

Arianna Kelt

and the Wizards of Skyhall



J. R. King

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J. R. King

Debut Novel - Teen Author

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Arianna Kelt

AND THE WIZARDS OF SKYHALL
(Wizards of Skyhall Book One)

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Cover design & illustration by Reagent Press

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ISBN 1-57545-826-8



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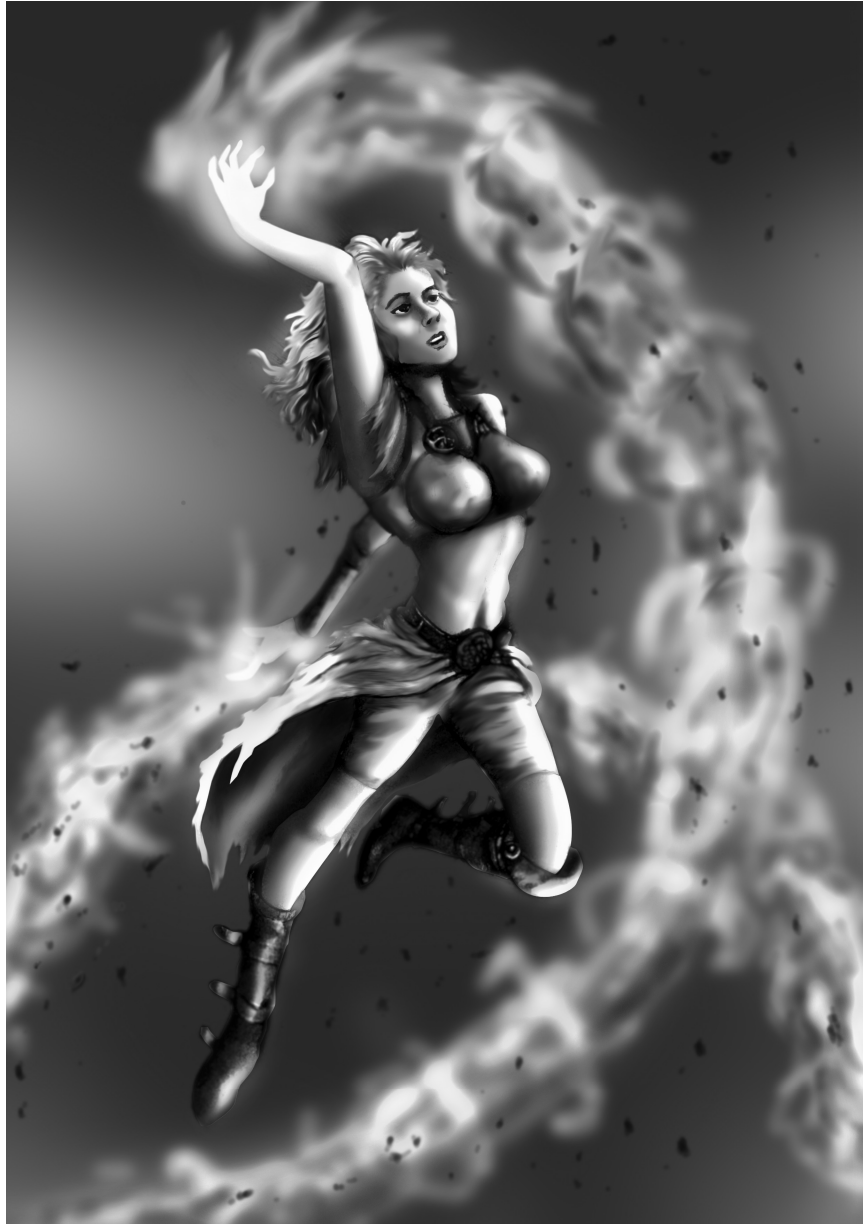
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THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

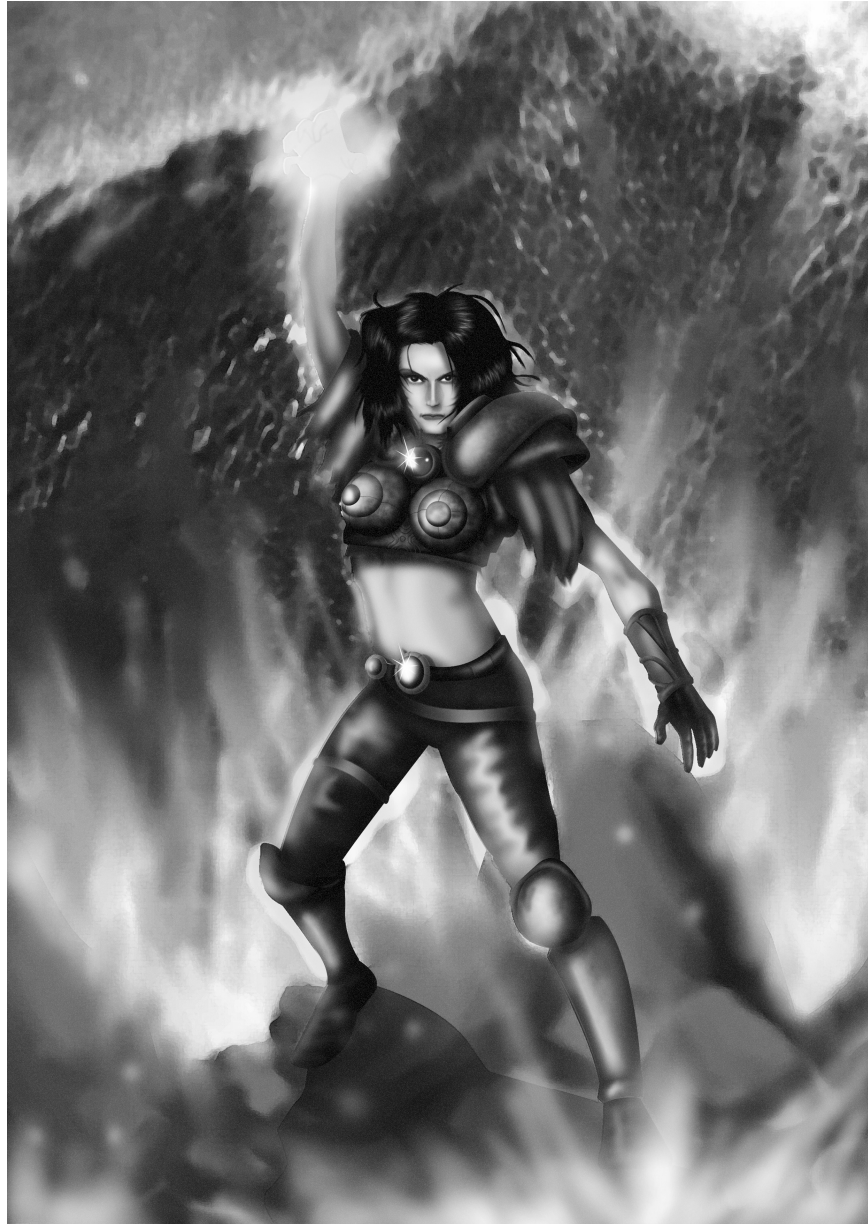


ENTER IF YOU DARE

ARIANNA



MEILAN



RANTH



MORTIMER





CHAPTER ONE: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW LIFE

Arianna Kelt, master thief, slowly slipped out the door of the orphanage *they* had sent her to when she was caught sneaking out the door of a bank with well over ten grand. Only eight at the time, she had managed to break into the guarded vault in the district bank and escape without being detected. She was caught only because a guard had decided to go off and have a donut. *A donut! What was with that? Was God out to get her?* It's pretty important to point out that after that day, Arianna never ate donuts again, and she had a particular loathing for those who made the vile, corrupting food.

All because of a donut, she was arrested, taken to court. *They* had wanted to send her to prison, but the local dictator and the

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populace said she was too young and they shipped her off to a foster home, telling the rather strict owner of the horrible grey house to whip her into shape. They hadn't meant it literally, but the stout farmer had thought so. Against the pleas of his tear-stricken wife, he would whip Arianna if she made the slightest mistake, which to his critical eye was almost every second, until she couldn't sit for a week. "You breathe too hard; you're using up all my oxygen. Spoiled brat, I work in the field all day so we can have food, water, and air in our house, and what do you do? You waste all of my precious air!" Then he would reach for his slender whipping stick and whack her savagely with it.

Needless to say, she hated the farmer almost as much as she hated donuts. This hate was the reason she drew the farmer and his wife out of the house by setting fire to the barn. Now, to be sure, it's not such a nice thing to do, but she figured the farmer had it coming. She did take care to ensure that the fire wouldn't burn the grass around the barn and spread to the fields.

When the farmer and his wife ran outside to inspect the flames, Arianna set the house on fire, too, slipping away from the farm and into the woods. She figured that would be the end of it, that everyone would think she was lost in the fire, but she had no such good fortune.

