and Gerald would be allowed an hour or so of free time; time that he would make the most of.

In Gerald’s mind he had one inch left to grow and he needed to make the most of that time.

That meant gathering wizarding supplies and studying as much as possible—Gerald's studying was more of the looking at colorful pictures type as words of more than one syllable on the written page were problematic, but in his little head was the determination of the stoutest knight.

He knew exactly where to go when he reached the city and exactly who to talk to. Gerald, for some reason, had this knack of convincing the most unsavory characters that he was destined for greatness. This was probably the only thing that had kept him alive over the course of the past couple of years. No-one in their right mind would approach the cutthroats he did without the promise of a certain realignment or removal of body parts, but Gerald could. Rumors around Sendora were that he was actually a spy from the Wizard's Court and a very powerful wizard. Luckily for him the local criminal fraternity shared the one brain cell between them and assumed that his diminutive stature meant that the rumors were true. He was an *opposite wizard* meant for others to think he was very weak; which according to some was a very clever approach by the Wizard's Court. This meant that as far as anyone—from areas he frequented—was concerned, a *hands off* approach was advised.

Quite a few hours later Gerald was sat in one of the seediest inns in Sendora drinking a mug of lemonade. He'd added a bit of tree bark to darken it so that it looked as if he was drinking ale—quaffing as he like to call it; a term he'd heard was used by heroes of the realm. He was using his steeliest look to make the person sitting opposite quiver, which they actually did. Facing a wizard this small asking penetrating questions such as '*are you sure that this copy of Wizarding Monthly hasn't been seen by anyone else yet?*' was liable to make the hardest member of the criminal fraternity quiver just a bit, especially from this little wizard. The tatty robes and baby face were, as far as they were concerned, a little too good, and that certain equine odor which could eclipse their own natural smell spoke volumes about how determined the wizards were to place a spy in their midst.

The pristine copy was handed under the table, as was the way of things with Gronmach and Co, even though the magazine wasn't an illegal item. Gronmach, a hulking great orcling, had got it hot off the press just this morning. Gerald grabbed it, eyes looking round the inn to make sure their transaction was not observed, then pressed a coin into the orcling's massive hand. The coin was just a fraction of the magazine's worth, but Gronmach just swallowed hard and accepted it without comment. Gerald nodded at Gronmach, got up from the table and swept out of the inn. Once he was outside he ran like an eleven year old boy who would get a spanking if they were late; which he was and he would.

When he entered the stable yard he skidded to a halt; his father's face had adopted the color of his flaming red hair and Gerald knew that some form of punishment was rapidly heading his way.

"Where have you been," asked his father leaning forward to close the gap between them. "I gave you an hour of free time out of the goodness of my heart and you are...LATE!"

"Er, just," said Gerald, whose ears could still pick out the faint echoes of Sendora's clock bell which had just finished striking the hour.

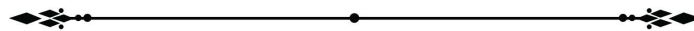
"Late is late," said his father reaching out and grabbing Gerald by the front of his robes.

As Gerald was thrust onto the flatbed of their cart, bottom uppermost he could only wait and see how many strokes he was to receive. He wasn't unduly worried because the copy of Wizarding Monthly was securely hidden down the back of his pants and it made an effective barrier between his bony rear end and his father's ministrations. The other point in Gerald's

favor was that his father couldn't count which mean that he rarely received the amount of strokes his father specified. Gerald had always thought that counting would have been one of his father's strong suits because of he was a businessman—of sorts. But he was frequently told that using your brain for education wore out valuable brain cells and that his father knew, at a glance, exactly how much coin he had been given by his customers for the sacks of fertilizer he had sold them. This small fact was probably the reason why they were so poor. Gerald was convinced that they would have been a lot wealthier if his father could count.

The only thing that Gerald worried about at that moment in time, though, was the creases in his prized reading material once the punishment was over.

Once the '*thrashing*', as his father like to call it, was over, Gerald climbed down from the back of the cart and when to get Jason from his temporary stall. He couldn't wait to get back home to start studying the latest advances in magic that were bound to fill his chosen profession's monthly magazine. He might even pick up a new spell which would allow him to help some unfortunate—non-wizard—person when his gene finally kicked in. Gerald was convinced that this research was of vital importance if he was to hit the ground running when he became a wizard. A possible different meaning of hitting the ground running didn't enter his head, which it should if his tendency to try things out backfired on him as was the norm with Gerald.



