

*...in which the band of fearless adventurers gathers at Novakidville.*

Alex was worried. After all, his friends had asked him to travel to the lands of the evil gremlins through the legendary magical forest. Anything could happen on the way. Alex wasn't worried about himself, but he knew his mom and dad might be. Of course, in the world of people time passes differently than in the world of magic, but still, his absence could be noticed. So Alex came up with a cunning (or so he thought) plan. He arranged with his friend Daniel to tell Alex's parents that Alex was visiting him and staying overnight. In fact, Alex packed his backpack with everything he might need on a hike: a flashlight, a magic language dictionary, a change of socks, a bottle of water, and a bag of chips. He closed the backpack, inhaled, exhaled, and said loudly:

"Novakidville!"



When Alex opened his eyes again, he found himself on the bustling street of Novakidville. Life in the city was happening: the streets were full of both animals familiar to humans and fairytale creatures. Rhinoceroses happily beckoned shoppers to their stalls, elephants cooked food in huge pans on big roasters, unicorns played cards and dice at the local cafe "Sweet Water". An orchestra of meerkats and mongooses sang magical tunes on the summer veranda of "Café Ice", where everyone can find an ice cream to their liking. And nearby, a wise old dragon, Aspidus, used

would read the hand (or paw) of anyone who wanted to know his fate. Alex felt like he was in some anime: the houses, boutiques, and the whole street reminded him of some oriental neighborhood. Alex looked around and did not find any street names or house numbers on the buildings around him. He did not know how to find the cafe “Blue Crane”, where Luna and Astro had planned to gather before going to Behindforest. Fortunately, a bunny came running up to him.

“Hey there! The latest Novakidville and Academy news awaits you! Only in the latest issue of Novakid Times: discoveries in the study of magical language, the mysterious disappearance of a student—investigation. New magical language books: to read or not to read? Want to buy one?” The bunny looked at the boy with hope.

“Hmm... If it tells where the ‘Blue Crane Café’ is located, then I’ll buy it,” Alex replied.

“Oh, so you’re looking for the ‘Blue Crane’? You should have just said so. It’s over there, go straight ahead and turn left. And there it’ll be,” said the bunny. “Will you take the paper?”

“Okay, sure,” Alex agreed and paid for the newspaper with one star.

Stars are the currency in the Academy’s magic world. Students who study well get stars and can use them to buy books and magical items in Novakidville. Since Alex studied well, he had enough stars to buy anything he wanted. But usually, he didn’t spend the stars he had, but saved them up for important occasions.

“Have a nice day!” The bunny shouted after him and took off down the street.

Alex continued in the direction the bunny pointed. Kangaroos, who worked as food delivery guys, whizzed past him. Elephants put orders into the Kangaroos’ bags and they happily jumped on their powerful legs in the direction of the customer’s house. At the corner, Mr. Panda lazily fried mushrooms in sweet and sour sauce to later add them to some noodles. Then there was the bear’s shop, which sold magic wands. Of course, it’s not very popular at the Academy to use wands—why use a wand when you can get by with a spell in magical language?. But still, some Novakidville wizards didn’t mind walking around with a nice wand strapped to their belt.

Finally, Alex turned left and into a small alleyway. It was somewhat quieter here than on the busy street. At the end of the alley was a large building with a spacious summer terrace. Above the stairs leading to the terrace hung a colorful sign that said, “Blue Crane”, with a picture of—who else?—a blue crane.

Coming closer, Alex immediately saw Luna, Astro, and someone else, whom he didn’t know, at one of the far tables. The bunny had told him where to go correctly. Alex looked at the newspaper in his hands and smiled—what a nice bunny he met on his way here.

“Alex! Alex! Finally, you’ve come!”

“Hi, Luna! Hi, Astro!”

“My name is Marty. Greetings, my new friend!” Marty introduced himself in his unearthly voice.



"Hi, my name is Alex, nice to meet you!"

Alex joined his friends at the table.

"That's it, now we wait for Bella, discuss the details of the plan, and we can go," said Astro.

"I'm a bit scaaaaaared," cried out Luna.

"Books say that the scariest places in the magic forest are the Foggy Bridge, the singing Meadow, Fear Grove, and the Swamp of Despair. If we end up in one of those, let's follow the rules I found on the Internet. Better yet, let's try to avoid them."

"Oooh, that sounds really scary. Especially the Swamp of Despair," said Luna, and the fur on her tail stood up on end from fear.

"Come on, don't worry. Everything will be fine. We'll be out of the magic forest in no time, Marty has an old map. And the gremlins can't do anything to us, they don't even know the magic language. We'll get our missing student back, and solve the case, and..." Astro didn't have time to finish.

"And we'll get to the front pages of Novakid Times," Alex added.

"And explore new, previously unknown plant species in the forest. Hi, everyone!" Said Bella, who had just joined her friends.



"Oh, Bella, hello! We've been waiting for you!" Luna exclaimed.

"Hi! Great, now we're all here!" Astro said cheerfully and introduced his friends, "This is Alex and Marty."

"Hi," said Marty and Alex almost at the same time.

"Marty, tell us about the portal," Astro immediately suggested.

"Ancient books say that the portal is located in the wall outside the city and can only be opened with special spells."

"Did you find those spells?" Luna asked.

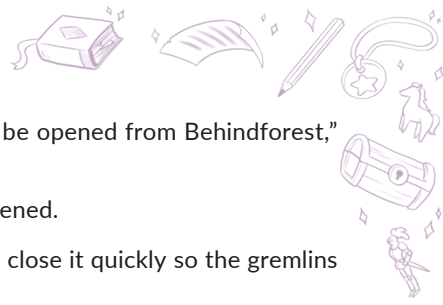
"I sure did! Marty finds everything there is to find!" Marty said confidently.

"Great! Then we're ready to go camping!" Astro cried out.

"There's just one small problem," Marty remarked.

"What's that?" Asked Bella





"The portal only opens from the inside, it can't be opened from Behindforest," Marty explained.

"How will we get back then?" Asked Luna, frightened.

"We could make a new portal. But we'd have to close it quickly so the gremlins can't get into the Academy," Marty suggested.

"Is that all?" Astro was delighted. "Well, we can certainly do that!"

A few minutes later the friends left the café and went to the outskirts of the city, to where, according to ancient writings, there was a portal...