"So, trying your hand at arson this time, eh? Well, Missy, we've got a place for children like you," said the policeman who tracked her down. She wanted to blame everything on donuts this time, but she couldn't. Well, not quite. The truth was she

got nabbed sneaking a piece of cherry cobbler for supper. Her true enemy in the world was surely a pastry cook. She was sure of this when they sent her to boot camp. When she escaped a few days later from the nightmare called boot camp, she was sure her true enemy in life had to be head pastry chef at some world-famous resort, and she made it her mission in life to find this person and teach him or her a few things about making donuts.

After four years of running from the police and escaping from the dreadful places they sent her to as punishment for her crimes, she was finally old enough to be sent to prison, which they did almost immediately. After finding her on the streets begging for money and food, they arrested her. In her pockets were several day-old bagels she'd pilfered and a few wallets she'd pinched that day. Against her protests that they could not do what they were doing, the jury found her guilty and sent her to a maximum security facility dubbed Camp Hopeless. Camp Hopeless was in the desert, a place the state deemed fitting for habitual re-offenders like Arianna. It was of little comfort to her that the facility was for juvenile offenders.

Arianna almost laughed as they dragged her to her cell, which irritated the guardsmen, who took many blows from the protesting girl as she struggled against them. Throwing her brutally into her cell when they reached it, the guards returned her laugh, hoping she would try and attack them, which would give them the chance to beat her with sticks.

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Instead of behaving angrily, Arianna simply reached for the stale bread in the bowl containing her food and began to eat. When the guards turned their backs on her, she searched the room for anything that would help her escape. While it would've been nice to find a secret key, a spring from the dilapidated mattress would serve just as well. She worked for days to get the old spring into just the right shape, hiding it in the bed whenever the guards came near.

Late one evening after the makeshift key was finished, Arianna silently stuffed the circles she made of bread under the thin blankets and raised her pillow, giving the illusion she was in bed sleeping. When she was sure old Bern, the guard on duty, was asleep at his post, she opened the rusty door to her cell, using the makeshift key to open the door, and wincing slightly as the door made a creak.

As she stepped out into the hall, a dozen whispers of, "Take me with you!" and "You go, girl!" came to her from the cells she passed. She nearly screamed as she ran, knowing the guards would soon be on to her and she didn't have time to help anyone else escape.

Carefully, she pulled a motion sensor alarm trigger from the wall with her prong and then she proceeded to smash it. She dashed down the hall, pausing every so often to destroy the motion sensor devices stuck to the wall. Thankful she was a skilled thief and not just a lazy person trying to make easy money, Arianna slipped past the sleeping door guards and ran

out into the desert.

She made her first mistake at the wall. A slip of her feet echoed hard off the stones, rousing the guards in the tower. A spotlight lit up the top of the wall just before she slipped over it. Pulling out tranquilizer guns, the guards aimed at the fleeing figure and prepared to fire when a hand motioned for them to stop. “Let the desert claim her. No point in wasting valuable darts. By the way, how did she get out of that cell?”

“We’ll investigate fully. I assure you.”

“Hmm, patrol around the premises, inspect each room. I don’t want another incident like this one. Do we understand each other?” The guard trembled and nodded his head, hoping his fellows wouldn’t fail him.

Swiftly, Arianna ran through the night, knowing day would bring intense heat and dryness to the desert. After a few days of traveling, she was found by an old lady in a caravan who lived life like her ancestors did, which made Arianna think the old lady was strange. Unfortunately, Arianna was a bit more than right on that account, and she ran away from the insane lady a few nights later as soon as they reached a city.

But she was found in the streets by an old man who took her back to the dreaded orphanage. The headmistress greeted her coldly: “Well, Arianna. Welcome back to my orphanage. You know my rules and expectations, so I expect you to follow them. You must not be a very good thief if you’ve been caught so many times.”

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Before Arianna realized this was a trap, she quickly exclaimed, “Oh yeah, well I’ve stolen thousands and it’s all in my secret hideout!” The headmistress sighed and the guards popped out of the other room, preparing to inject her with a truth serum. They warned that there was a chance she might receive brain damage from the serum, but the headmistress just shrugged and said it would be good for her if it happened.

Arianna tried to resist, but two men held her steady while a third administered the serum. After telling them the location of her secret cache of money, Arianna was tied to the bed and left that way for days. As soon as the restraints were removed, she began to plan her escape and her next big heist. She was unlike the other children at the orphanage, unusually tall for her age and with golden hair and sparkling emerald eyes. She already stood a little below six feet even though she was only fourteen.

Whenever she was around the other children, she treated them as inferiors, for they were all tediously thick-headed and couldn’t stay in a conversation with her for more than a few minutes before becoming utterly confused. This would annoy her, and she would detach herself from the groups of kids playing childish games and talk to the only intelligent person in the room—herself.

Her superior intelligence served her well. The bank she was going to break into would make her rich if she could perfectly plan her entrance and escape. She spent hours in the boughs of an ancient tree near the orphanage out of sight of the

headmistress and the other staff members. The vantage point atop the tree, which was a fair distance from the orphanage, gave her ample time to hide the bank plans acquired from a “friend” whenever anyone would walk toward her.

Within a few weeks, she was ready to escape and hit the bank. Escaping the orphanage was the easy part, hitting the bank the hard part. As she began her long walk to the bank, she thought of new places to hide her stolen cash—the cash she would start using when she became an adult and needed to start paying her own way in the world. Seeing the bank ahead, she quickened her pace.

Silently, she walked just outside the boundaries of the cameras sweeping their ion rays across the field. She slipped on the glasses she had purchased on the black market that allowed her to see the ion beams as they scanned the grounds of the bank.

With a smirk, she slipped between a pair of rays as they crossed, barely flattening herself against the wall of the bank in time. When the ion rays were far enough away from her location, she began to climb up to the second floor ledge using another tool she had purchased on the black market to help her reach the ledge quickly.

Occasionally, she would flatten herself against the wall when the ion rays would come close to her while she used the strangely crafted stilts, which looked like an accordion. They would blow up when Arianna kicked her heels together, and

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then deflate when she kicked her heels together again while she was pulling herself up to the next ledge. When she finally reached the fifteenth floor, Arianna deflated her stilts and placed them in the pack she wore on her back.

Waiting for the ion beam of the camera to reach the opposite end of the room, she slowly and silently cut a hole in the glass window, pulled the piece of glass out, slipped silently into the room, and quickly replaced the glass. She dived behind the safe as the ion ray turned the other way, barely avoiding touching the beams surrounding the safe. Rising silently, she slowly pulled on her gloves, bringing a stethoscope out of her pack along with some other gear she needed for breaking into the safe.

Deftly, she slipped her hands between two ion rays and pushed the stethoscope to the vault, listening to the tumblers. Smiling to herself, she quickly disabled the first lock and slipped out of the camera's sight and waited for it to go back toward the opposite end of the room before she went to work on the next set of locks. Pulling a lock pick from her sleeve, Arianna began working on the safe's key lock. She had almost opened it and was about to turn the pick a final time when the ion ray from the camera hovered dangerously close to her face.

Swiftly, Arianna vaulted to her right, narrowly avoiding the red beam scanning the room. Just as she was about to turn back to the safe, a hole opened in the ceiling and a heat sensor lowered into the room. A heat sensor was the one thing she

couldn't escape, so she knew she had to act swiftly. Soon a light would flash through the entire building, noting every warm-blooded creature and sending an outline of the figure and the figure's location to the security computers.

Thinking quickly, she pulled a guard hat and jacket from her pack and pulled it on. Unnoticed by the camera and sensors as of yet, she slid into a chair and though she loathed them, she unwrapped a donut from its plastic baggy as she sat down, sure that the donut was the key prop that would make the scene look authentic. In the security room, the guards sighed as they saw the guard in the chair, envying him, especially since he was so immodest as to eat donuts in the bank president's office. Sighing, they returned to examining the other reports, deleting the scan of the room Arianna was in.

As soon as the heat sensor went back into the ceiling, Arianna jumped over to the vault. She slipped on her gloves and prepared to insert her pick, but before she could do this she heard a tiny click and she instantly pulled her hands from between the beams and dove behind the vault, her hands barely escaping before the beams around the vault began to move in unpredictable patterns.

She watched as the camera's ion ray blinked out. An alarm broke out through the bank, and Arianna cursed. "So, there's another thief in the building. Maybe it's time someone learned not to screw up the operations of their betters," Arianna whispered to herself as she headed out the door, still in her

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guard disguise.

She headed toward the emerald vault on the bank's second floor, figuring the amateur would go for the easiest vault to open and the one that would yield the heftiest profit. She was correct. She sneaked up behind the other thief and angrily shocked him with a Taser before he could do anything. Laughing to herself, she put the guard uniform on him before she left, then bounded down the hall. Moments later, she was leaping out of a window on the second floor and landing in a dark alley, cursing her bad luck and sure it had everything to do with donuts. She had, after all, touched one of the vile things. Her heist foiled by another thief, her only hope now was to slip back inside the orphanage before her absence was noticed.