The visits to other farms since leaving Sendora where uneventful and gave Gerald plenty of time to study his latest periodical. By the time they arrived back home his head was buzzing with new ideas. His father's only idea was to have Gerald mix his latest batch of poop with the new stacks of straw his brothers had created while he was away. The only upside of doing this was watching his father, reverently, adding one or two lumps of Spot to each stack as Gerald forked the common poop into the straw. As per usual his brothers just leaned against whichever solid object was closest to the stack Gerald was currently working on giving helpful advice.

Gerald bided his time. He knew that once he was four feet eight things would be different and he could escape to a life of glamour. Then it would be his pasty faced brothers receiving the brunt of his father's words of wisdom—and stick.

As soon as he had finished forking in the last lump he scooted into the dilapidated cottage he called home, and ran straight to the corner he had inherited from their dog when it passed away. On the wall next to his bed—tatty old pallet—he looked at the horizontal lines etched into the moldy wooden wall. He had waited a month since measuring himself and the wait had been excruciating. He was so close, so terribly close, to reaching his goal. The hard line he'd originally engraved was his target height and the last mark he'd added had only been one inch from it. He must have grown in the month he'd waited. He'd eaten every meal he'd been given and as much as he could steal in between. He'd worked hard and had even been lifting sacks to increase his muscle mass—admittedly this was harder once he started putting things into the sacks—and he was sure he could see the beginnings of a bicep appearing. All in all he was convinced that he had done everything he could to ensure his body would grow at its maximum potential.

He looked around the smoky room to make sure no one was watching—which was normal as

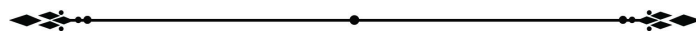
no-one ever paid him any attention anyway—before slipping his latest purchase under the layer of used sacks which made up his bedding. The added benefit of keeping his reading material there was that they were great insulation on frigid nights in the drafty home. He retrieved his rusty knife and stood up. After taking a deep breath, trying to temper his excitement, he approached the wall. He turned and placed his back against the damp wooden boards and with a swift stroke, made his mark.

He turned and opened his eyes to see the fresh white line glaring at him. His jaw dropped when he saw how close he was to his goal. He couldn't be sure, but he was convinced that the lines almost overlapped. A couple of wood fibers were all that separated him from wizardom. He scanned the room again, his heart thumping so loud in his chest that he was convinced that even people in the city of Sendora should have heard. But, as usual, no-one was paying him the slightest bit of attention. The rest of the family's attention was firmly fixed on his father leaning against the mantle of the fireplace—which had a miserly fire burning—listening to his animated description of Spot's latest offerings.

He turned back to inspect the new line and gently fingered the wispy fibers standing out from the engraved line. A lump grew in his throat and he could feel his eyes filling, blurring the crisp line. His dream was just a few fibers from becoming reality. He'd considered many things to accelerate his growth: standing in Spot's offerings, hanging from door frames with as much weight as he could tie to his feet; he'd even considered getting a little something from the local witch to help. This would have been a drastic move, especially after the hair dying incident, but, he knew that any form of artificial growth would not work. He thought was a bit unfair due to the amount of effort that went into thinking up ingenious ways to gain an inch or two. So, he bided his time as best he could and waited...and waited.

He tried to calculate how long it would be before he grew the tiny little bit that remained, but gave up after his head started to ache. It wouldn't be long now, he was sure of that.

While his family talked of important things like the poorer consistency of their ingredi-ents recently, Gerald gathered all the items he's accumulated throughout the years. He wanted to ensure that nothing had been overlooked. He had enough educational material to add at least two inches to his bedding, so he felt confident that his studies were definitely at their peak. He had the robes which he'd made from every scrap of spare material laying around. The overall effect was a cross between a scarecrow and a jester, this resulted in a color scheme that could make even the most flamboyant person's eyes water, even after he had made sure that the robes were scrubbed to within an inch of their lives. His crowning glory though, was the wand he had reverently carved. It was just an old stick he had whittled, but he was immensely proud of it and had spent hours making sure the grip fitted his hand perfectly—it had needed to be adjusted many times over the years—and that each flourish for the variety of spells he had learned was practiced to perfection. Yes, he was ready. Now it was just a case of growing that last fraction of an inch.