Of course, however, this wasn't what was going to happen. She heard a soft noise and shrank deep into the shadows. Directly in front of her in a space that previously had been vacant stood a man in white robes wearing a pointy hat and carrying a weathered wooden staff. She put a hand over her mouth to keep herself from laughing out loud. *Did the fool think he was a wizard or something?*

The man in the hat looked around for a moment like he was lost, then cursed loudly, using words that caused Arianna to blush. Then he uttered a strange phrase and disappeared, vanishing right before Arianna's eyes. She pinched herself and tried to figure out if what she had seen was real. Shaking her head in disbelief, she continued on her way, slipping unseen

into a small store, which was kept open 24 hours a day in hopes that someone would finally buy its products. It was scorned by most of the people in the city.

Arianna pretended to look at the DVDs on the shelves, wondering why anyone would want to pay to suffer through the dreadful television series she watched at the orphanage when she was bored. "It was horrible enough once," she mumbled to herself, her comment causing the owner of the shop to flush angrily. Arianna laughed and prepared to make another comment, but the owner yelled at her to leave.

She was almost out the door when she overheard two people speaking. "Maybe if they took that show off their shelves, the rest of their stock would sell. People here seem to treat it like it's a dreadful disease, not even going near it. Is it that bad? I mean, what kind of name is Ephramme? Not even fish would name their children that. I'd rather have five brothers named George." Arianna heard a loud thump and nearly cried out but a finger touched to her lips stopped her.

"I apologize, my lady. My companion always seems to forget he's on duty and not on some joyous escapade. We have been watching you for a while, ever since you leapt from that building. It's rather regrettable, but you've seen a wizard, so you must be taken to Skyhall for interrogation."

"Skyhall? Where's that?"

"In the land of Xjoz," the other said. "Come, we must see the archwizard."

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“Who are you?”

“I am Munch and the lazy gnome over there is Winker. We must really be going now. They need to decide what to do with you.”

“Did you say gnome? And how am I to know this is not some kind of joke?”

“We are law gnomes, and this is most definitely not a joke.” Munch turned to Winker, “Is there anything funny about this?” Winker shrugged.

“Don’t you mean lawn gnomes?” asked Arianna.

The gnome scowled, his reply cut short as his communicator received a transmission. He listened to the message intently for a moment before responding to Arianna. “It looks like you will be seeing the archwizard by yourself, young one. We have a mission.” Arianna started to protest, but the gnomes ignored her. Instead, they started a spell and teleported her to a castle, heading out into the dark streets of the city as soon as a confused Arianna disappeared into the land of Xjoz.



CHAPTER TWO: THE LAW GNOMES

Digorence ran down the halls of the building, hoping to reach his office before Mortimer could find him and give him a new assignment. He preferred to sit and view the security cameras; and if he turned up the sound, he could pretend not to hear when Mortimer knocked at the locked door. This, of course, did not impress the officials, who had demoted him many times for slothfulness; they didn't know why they kept him employed.

It is because of his inventions, the officials assured themselves each time they decided whether to demote or fire him, though his inventions often failed and often had some disastrous effect. His Super Trap Detector-Deflector created traps instead of finding and disarming them. His Golem-o-matic was supposed to create golem workers—the ultimate, modern golem workforce; instead it created a golem army that nearly

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destroyed Skyhall.

“He promised a brain-devouring torture device, didn’t he?” one of the officials had asked when they were going to fire the gnome for making them watch the latest horrible failure: Gnome-o-vision. They reluctantly agreed that the gnome had delivered what they asked for. When the invention earned the eccentric and lazy dwarf an award, the officials were not surprised. Prisoners who realized they were doomed to watch Gnome-o-vision incessantly until they went completely insane blabbered responses faster than when they were put on the rack in hopes they would be spared.

Digorence’s laziness was too much of a problem to be covered up just by the fact that he made a few great inventions, however, and Mortimer joined the officials as they decided whether or not to fire the lazy dwarf. “I say we give him one last mission, and if he screws this up, I say we fire his lazy—”

“But how can you count Gnome-o-vision a success? It disappeared, didn’t it?”

Mortimer grimaced. He hated to admit that he kind of liked the lazy gnome. “Teleported away, actually. We don’t know how—”

Someone burst into the room. “Mortimer, sir, we found it.”

Mortimer’s expression lifted. “Found?”

“On Earth, a place called London. It’s everywhere. They call it the welly.”

“The welly?”

“Welevision. Everyone’s watching it.”

“Don’t you mean television?”

“No, Mr. Mortimer, sir. You’ve got to come quickly, sir. It’s worse than when—you know—worse than when the Golem-omatic went crazy and started coughing out all those evil golems.” He motioned for Mortimer to follow him.

Mortimer sighed as he realized where the other was leading him and braced himself, for he knew he was going to become very angry. A gnome scout stood near the door to Digorence’s room, a look of anger and anxiety on his face. Mortimer sighed and blasted the door open with a spell, his shoulders heaving dangerously.

“Mortimer, how good of you to join me!” Digorence exclaimed, hoping fervently he was not going to be given an assignment.

“Shut up, you lazy slob. I don’t care how hard it is for you to get out of that chair you’re so fond of, but I want you out of that chair and over here to receive your orders, even if I have to call all of the wizards to levitate you out of it.”

Digorence feigned a hurt expression and slowly, with much effort, eased out of his chair and walked to Mortimer. The wizard nodded for the scout to come back in, which the gnome quickly did. “Rally the Law Gnomes. I believe there’s a warlock running loose in London. It’s the only explanation for Welevision.”

Digorence sighed and turned to face Mortimer, who looked

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angrily at him. “Welevision?”

“Welevision,” Mortimer repeated. “Or should I say gnome-o-vision. Now rally the Law Gnomes like I told you.”

Rolling his eyes, the gnome sighed and activated a microphone on his desk, speaking slowly with mock annoyance. “Rally the law gnomes; we have a warlock loose!” The message rang throughout Skyhall and Earth, snapping the law gnomes stationed on Earth into action. He followed the voice message with the schematics for the gnome-o-vision and a detailed memo on the welevision aka gnome-o-vision.

Slowly, a gnome stationed on the lawn of a human on Earth cautiously moved the pair of eyes he had painstakingly kept still for several days, making sure no one saw him move from the lawn and creep away into the city. As soon as the gnome stepped off the spot where he had been stationed, an artificial gnome popped out of the grass and settled into the same spot.

Around the world, the gnomish spies left their places and crept around the cities of the world, searching for a warlock and his henchmen. The gnomes were tense and alert for signs of the warlock as well as humans, for while they might pass as a midget at a distance, any human who came to ask them why they were snooping around town would know instantly that they were not human at all, unless of course the human happened to be exceedingly stupid, which some were.

Just before dawn, the gnomes cornered a group of gremlins speaking to one of the shadow men. Now, gremlins are clever

little beasties. Being about two and a half feet tall with grey skin and strangely blue ears, they are small enough to get into some pretty tight places. While it is widely known that gremlins are great nuisances and love to break machines, what isn't so widely known is that gremlins live in the dimension called Brittle. Brittle is full of machines built by the gremlins who live there. So while it may be true that they are often seen breaking machines, more often than not they are doing this to learn how a machine works so they can copy the design and build the machine on Brittle.

One of the cornered gremlins was speaking hastily as the gnomes approached. "Boss, our operation will have to wait," he said to the man waiting in the shadows before disappearing with the other gremlins. The man in the shadows frowned and prepared to teleport back to his home but was stopped before he could finish the spell. There was an audible crack as the war hammer hit the man on the head. The man groaned as the butt end of an axe slammed into his stomach and then struck him on the chin.

As the man fell to the ground, the gnomes picked him up and teleported themselves to Skyhall, where Arcanious was waiting to interrogate any prisoners. The archwizard scowled as they brought the prisoner to him, and he roughly dragged the man to the torture room.

While Arcanious interrogated the prisoner, Mortimer left to question Arianna, who was being almost as stubborn as the

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shadow man. “I will ask you once more, what did you see?”

“I do not have to tell you anything, and if you threaten me or torture me, I can sue you or have you arrested for child abuse.”

“Stop acting like an arrogant dragon and tell me what you saw! I mean it, girl. Your arrogance will not be tolerated here, so tell me what you saw or I’ll put you on the bloody rack!”

“You do not frighten me, wizard, nor do your empty threats.”

“Empty? You dare to call my threats empty? I will show you just how real my powers are!” Mortimer screamed as the last thread of his patience and common sense snapped. Rapidly, he began to conjure magic, his mind momentarily entering the realm of insanity. When the magic in his hand died down, Arianna asked him, “Bad day, old man?”

“A bloody bad one, and you aren’t making this any easier.” Arianna’s comment was interrupted as an agonized scream thundered throughout the halls, followed by pleas to stop the torture. “What are they doing to him?”