It was a week later when the strangest thing happened. It was a beautiful sunny day for once, and the only sounds that could be heard were the playful songs of birds frolicking in the gentle breeze; the buzzing of bees as they gathered nectar and moved pollen from one flower to

the next; the sharp sound of hazel against hessian as Gerald received his customary ten in case he'd done something wrong which his father hadn't actually discovered. Better to be safe than sorry, was his father's outlook when it came to when punishment should be dished out, and after a few mugs of his home made mead on a quiet afternoon he generally thought that he should get ahead of the game because Gerald was bound to have done something, was planning to do something or eventually would do something that needed to be addressed by hazel against buttock.

Gerald, as usual, had his reading material stuffed down the back of his pants so, while his father sweated from his exertions in the afternoon sun, Gerald could recite the latest spell he had learned, making sure that each word and inflection was perfect. Demotion in inches was a real danger if you got it wrong, and this stage of his career that could be disastrous.

It was during the recitation of one of these spells that a most unexpected and quite alarming event occurred. Gerald was concentrating hard even though the thwacks from his father's hazel branch were becoming very annoying and, suddenly, there was a blinding flash followed by an ear shattering scream. Gerald couldn't remember screaming, but did remember finishing the incantation he'd been working very hard on. He opened one eye nervously and noticed that an unusual quiet had fallen over the surrounding countryside. A whimpering rose through the silence increasing in volume and intensity until it became a high pitch screech which, if it increased in pitch just a tad more, would only be heard by dogs.

Gerald jumped up and turned around to face his father, or where his father had recently been because all that remained was a rather large scorch mark on the ground. His eyes lifted and spotted a figure in the distance running towards their house. It appeared the figure was also pounding on its head for some strange reason. Gerald's eye caught sight of a shriveled object on the ground and he bent down to retrieve it. On closer inspection he realized that it was his father's favorite *bad boy* stick—which he'd named Gerald for some strange reason. It was burned to a crisp and as Gerald inspected it the stick crumbled to ash in his hands. His attention shot to the cottage when he heard the door slam and a huge commotion coming from inside. Thinking something horrendous was happening to his family he sprinted as fast as his little legs would carry him. He might not like his family much and they like him even less, but they were still his family and he was determined to protect them, if he could. As he rounded the corner he skidded to a halt as they shot out through door and stopped dead, all eyes on him. He could feel the color rise in his cheeks; guilt has a way of doing that to you even when you're convinced that you are totally innocent.

His gaze moved from face to face—rather quickly once he caught sight of the glare coming from each one—until it rested on his father. The once flaming red hair that covered his head looked as if he'd took the flaming part too far. What was left was blackened and very spiky. This pretty much color coordinated with the soot covering his face and the scorched clothing—or what was left of it—trying to cover his body.

It was at this point when realization smacked him in the face. He grew an inch and as his stature increased so did the grin which had started to form.

"I'm a WIZARD!" he almost screamed the words as he examined himself. Two arms, two legs, body, head, yeah all there, but nothing seemed to have changed, apart from that certain feeling of self confidence at knowing you are different.

He looked up at his family who stood with mouths like beached carp. His grin settled to a smile and he calmly walked past them and on into the cottage. He approached his pallet,

hearing subdued voices, arguing, and the shuffling feet of those trying to be stealthy with zero success, but he just ignored them. For once he felt empowered; not the little nobody who had been the family disgrace.

He stood against the wall, turned and leaned back, then withdrew his trusty knife. With a swift movement he drew a line then turned to face it. There was no doubt. He'd eclipsed the minimum height and more. Completely ignoring his family he reached into the back of his breeches and removed the magazine he'd been studying earlier. He then reached under the pile of straw and manky hessian which was his pillow and pulled out his carefully carved wand before settling onto his pallet.

"Now, now, Gerald," came a stern voice from doorway to their home. "No funny business...eh?"

Gerald looked up, one eyebrow raised in contempt and waited until his family turned, en-mass, and moved to the other side of the room before calmly opening his magazine while gently twitching his wand. After a while his attention was drawn to the stunning particles of light coming from around his hand and moving up to focus on the tip of his wand. At first he was mesmerized by what was happening, but he quickly realized that he'd better understand what was happening before he let it get too far. For once Gerald showed a bit of maturity—probably due to the fact that he was too scared of losing the inch he'd so recently received.



A few days later Gerald was, as usual, laid on his pallet reading, rather than doing his normal work of sorting spot offerings from those of other horses, when he felt, rather than saw, a shadow cast over his bed. He ignored it until the throat noises which were supposed to be gaining his attention turned into violent coughing spasms.