“He’s been listening to a Jessie McCartney song over and over and over.”

Arianna gasped and stared at Mortimer. “Just listening to one of his songs once is enough. How can you be so heartless?”

“Heartless? The warlocks aim to take over Earth, flood the world with demons and ghouls. We have been stopping every one of their plans for over a millennia now, but still they try.”

Arianna was silent for a moment, wondering what other tortures the wizards had developed. Deciding she wouldn't want to find out, she told Mortimer what she saw, relieving some of the stress for the nearly delirious wizard. "Thank you, girl. I don't know what the council plans to do with you, but I'm sure you will be fine," Mortimer said almost to himself.

Finishing his work, Arcanious burst out of the torture room and strode toward the council room, beckoning for Mortimer to follow him. Mortimer told Arianna to follow him as well; and soon, with the girl in tow, Mortimer entered the council room.

"I have grave news for all of you. Welevision is a diversion. The warlocks have all unified under one master warlock, who has discovered a way to bring the dragons back from their ancient prisons. Say no word of this until we discover this master warlock, and then let us keep this between us and take discreet action. Council is adjourned. Mortimer, would you stay with me a moment?" After Mortimer was done speaking with Arcanious, Arianna followed the wizard out of the room, wondering what was to become of her.

"That was blunt," Arianna said to Mortimer as they walked.

"We prefer it that way," Mortimer replied somewhat distantly.

"What are you going to do with me?" Arianna asked, the question finally popping out of her mouth.

"If, and only if, you lose the arrogant and snobby nature you have adopted, Arianna Kelt, you will be questioned in court to

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decide whether or not you can become an apprentice of magic. If you fail or wish not to become a wizard, you must stay with us.”

“As a prisoner? Couldn’t you use your magic to make my memory disappear?”

“No, I cannot. You should not have been able to see me, girl. Come. We must make our way to Judge Krudy and the People Court.” Arianna frowned when he mentioned court, which made Mortimer uneasy.

“How many times have you been to court, young lady?”

“A few times,” Arianna replied, wondering what difference it made.

“How many convictions?”

“Several, but only because I am an orphan without lawyers to fight for me and because the jury and the judge wouldn’t accept my responses to their stupid questions as the truth.”

“And did you tell the truth?”

“Sometimes,” Arianna replied with a mischievous smile.

Mortimer sighed and kept walking, wondering what he was getting himself into. Soon, they reached the door of the court, where they were expected. Shortly after Arianna entered the room, Judge Krudy began questioning her. After a few more minutes, he asked her, “Well, do you have anything to say before I give the *final* verdict. Are you or are you not a wizard seer?”

Arianna, who had been looking at the gnomes, the strange

looking humanoids with their armband communicators and talking spears, and the ancient wizard in front of her, pinched herself and said, “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home,” as she tapped her heels together.

“Are you trying to be funny, girl?”

“Nope, it seemed like the right thing to say during a bad dream.”

“This is not a dream. I am a wizard, Arianna,” Mortimer said, glaring at her as he extended his hand palm up and conjured a ball of enlightenment. He cast the glowing orb at Arianna just as the judge said, “I regret this immensely, girl, but I am forced to—”

“Anything!” Arianna shouted. “I’ll do anything you want.” She started crying. Real tears, not feigned. “I don’t know why I saw the wizard, I don’t. Please, don’t send me away. I don’t want to be locked up again. I am good. I mean—I mean, I can be good. I’m willing to be good.”

Some of the gnomes watching the questioning laughed as they exchanged whispers but were silenced by Judge Krudy’s angry stare. Mortimer, being a sucker for tears, asked for permission to approach the bench.

After several long minutes and much discussion, Judge Krudy said, “Very well, since you seem to have the natural ability to see through cloaking I will let you become an apprentice at Mythardiom, our esteemed academy for would-be wizards. Should you fail the academy, you will live out the rest

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of your days in Xjoz. I hear the pest crews need extra members—something about a giant beetle infestation.”

Arianna grinned and thanked him, suppressing a snide comment as she did so. Mortimer sighed and led Arianna from the courtroom when the judge dismissed them, talking to the girl as they walked.

“Come, we must talk,” Mortimer said to her as he sat down on a wooden bench. “A few days from now, you will be able to enter Mythardiom, for then the new students will be let in. You will be sent to the beginners’ squad, which I will teach for the next five to six years. Luckily, you are the same age as the other students, or close by the look of you, so you don’t have to worry about that. Before I let you enter our academy, I must explain the dimensions to you, for without this knowledge you will drown, metaphorically speaking, of course.

“My explanation will not take long. Earth, where I assume you came from, is one of these dimensions, as is Xjoz. The city of Skyhall, which you are in now, is in Xjoz. I will skip explaining these, since to explain them would be irrelevant. For each dimension, there is a similar one, which is the exact polar opposite of its brother dimension. The opposite dimension of Xjoz is Subterranea in which lies the city of Darkhall, the home of the warlocks and their vile academy.

“Another dimension is Gnomer, where the gnomes live. They supply us with their wonderful inventions and machines. Their brother dimension is home to the gremlins, who side with

the warlocks, and is called Brittle. The gremlins take it upon themselves to foil our machinery and to be immense pains in the process.

“The final dimension is Dementia, where the shadow men, demons, and other deranged and annoying creatures live. You can look these dimensions up when you are in the grand library in Skyhall. Ask the book-o-matic for the text of *Arcanious’ Book of Dimensions, Myths, Legends, Half Truths, Whole Truths, and Genuine Honest-to-Gosh Truths.*” Mortimer sighed as he finished the lesson and then asked Arianna if she understood. Slowly, she told him she understood, which brought a smile to his lips. For the next three days, Arianna slept and rested in the barracks of Squad Zero, Mortimer’s elite group of wizards and demon hunters, waiting for Mortimer to return and take her to Mythardiom.

When he returned, Arianna composed herself before asking him if he were ready to go. When he finally said yes, Arianna laughed nervously and waited for Mortimer to teleport them to Mythardiom. “What does it say?” Arianna found herself asking a moment later as she looked wide-eyed at a massive gate inscribed with words in a language she did not recognize.

“Words of protection from the Wizard’s Oath,” Mortimer replied. As he pointed to each of the three words, he said, “Secret, safe, secure. S.S.S. for short. It reminds us of the necessity for secrecy; the need to keep the innocents safe from the darkness; and the preciousness of those for whom we may

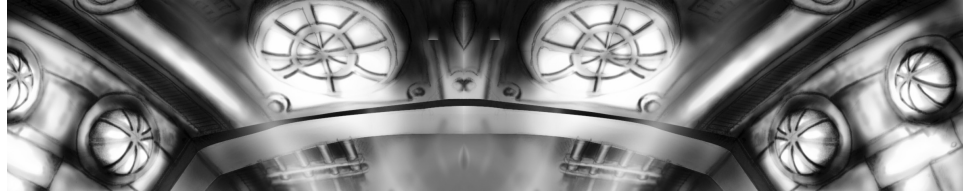
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be responsible. All wizards of Skyhall are charged with upholding this oath.

“The oath means different things to different people. To me, it means that we must keep the existence of ourselves, magic, and the magical realms hidden from those who have no knowledge of it. We must protect these innocents from those of the dark realms who would do them harm. And we must carry out our duties at all times, regardless of the cost to ourselves. This is what I have sworn to. It is what you must swear to if you are to become a wizard.”

Arianna nodded understanding as she listened. She had never dreamed that such places as Mythardiom and Skyhall existed or that she would be part of something with so great a purpose.

“Are you ready, Arianna?” Mortimer asked her as he ordered the guards to open the gates. When she could finally see what the academy of wizards looked like, Arianna gasped, and as she stepped forward, passing through the gates, she truly was ready to be a part of it all.



CHAPTER THREE: APPRENTICESHIP

Arianna marveled at the sight of the academy, reveling in its beauty. Mortimer smiled as he saw the look on her face and allowed her a few minutes to survey her surroundings. In the center of the academy was a magnificently forged fountain of unsurpassed beauty and elegance, with beautiful crystal clear water erupting from the mouths of exquisitely carved dolphins and flowing into a pool at the bottom of the fountain.

Real and beautiful birds perched on the fountain and sang wonderful songs to all who cared to listen. The academy building was a vast grey stone building with many windows and rooms, which were all enormous. The students' quarters were the exception. They were mainly rooms with two beds each and several pieces of furniture and tables to allow the students room to study the lessons they learned.

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Arianna marveled at all of the sights and sighed when she realized she had seen all of the enchanting and captivating places in this wonderful academy where she was to study the arts of magic. Wordlessly, she followed Mortimer into the heart of the academy. He showed her to her assigned room, conjuring a bed, dresser and desk, and rearranging the furniture with a wave of his arm as she stared. “I figured you wouldn’t like purple and pink, so I went with earthy colors,” he said, pointing to the golden-hued comforter, pillows, and bed skirt that were putting themselves neatly into place on the four post bed. “If you’d rather have something else, tell the desk-all. You will share, of course,” he said, indicating the bed, dresser and desk on the other side of the room.

“Tell who, what?” asked Arianna.

“Gnomes,” Mortimer said, “They come up with the dandiest things. I don’t know what we’d do without them.” He went to the study desk and said in a loud clear voice, “Desk-all, Arianna needs first-day supplies.”

The desk came to life, doing a little dance on its four legs, and for a moment it seemed to be smiling up at Arianna, then it spat out a leather-bound notebook, pen, and ink.

“The desk-all will give you any supplies you need except for books, of course, which come from—”

“The book-o-matic?”

“Exactly,” Mortimer said with a grin and then told her to follow him to her first class. Each of the senior wizards took six-

year shifts teaching magic to a group of apprentices of the same age; and since there were many senior wizards and only a few scores of students, there didn't have to be many wizards on teaching duty. Mortimer assured Arianna she would be fine, for all of the apprentices in his class were fairly new to the academy as well. Arianna sighed and sat down and waited for the rest of the apprentices to enter the classroom.

At the start of the class, Mortimer introduced Arianna and immediately began talking about basic energies. "The four basic energies of magic are simply fire, water, earth, and air. Before you can channel these energies, you must study them. Why you must do this is very simple. Each of these elements has a certain characteristic which makes it different from the others. For example, fire is the easiest of the elements to control initially. It is the easiest to summon and create, but it hungers for power and will sometimes lead apprentices to put too much power in their spells.

"Air is exactly the opposite. It is the hardest to master because it is difficult to tell if you have put enough energy into your spell. If there is not enough power, the spell fails. Earth is also very simple and the main problem with this element is that it is difficult to cast a spell of earth since earth is living and can distract apprentices at crucial moments when they need to concentrate. Water requires great mental stamina from apprentices, for most spells connected with the element of water take long to cast.

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“These elements also oppose each other, but elemental opposition is another lesson for another time. Today, the first element we will study is fire. We will learn how to control and shape this power as well as how to channel it and call it forth. I will ask you not to attempt to do this. The last lesson in fire will be conjuring and controlling it, and I will need to teach energy control before we attempt that.” Mortimer began to give each student thick tomes, which he told them to open.

Arianna followed the instructions, eager to learn and to be able to use the mysterious power of magic, and waited for Mortimer to finish his task. When the wizard was finally finished passing out the books to the score of apprentices in his class, he stood at his desk and began to read from a passage in the book. Arianna followed along, reading about how one should shape fire. The book said to gently morph the shape or strength of the fire with your will and magic and slowly alter the shape you conjured. The book went on to explain this in detail, giving examples of commands to give fire and how it would react. After this lesson, Mortimer continued loudly and clearly, reading the passages on how to use the full force of your will to keep the fire from expanding without your permission so even the students staring out the window heard what he said.

Arianna stored all of the information in her head, making sure she memorized everything she had learned about fire. She heard a soft buzz, which emanated from a small clock on Mortimer’s desk. The clock waved its hands as it danced across

the desk buzzing. The wizard announced it was time for lunch and led the class to the cafeteria. Arianna bravely tried the food; and though it was alien to her, she found it was extremely pleasant-tasting.

A long-haired apprentice sat wordlessly next to her and ate without noticing Arianna's presence. Arianna didn't care that she was being ignored and continued eating, eager for the next lesson. After further lessons on fire, Arianna was told to either explore the academy grounds or return to her room. She chose the latter and lay in her bed attempting to sleep though it was far too early for her. After a while, she pulled a book from the shelf near her bed and began to read it.

Suddenly, she heard the springs of the bed opposite hers clank and stared at the apprentice who had just entered, marveling at the girl's skill at moving silently. When the apprentice saw her stare she quickly said, "I'm sorry if I startled you. I just didn't want to disturb you."

"It's quite all right. I am just amazed at how silently you move."

"It's useful for not being noticed by people. It eliminates a lot of embarrassment."

"I'm Arianna,"

"Meilan," replied the girl.

Arianna smiled and returned to reading, occasionally looking at the girl as she combed her hair. Meilan was a tall, violet-haired girl with long hair, dark eyes, and a strong,

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healthy complexion, who seemed to be constantly thinking about something. Arianna regarded her for another moment before returning to pore over her book.

The first week passed quickly. Arianna was stunned to discover that the grand library was little more than a closet in a back room of the academy containing the book-o-matic. She thought it was some kind of joke. She opened the door, found little more than a broom closet with a strange contraption in the middle of it. When she approached, a voice asked, “What book are you looking for?” and when she asked for *Arcanious’ Book of Dimensions, Myths, Legends, Half Truths, Whole Truths, and Genuine Honest-to-Gosh Truths*, the book materialized in her hands.

Well that’s not quite true. Actually, the voice said, “What book are you looking for and be quick about it. I’m trying to take a nap.” Arianna said she was looking for *Arcanious’ Book of Dimensions*.

The voice said, “Please be specific in your inquiries; I don’t read minds.”

To which Arianna replied, “I think it’s called *Arcanious’ Book of Dimensions, Myths, Legends*, and there was something about truths.”

The book-o-matic, rather angry now, said, “Close enough,” and the book materialized over Arianna’s head, falling on her with a loud thud. It was a heavy leather-bound book, so it had quite a heft and it hurt when it fell on her noggin.

The first morning of her second week, Arianna left early for class, hoping to speak with Mortimer before class started. She was startled to find someone else had arrived before her, for since she had arrived at the academy a week ago she had never seen anyone besides herself who came in early for class. Mortimer watched as Arianna walked in and sat at her desk. “Ranth, the problem is, you are tensing when you conjure the fire. You must relax and let the energy flow. The tenseness blocks the flow of the energy. Let it flow.”

Ranth nodded and relaxed, quickly casting the spell as he thought of home.

“Now shape it with your will. Gently alter its appearance and let the new shape reflect what you wish it to be. Perfect. Now throw the spell at me.”

Ranth looked perplexed but finally threw the orb at Mortimer, though it was a soft and slow throw, a sign that Ranth was still reluctant to do as Mortimer wished. A sphere of blue appeared and the fire disappeared as it collided with it.

“See, fire and water are opposites. Water negates fire, fire negates earth, air negates water, and earth negates air. If you remember this, you can use spells of the element that negates the one slung at you instead of a magical shield, which is a form of air magic. Do you understand, Ranth?”

The apprentice nodded and sat at his seat; the perplexed look on his face was gone and was replaced by a look of comprehension. Arianna looked on as the other students began

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to filter into the room. Today they would work on the element of earth. Though most of the lessons were similar to those on fire, there was also much that was new, which meant there was much to memorize. Mortimer began with a lengthy lecture about earth magic, warning about measuring the strength of the magic and about how using real objects as part of an earth spell could disrupt the balance of nature and bring chaos to the world; for example, if they suddenly uprooted a mountain or moved a planet out of its orbit. Those were the examples Mortimer gave, and the students understood the message.

At lunch, Arianna's roommate, Meilan, joined her at a table; and together, between bites of food, they repeated to each other the lessons about drawing magic and unleashing it that Mortimer had given them.

"Mortimer said to draw the energy from our surroundings as well as from the ground and the air. The energies magicians collect are shaped within them after they find their center, the place inside magicians where the inner power dwells. Then, using the force of their wills, the wizards could direct portions of the energy they collected to their hands to be used. The energy then should either be returned into the earth to be distributed among the objects they were taken from or stored within the wizards so they may draw upon it quickly if the need arises.

"To use the energy, use the power you direct toward your hands, force the energy to your palms, and command it to

become the element you want it to be. Some elements will take longer than others to form; others will require less time. When the element or multiple elements are in your palms, either shape them and then cast them in their raw form, or shape them further and add more power to them with arcane spells. The spells we will learn last this year.”

Both practiced each step repeatedly during lunch and the short break afterwards, and both were more than ready for Mortimer’s lesson when they returned to class early in the afternoon. Mortimer continued instructing his pupils on the art of earth magic, going through each delicate step of the summoning and shaping with the class until all could summon and shape earth energy without mishap.

For the next few weeks, Arianna continued studying the basic energies and learned how to control the powers she summoned to her hands. Each of the lessons was highly detailed and Mortimer discussed everything they learned with them repeatedly, hoping they would commit the lessons to memory forever and therefore excel at the art of magic.

After this short period of training in the basic elements, Arianna began to learn how to use intricate arcane spoken spells to enhance the raw energies she conjured. Mortimer once again went over every detail regarding spell casting and repeatedly made his students practice in front of his critical eye. At first, they conjured the raw energy and then started to say a spell; but after a few days, Mortimer instructed the apprentices in

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conjuring the energy right before the last words or syllables of the spells were spoken.