He looked up beneath a furrowed brow—he wanted the miscreant to feel suitably ashamed for disturbing a great wizard—and his gaze fell on the rather disheveled form of his father.

"Yes," said Gerald, in what he assumed was a severe tone.

"Errm..."

"Yes?" asked Gerald, maintaining his aloof demeanor.

"Gerald," said his father. "The rest of the family...and I, wondered what your plans were now that you are a, erm...wizard."

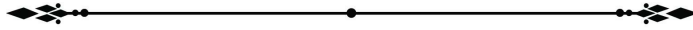
Gerald laid down his magazine, taking his time to smooth the creases from the cover, and stood up to face his father who squeaked with surprise, jumped back, tripped and promptly landed flat on his back.

Gerald stifled a giggle at the look of terror on his father's face as he looked down at him. The figure cowering before him was no longer the terrifying parent who saw Gerald as some-thing he had just picked up on the sole of his boot. Now it was Gerald's turn to return the favor.

"I'll, obviously, be moving to Sendora to take up my position at the Wizards Court," said Gerald.

"Right you are," said his father, scrambling to his feet. As he scooted into the main living area he called over his shoulder. "We'll leave first thing in the morning. Make sure you're packed and ready to go when the sun comes up."

"I'll be ready," said Gerald. *I'll definitely be ready.*



Gerald stood by the door of their home with his homemade wizard's chest packed, waiting. He had his clean homemade robes and a new item he'd made during the night...a wizard's hat constructed from straw. It had various stars and runes drawn on it with a piece of charcoal retrieved from last night's fire. He had also written, in rather large letters, the word 'WIZZURD' on it so no-one would have any doubt as to his profession.

He poked his head outside and was surprised to see his father sat on the cart ready to leave. Normally the only way you could get him out of bed was to shove a pitchfork up his nether region. Gerald shrugged, he was just happy to get away from there and start his new life. He struggled with his wizard's chest—paper is quite heavy, especially when you have several years' worth of literature to carry—but finally managed to get it into the back of the cart.

He climbed up and took his seat, grinning at his father, who promptly cracked his whip and sent Jason hurtling off down the road faster than Gerald had ever seen the poor beast move. Gerald gripped his hat and the side of the cart for dear life, but the grin remained plastered on his face.

They arrived at the glade, where they normally camped for the evening when doing their rounds, in record time. In fact it was the middle of the afternoon, so Gerald was surprised when his father stopped and began unloading various items.

He shot his father a questioning look.

"Jason needs a rest," was all he said before starting to build his usual meager fire. He grumbled as he struck the flint over and over again without success.

"Incendio!" A flame shot out of Gerald's wand, wiggled a bit, and finally hit the small pile of kindling which burst into flames and then crumbled to ashes. "I think a new wand is in order."

Gerald's father opened his mouth to say something, but it slammed shut at the look Gerald directed at him. "I think I'll get some more wood then."

Gerald nodded and went to sit down by a sturdy oak. He looked up to check that there were no birds perched up there before leaning back and closing his eyes—after all that work lighting the fire he deserved a rest.

"Ehem."

Gerald opened an eye and saw his father standing there looking down at him.

"Yes?"

"Er...I have some more wood. Can you do your lighty fire thing again?"

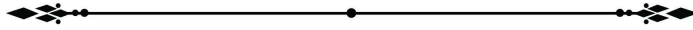
Gerald looked past his father and eyed the fire that had been built. This one was a lot more substantial, something Gerald could really get his teeth into.

He stood up and walked towards the pile of logs before him and raised his wand. "Incendio!"

Again there was a bright flash as the flame jetted out of the end of his wand. Just as before, it wiggled in the air before striking the wood which burst into flames. This time, though, there was enough there to prevent it being incinerated completely.

Gerald stepped back with a look of pride on his face. The smile grew into a grin when he grew an inch.

This wizarding lark is going to be awesome.



After lunch they set off for the final part of their journey. As before, Gerald's father drove Jason mercilessly. Gerald was beginning to think his father was eager to be rid of him, but those thoughts disappeared as the sun set. Lit from behind by the orange and red flames shooting across the sky, Sendora looked like a burning jewel in the distance.

Gerald's heart soared as the massive spire of the Wizards Court was framed against the magnificent skyline.

In record time they arrived at the city gates. As a guard approached Gerald's father hopped down, grabbed Gerald's wizard's chest and dumped it on the ground. Hopping back onto the cart he shoved Gerald out. As Gerald hit the ground the last thing he remembered was the sight of his father rocketing back down the road.