Mortimer said this wasted less energy and allowed the caster's mind to be less strained, which would help the spell-caster immensely during precarious situations. To do this, however, required perfect timing and vast amounts of practice, for they needed to be able to continue the spell and summon the energy at the same time.

They practiced for hours on some days, trying to ensure that they would be able to do this perfectly if asked. Arianna and Meilan worked the hardest of the assembled apprentices to perfect this technique, staying up late many nights to continually perfect their abilities. When Mortimer learned of this, his admiration for Arianna's willingness to study hard to achieve what she wanted grew.

Soon, Mortimer gave Arianna and Meilan advanced text books to study in their free time and also asked them to tutor Ranth, who was constantly encountering problems in spell casting. Mortimer thanked them when they agreed to help the boy and left to prepare his next lesson for the weary class. In a few minutes, Arianna and Meilan left their new books in their room and headed toward the lunchroom to meet Ranth, who had been told the girls were to tutor him. Ranth was a youthful boy with sandy hair combed to cover one eye and a long scar that ran in a diagonal line. He also had yellow eyes and was constantly scowling. He had a complexion similar to Meilan's

and was also tall. He looked almost lanky, yet moved in a graceful manner and was not as prone to anger and violent action as some other boys.

Tutoring Ranth wasn't easy for Arianna, and her patience was tested almost as constantly as he encountered difficulties. "You must relax, Ranth. If you tense, you block the flow of the energies. You have to relax; otherwise, you won't achieve anything."

"I try, but when the energy comes, I see shadows, shadows, Arianna, like the kind that the wizards battle. I'm not afraid of them; I'm only afraid I will become a wizard and then fail. The shadows, they feed upon this fear; I cannot be freed from them. Sometimes, I break away from their power, but they only return like a hungry dog who has escaped his master's chain. Then the pain intensifies. I must prevail, but how, I do not know."

Meilan looked sympathetically at Ranth and started to reply but the striking of a gong interrupted her. "We better be going to class, I guess," Meilan said as she rose from her chair. Ranth thanked the two and left, heading toward Mortimer's room. Arianna sighed and headed after Ranth, hoping she would not be late. Meilan caught up to her and hastened her pace, signaling to Arianna that they had better move faster if they wished to arrive on time.

Both burst into the classroom out of breath, barely sitting down in time. As the gong rang once more signaling it was time for class to start, Mortimer rose and headed to the front of the

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room. “We will begin working on the element of water again today. I know learning this is tedious; I went through this as well. Arianna, Meilan, you may both return to your rooms to study those advanced books I have given you. You both have mastered the lessons of basic energies, so it would be pointless for you to do this. I trust you will study, however, and I hope you will not disappoint me. Now, class—”

Mortimer began the lesson he had prepared without waiting for the girls to leave, speaking loudly and slowly so every part of the lesson would be heard by the students. Everyone listened closely to Mortimer’s lessons. If they didn’t, the whole class would have to pay attention to the same lesson after their class was over, and they would lose most, if not all, of their free time.

Arianna and Meilan slipped out of the classroom, thankful they wouldn’t have to listen again to a lesson they already knew. They walked briskly to their room, hoping to study as much as possible before the classes ended and the myriad of noises would start to flood the academy as it did everyday. Arianna pored over the book Mortimer had given her, often reading each of the passages twice in order to assure she had understood fully the meaning of what she was learning.

Meilan did likewise, and soon the two lost track of time, stuck somewhere between reality and the passages of the thick, musty-smelling book. Both profited from the time they spent reading from the seemingly endless book; and a few weeks later, Arianna thought she had found a solution to Ranth’s

problem.

While she had been idly skimming through the pages of the advanced book, she had found a chapter about mind control and possession, skills she learned the shadows were masters at using. Together with Meilan, she convinced the apprentice to allow Arianna to enter his mind. Meilan chose to stay, in case she needed to pull Arianna's spirit from the walls of Ranth's mind.

Ranth was extremely nervous about having Arianna enter his mind but agreed and said nothing, waiting for her to start and finish what she planned to do. Arianna began a spell she had learned from the book and conjured an immense amount of air right before she finished the spell. In a flash, Arianna's spirit left her body and entered the realm of Ranth's mind.

Meilan looked around nervously, hoping fervently that no one would notice them, for she was sure Mortimer would not agree with Arianna's plan. Arianna slowly stared around the room, looking for any possible dangers. Slowly, she moved to her left, gently probing at the floor for traps before she moved, her thief instincts cutting in before she could stop them.

Arianna turned around and ducked as a shadow soared toward her, barely dodging the creature's claws. She beamed when she realized her theory was correct. *It's time to test another theory now, I guess,* Arianna thought as the shadow turned back around to soar toward her again. As the shadow drew closer to her, Arianna stood stock-still and waited for the shadow to

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collide with her. The shadow passed through her, causing it to emit a savage growl as it realized its secret was discovered.

An ancient wraith floated toward Arianna, anger clearly evident on its spectral face. It spoke with a raspy and eerie voice, which created goose bumps on Arianna's skin. "This is our domain! Puny mortal, why do you not cower in fear before me? You must be tediously brave or stupid if you do not fear me. I can stop your beating heart with a single word and then drink your still warm blood without even trying. Do you dare to face me?"

"I do not fear you, wraith. Just try and stop me from freeing your hold on this boy."

"To do so, you would have to kill me. And to react in a violent way could damage the boy."

"Do you think me naïve, you ancient bag of bones? I can sever you from his mind without violence, and you know you are powerless to stop me unless I forget you are only here in spirit and can therefore not harm me. To be able to do so would be impossible and to do so would break the balance of reality and shatter the order of the universe, bringing chaos to the world."

"Try, then, mortal, let us see if you can do what you say you can do. It is easy to promise something, but much harder to give or do what you say you will."

Arianna stared into the wraith's eyes and sneered before walking toward a staff lodged in a small shaft containing staves

connecting the brain to the mind. The wraith cried out in despair as Arianna pulled a red staff from the myriad of colored sticks in the shaft and then disappeared, followed shortly by Arianna.

Before she left, however, Arianna took a moment to study what Ranth's mind looked like. It looked like the interior of a broken castle, with various fallen stone pillars littering the floor. Occasionally, a thought passed through the mind and into the shaft; but other than the thoughts, nothing else stirred in Ranth's mind. Arianna walked deeper into the boy's mind until she reached a door, which she opened, fascinated at the sight she saw beyond the door. A corridor led her to a room where all of Ranth's memories were kept, each waiting until they were called to be sent to the brain by a probe which told them the owner of the memory was going to reflect on it. Arianna marveled at the sights for a moment longer before leaving.

She gasped as she stared into Mortimer's disapproving eyes when her spirit returned to her body. Mortimer said nothing and left, with a perplexing look on his face. Meilan turned to face Arianna, who was deep in thought at the moment. It took Meilan a few moments to return Arianna to reality, and once she did, Meilan was regarded with shining eyes. "It was fascinating. His mind looked like a ruined castle or fortress, Meilan. The sight was wonderful and interesting. Oh, I hope Mortimer isn't mad at me." Meilan sighed and didn't answer, for she didn't know what to say.

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There was a sudden flash of light and heat, which made Arianna and Meilan spin around. Standing there in the shadowy corridor, Ranth stood with a globe of fire blazing merrily in his hands. “Thank you, Arianna. I am in your debt.”

“You owe me nothing, Ranth.”

“Nonsense. One day I will repay you; and until that day, I will remain in your debt. Thank you.” Ranth turned and left, hoping to return to his studies before anyone came along and sidetracked him. Arianna left to return to her studies as well, and Meilan followed her, wondering how Arianna knew how to enter Ranth’s mind and free him from the shadows, and of how she knew he was possessed. With a sigh, Meilan pushed the questions to the back of her mind and quickly caught up to Arianna.

The next few weeks passed by uneventfully, and Arianna and Meilan continued to study advanced books, occasionally taking tests from Mortimer to determine whether or not they still remembered the basic lessons. When they successfully passed his tests, Mortimer presented them with more books, which they eagerly took.

Everything was peaceful at the academy, and all the apprentices trained intensely for the Tests of the Magus, a two-part test which would determine whether an apprentice was ready to become a level one wizard, who, though still in training, could join one of the squads that battled shadows and all the evil creatures on Earth and at Skyhall whom the normal

denizens couldn't handle by themselves. One of the last lessons Mortimer taught his class before they began testing was always to be sure no person who did not know magic existed ever saw magic being used and then he proceeded to show them how to conceal spell-casting and themselves from people on Earth.

Arianna and Meilan studied relentlessly for many weeks to prepare for the tests, for they wished to pass so they would be able to become wizards and enter the field. After the first week ended, Ranth asked to study with them, and they agreed; for now that his mind had been freed from the shadows, the boy's knowledge and mastery of magic was almost greater than Arianna's, and they accomplished much when they discussed what they were learning and the problems they were grappling with. Soon, they had covered all of the basic and advanced lessons Mortimer had given his students a written copy of and proceeded to study more from the special text books Mortimer had given to the trio, who were the ace students in his class.