Gerald nearly jumped a mile when he woke up with a strange nose almost touching his. "Er...what happened?" he asked the nose.

"Dunno," said the nose as it retreated, apparently attached to a city guard. "Some fellow dumped you off the cart and shot off down the road."

The nose returned to its former position. "You ain't a bandit, are you? or some other sort of baddy?" The nose was replaced with a searching eye.

Gerald tried to pull his head back, but the hard surface of whatever they had placed him on prevented any further backward movement.

"Actually I'm a wizard on my way to the wizard's court," said Gerald, still trying to create some distance between his head and the city guard's.

"Really? I took you for some sort of scarecrow, come jester, come robber type person, what with the weird getup you're wearing."

"These are actually my formal robes I'll have you know," said Gerald who had managed to force the guard to move with the annoyance in his voice. Obviously discretion was the better part of valor when it came to someone claiming to be a wizard.

"Er...yes well, said the guard, beginning to looking decidedly uncomfortable. "We'll see what Sellion has to say about that, shall we?"

Gerald stood up, still lightheaded after his tumble, and headed for the door. The guard followed. When they exited he placed a hand on Gerald's shoulder, halting him. He waved over two more guards.

"Grab his box thingy and we'll escort him to Sellion's chambers."

They set off up the main thoroughfare of Sendora and Gerald's eyes couldn't keep still. The places he'd visited previously were nothing like the residences lining the route to the Wizard's Court. As they progressed up the road he noticed a hulking figure leaning against a wall and as they approached the smell coming from it identified the figure beyond doubt.

"Hi Gronmach," said Gerald as they passed.

"I knew you was a wizard!" said Gronmach who quickly closed his mouth and disappeared down the road at a rapid pace once he noticed who was accompanying Gerald.

The two guards carrying his wizard's chest promptly dropped it and shot off after the orcling.

The grip on his shoulder tightened as the remaining guard halted their progress, and suddenly that nose appeared against his again.

"Know him, do ya?"

"Not really," said Gerald. "Just in passing, while browsing the wizards' market."

"Well...steer clear of him. He's bad news."

Thankfully the nose retreated and the hand turned Gerald back around before marching him up the road again.

"What about my luggage?" asked Gerald, trying to wriggle out of the vice-like grip.

"We'll send it up to Sellion when we've dealt with Gronmach."

Finally they reached the gates of the Wizards Court and the guard handed him over. "Take him straight up to Sellion's chambers while I go back and get his box thing."

"Right," said the sentry, grabbing Gerald's shoulder and replacing the previous grip with one even tighter, if that was possible. "Off we go, young fellow me lad."

Gerald found himself herded across a courtyard dominated by a huge statue of a wizard, then through a small doorway and on up, what seemed to be, a never ending staircase.

They arrived at a sturdy looking door and the guard knocked.

"Come!" came a booming voice from inside which nearly made Gerald need those new silk boxer shorts he'd been dreaming of.

The door opened by itself and Gerald was confronted with the figure of what he could only describe as the greatest wizard he'd ever seen. This was probably very accurate because Gerald had never actually seen a real wizard in the flesh. The only ones he'd ever seen were the paintings in his reading material.

"Come in then," said Sellion. "Sit down and tell me why such a strange looking little chap has arrived in my chambers at this hour."

"Er...it's only just sunset," said the guard.

"Ah, okay," said Sellion, turning his gaze to Gerald again. "I lose track of time up here and I was certain it was much later than that."

He turned back to the guard. "Are you sure it's only sunset?"

"Yes, sir."

"What day?"

"Thursday."

"Ah, that explains it. I've been working on this spell since Tuesday."

"Right you are, sir," said the guard, rolling his eyes. He leaned down and whispered in Gerald's ear. "Right weird lot these are. Never know what day it is, let alone the time."

Gerald sat down in the chair opposite Sellion's desk as the guard left, closing the door behind him. He waited, and waited, and waited. Sellion was engrossed in his notes and seemed to have forgotten him.

"Sir?" Sellion didn't react and by now Gerald was literally squirming in his chair. Gerald waited again.

Suddenly Sellion stood up, walked to the door and left the room.

Thinking he had popped out to get something, Gerald continued to wait. After what seemed a very long time it finally dawned on him that Sellion wasn't coming back. He stood up and made his way back down to the guard.

"Er..."

"Ahh," said the guard. "Where's he sending you?"

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