The months passed by quickly, filled with lessons about the field and how to deal with common problems encountered there. In their free time, students were expected to study unless they wished to begin again at the apprentice level and go through another two-year apprenticeship at Mythardiom, something the parents of the apprentices strongly disapproved of.

Soon, the time for the tests came, and on that day, the three comrades awoke early and ready for the day's activities.



CHAPTER FOUR: TESTS OF STRENGTH AND WILL

Arianna sighed as she met with Meilan and Ranth, who were waiting for her near the fountains. Unlike her friends, who were so anxious they could barely think straight, she was not anxious about the tests occurring today. She had selected them as partners for the first test of the day, where groups of three would battle shadows conjured by senior wizards. After this test, the comrades would split up and take final tests by themselves. They needed to pass both the group and individual tests to become level one wizards and enter the field.

With some reassurance from Arianna, Ranth and Meilan's fears evaporated, and the trio set out for the large field behind the school where the arena lay. Their pace was as brisk as the rapid beating of their hearts, for they couldn't afford a mistake. Another two years of apprentice training would be almost

unbearable to the three ace students. They took their seats and watched the other groups battle the shadows. One of the groups was made up of three obnoxious boys whom Arianna didn't like very much. For a time, she returned to her notes, and gradually lost track of the fight going on.

When the obnoxious boys lost the match, Ranth mouthed a silent, "They got what they deserved" to Meilan and Arianna, who succeeded in stifling laughs. Now they listened for the next set of names to be called out.

When they were not called, the trio sighed and watched the next match, anxious to be done with the tests. Arianna sat through three more matches before her team was called to the arena to battle the shadows. As they stepped on the soft sand of the arena floor, the shadows appeared in a flash of smoke and light. There were nine shadows in all, meaning they outnumbered the apprentices three to one.

Arianna called the forces of air and fire and blended them, using a technique Mortimer had taught her to create a new energy from two different ones. She quickly incanted a spell and flung the full force of her magic at the nearest shadow. It screamed but continued on. One of the most painful lessons in Mortimer's class had been accuracy; but now, the three were grateful for the long hours they had spent slinging spells at Mortimer, who either moved or stood still and negated the spell before it harmed him.

Ranth sent some nearby rocks flying at the shadows. The

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creatures blocked the spell with an opposing element and continued to fly toward them, having lost none of their numbers yet to the trio. Ranth's spell, however, had diverted the shadows' attention, allowing Meilan and Arianna to fling a barrage of flaming rocks at the shadows. While the shadows dispelled the fire using water spells, the rocks remained.

As the rocks struck the shadows, they began to retreat, and this was all Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth needed to change the balance of the fight. The three advanced on the shadows, conjuring blazing globes of fire and burning bolts of lightning and hurling them at the shadows. The shadows howled as the magic struck and gradually weakened them.

Angry, the shadows returned the attack, slashing at the three with raking claws. Arianna rolled to her side as the claws of a shadow came crashing down toward her, an eerie black aura surrounding the claws. Arianna quickly formed a lightning bolt and sent it soaring toward the shadow. The bolt struck the beast's chest, causing it to topple over in pain. As the shadow faded from existence, Arianna turned to engage another shadow.

Seeing that Meilan was in trouble, Ranth dove through the air. He placed a magical barrier around the girl at the last possible moment, erecting it just before the dangerous claws of the shadow would have raked her chest. The creature howled angrily as its claws collided with the barrier. It had hoped to find flesh but found none.

As Ranth landed on the ground, he turned and spun back around, facing the creature. The shadow's howl grew louder as Ranth sprayed it with ice and an icicle buried deep in its chest. Ranth followed with a pair of lightning bolts, destroying the shadow just before it turned on Meilan, who was busy fighting another shadow.

Meilan sent a pair of lightning bolts deep into the chest of one of the shadows and then turned to face the other one, surprised to find it disintegrating before her eyes. She shuddered as she realized how close to death she would have been if they were real shadow creatures and not harmless apparitions the wizards conjured to test the students.

"To me," Arianna called out to Meilan. Meilan regained her composure as she hurried to Arianna's side. She surrounded herself and Arianna with a magic shield as the former thief threw back her head and extended her arms out wide, calling great chunks of earth into existence.

Using a steady salvo of minor fireballs, Ranth engaged the remaining shadows, trying to keep them oblivious to what Arianna was doing. He rolled to his side as a shadow thrust outward, a blow that almost caught him in the chest. As he regained his feet, he leapt at the shadow, stretching his body out fully with his hands extended. Between his outstretched hands, he worked a growing ball of lightning. One moment the creature was cackling and roaring as it lashed out at Ranth. The next it was being engulfed by the ball of lightning.

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The shadow's companions grouped closer together and advanced on Ranth. The immense lightning ball Ranth had summoned hungrily devoured one of the shadows as it sought to attack, slaying it instantly.

Suddenly, the chunks of earth Arianna had created fell from the skies, burning intensely. The shadows scoffed and shot water spells at the flaming meteors, hoping to erect a shield that would neutralize the earth spell after the flames were doused. However, the fire was natural and the rocks fell through the hastily erected barrier, burying the remaining shadows and ending the fight.

"Well done," Mortimer called out as he dismissed them.

Panting heavily, the three comrades left the arena, thankful they had passed the first test. Together, they walked to the fountain to rest until the time of the final test. Arianna slapped out a round of high fives, her face showing her excitement.

For a time afterward, the three sat near the fountain, breathing and sweating heavily. The strong breeze blowing through the academy felt good on their skin. It seemed that they had only begun to rest when the gong announced the Test of Will was about to begin.

Lethargically, the three headed to the rooms they had been assigned for their tests. Arianna walked slowly toward Mortimer's room, though whether from exhaustion or anxiety she didn't know. When she finally entered the strange room, Mortimer beckoned for her to sit in the chair prepared for her.

She smiled wanly and sat down, wondering what she was to do.

Mortimer said not a word. He merely returned her smile, but it was a fiendish smile, not the smile of the friendly wizard. It was as if Mortimer weren't himself, and as suddenly as this thought occurred to Arianna, she felt a pull at her mind.

Her eyes widened, her eyebrows knitted as she tried to understand what was happening. Was Mortimer attacking her? Was this a test or was it real?

Mortimer scowled and increased the strength of his mental attack. He was trying to take control of her mind.

Arianna tried to concentrate but found her will was rapidly being defeated. Think clearly, think clearly, she told herself as she reinforced the strength of her defense. If she could break the link between their minds, she could free herself from the attack.

Mortimer pushed his thoughts into her mind, probing, testing her will. She fought to keep him out, but he was a great wizard and immensely stronger than her.

Pain swept through her mind. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Why are you doing this?" she screamed aloud. "Are you trying to hurt me?"

Mortimer's eyes, Arianna told herself. There was something wrong with his eyes. She started to question whether this was really Mortimer before her. Would her teacher inflict real pain upon her? What would be the point of that? Was this an imposter—a rogue wizard? Did this imposter want her to fail the test?

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Her pain became anguish and her anguish became anger. Refusing to yield, she lashed out with her will, trying to get the other to divert his energy and attention to defending so she could break the link.

The wizard countered by clouding his thoughts so she couldn't get any hint of what he was doing. Gradually, Arianna began to lose contact with Mortimer's mind, but she obstinately held on, struggling both to break the link and to understand what he was doing to her.

She almost succeeded, but Mortimer hit her telepathically with a strong blow while she was diverting her willpower to attack his mind and break the link at the same time, forcing her out of his mind. When Mortimer went to seize her mind, he met no resistance, for Arianna was still recovering from the first blow.

"You are mine," he told her, his voice inside her mind.

Arianna was afraid, very afraid. Her whole body shivered uncontrollably, but she managed to reply, her voice barely a whisper, "Never. I will never give up or give in."

"You dare to fight me?" Mortimer asked, his thoughts pushing into her mind.

"Yes. Yes, I do," Arianna countered, putting every last ounce of her strength into the unspoken words she cast back into Mortimer's mind.

Mortimer pressed back, thrusting his will on her with the full force of his might. He held nothing back.

Arianna found herself on her knees, looking up at him as he towered over her. She expected him to do something savage and terrible. All she could think about was making herself small, making herself so small she could slip by him and escape.

Escape, escape, went the whispered thought in her mind.

Run, run, she told herself. Her only thoughts were of escape.

Mortimer surprised her by releasing the link; and as he did so, her scattered thoughts came racing inward. She caught her breath, stifled words of despair in her throat.

The whole of the room suddenly changed. She wasn't on her knees. Mortimer wasn't towering over her. She was still sitting in the chair; Mortimer was still behind his desk. And in that moment she knew without doubt that the man before her was indeed her teacher and master.

Tears sprang to her eyes for surely she had failed. Her heart felt like it was breaking in a thousand tiny, tiny pieces. She had worked so hard and long to become a wizard. Now she would have to endure two more years of apprentice training before she could try to become a wizard again.

Through her tears and her sobs, she decided she would run away, far, far away, so far away no one from Skyhall would ever find her. A tiny voice in the back of her mind whispered, "Run, run. Escape, escape." Arianna fought the urge to run, and chased away the voice within.

Mortimer stood tall, arching his shoulders back and looking almost regal. He walked around the desk, put a hand on

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Arianna's shoulder. "Do not weep, Arianna. You did not fail. This test was meant to take your will to the breaking point."

"But, but," interrupted Arianna.

"Let me finish, my dear. This test was meant to break your will and to remake you as either a wizard or something else."

"Something else?"

"Let's just say that the broken return to their old life with no memory of the times in Skyhall, as it must be. You, on the other hand, are remade a wizard. A level one wizard, mind you, but a wizard all the same."

"Thank you, Mortimer. I have learned so much during my studying here at Mythardiom. I will serve you well."

"I won't be leading you unless you should join my elite squad. I think this may be in your future if this is something you want. You have great willpower, Arianna. I did not mean to take you as far as I did. For that, I apologize. Follow Neel; he's an excellent leader."

"Neel?"

Mortimer winked at her. "Come, we must join the others. I will see you at the ceremony tomorrow."

Arianna followed Mortimer, wiping the tears from her eyes as she left the room.



CHAPTER FIVE: COMMENCEMENT

Arianna walked slowly down the corridor toward the ceremony chamber, hardly able to contain her anxiety and excitement. In front of her strode Mortimer and waiting for her at the massive double doors before the ceremony chamber were Ranth and Meilan, both of whom were better able to mask their excitement than Arianna.

Taking in the sights as she entered the ceremony chamber with her companions on either side of her, she noticed the grand chandelier bathing the room in strong white light as well as the arrangements of flowers placed all around the room. She took her seat and watched as a rather bookish wizard walked up to the room's central podium. "I wish to welcome you all to the ceremony of graduation. I am Brozax, one of the three uber

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wizards in the tri-wizard council, and I wish to congratulate all of the students here today for enduring the training you have experienced. One of the reasons I am here is because I see great things ahead for each and every one of you. Great things indeed.”

Brozax paused to let his words sink in, and to study the wide-eyed faces of the young wizards. Grinning portentously, he continued, “Let us not forget, young wizards, that level one is but a beginning. You’ve completed one of five levels of training. Complete the rest of your training, become full, craft wizards, and one day you may find yourself standing behind this podium, addressing a group of wide-eyed wizards and speaking on behalf of all citizens of Skyhall.”

“On behalf of all citizens of Skyhall,” Arianna whispered to herself as Brozax said, “Now, let’s begin.”

The music started as Brozax was handed a long list of names, then he raised his arms to signal the newly made wizards to stand and form a line near the podium. Arianna was so thrilled and excited; the ceremony was going so well. Well, not truly, because that’s not quite what happened. Actually, a mechanized orchestra appeared on the stage behind the podium. The strings started playing quite beautifully, but the percussion and wind sections made awful booms and screeches causing Digorence to jump onto the stage and pummel the mechanized conductor.

Things got crazy for a few moments when the mechanical

band seemed to be turning on Digorence, but it all cleared up nicely—truly. By the time Brozax was reading the first name on the list of graduates, Arianna was telling herself that she'd forget about all that business with the orchestra. Still, it's a good thing that Kelt—Arianna's last name—wasn't so far down the list because as she reached the front of the line she really did forget about everything—even what she was supposed to do. She heard only the rapid thumping of her heart as she waited for Brozax to speak her name.

As Brozax raised the microphone, the music died down. Expectantly, Arianna took a step forward, then another. This is it, she told herself. This was her moment—the moment when she became a wizard for real. As the uber wizard opened his mouth to speak, though, the sound of an explosion overpowered the sound of his voice.

Before she understood what was happening, Arianna found herself catching the podium as it toppled over and trying to stop herself from falling under its weight. In front of her, Brozax dropped the microphone and began incanting a spell. Several others in the room were taking the initiative as well, cursing the restriction of movement their classy suits gave them as they attempted to figure out what was happening and defend themselves if necessary.

Ranth swore under his breath as the first warlock emerged from the dust-filled corridor and launched a fireball into the ceremony room. Mortimer and his elite squad, Squad Zero, who

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were always present at the graduations to inspire the graduates, deflected the fireball as they charged at the warlock. The warlock countered by calling the earth from beneath Mortimer's feet, creating a hole into which Mortimer and his squad fell. By the time, Mortimer and his squad emerged from the hole, a flood of warlocks had entered the ceremony room and grouped themselves into formations.

Arianna and her friends attempted to attack the warlocks, but counter spells hit them before they finished chanting, knocking them to the ground and forcing them to try and conjure the spells anew.

"Too close," Mortimer barked at Arianna as he drew his force blade, channeling his energy into it as he concentrated on the enemy. It was then he saw the power crystals the warlocks were wearing. "The crystals are enhancing the speed of their spells. Concentrate on them with your force blades."

The rest of his squad drew their force blades, magical long swords curved slightly at the tip into which wizards could store power. The stored power could be used to cover a blade with the element it was charged with or to launch spells. Mortimer was told that on Earth, humans believed they used staffs for storing their energy, and he had laughed when told that, since he knew staffs would be ineffective against most of the enemies wizards had to face.

As his squad's force blades started to add the elements stored within to their edges, Mortimer ordered his squad to

advance, firing bursts of energy at the crystals, but the bursts of energy ricocheted off the crystals uselessly. Cursing, the wizards continued their advance until they were close enough to strike the crystals directly with their blades. When their blades bounced off the crystals, the warlocks laughed and blew the wizards back with a strong gale of wind.

Pandemonium erupted as more warlocks pushed their way into the ceremony room, carrying force hammers for close quarters combat and attacking everyone in sight with both magic and physical attacks. No few ordinary citizens had attended the ceremony and now they were trapped in the melee. One leapt out of a window. Others followed and soon many were running away from the academy shouting and screaming.

As the warlocks surged toward Brozax, the brave but stupid graduates regrouped in front of the uber wizard, who was constantly slinging spells at the attacking force. The warlocks threw the young wizards against the walls with their magic, watching as Squad Zero recovered from an attack that should have stunned them all into unconsciousness. The warlocks turned as one and surged at Squad Zero, spells at the ready. The sudden maelstrom of wind, fire, and earth they unleashed caught Mortimer and his squad by surprise and it was all Mortimer could do to raise a defensive bubble around himself and his squad as the wall and ceiling behind them were ripped away and they were torn from the room by an unseen force.

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The warlocks laughed and plunged the room into total darkness. They were tired of playing with the wizards. They cast a night vision spell they had recently developed and advanced on Brozax, stunning him into unconsciousness with their combined wrath.

“Quickly now, get him,” hissed one of the warlocks. As other warlocks picked up Brozax and hurried away with him, another warlock turned on the speaker. “What about the others? I say we stay and finish this.”

The first warlock turned on the second, suddenly looming large before him. “That is precisely why your say doesn’t matter. Now leave or I’ll finish *you*.”

The second warlock glared at the first, then turned on his heel, hurrying away. The first warlock smiled smug satisfaction as he surveyed his handiwork, saying to himself as he departed, “Boss is going to be pleased.”

Minutes later, Mortimer opened his eyes and put a hand to his head. Slowly, he looked around and saw everyone else clutch at their heads and moan. As he returned to what remained of the ceremony room through a break in the wall, he heard Arcanious working to restore order. “The graduation is postponed,” the archwizard was saying and then almost as if to himself he added in a low tone as he slumped over, “Brozax is missing. Missing, oh my stars. We must find him. We must rescue him. We—”

Mortimer made his way to the archwizard. Picking his way

through the chaos and rubble, he caught sight of Arianna, Ranth, and Meilan working to help those around them. When he finally reached the archwizard, he could hardly believe his eyes. Arcanious, commander of the Senior Wizards, Field Marshall of the wizard squads, looked like a man beaten. “—breached the shields of Skyhall, broke into the very heart of Mythardiom,” the archwizard was saying to himself as he surveyed the turmoil.

Mortimer knelt beside Arcanious. “Sir, I know why they were so strong. Those crystals enhanced the speed of their casting as well as their strength. Sir—” His voice trailed off as he sensed the strange, magical aura surrounding Arcanious. He rose from his knees quickly, but before he could turn away, Arcanious grabbed him by the arm.

“You must locate where they are making these crystals and destroy them all.”

“What of Brozax?”

“Alpha,” Arcanious replied. Mortimer nodded fast agreement. “Sir, allow me to have Arianna and her friends as temporary squad members until this is all resolved.”

“If you think they will help, Mortimer,” Arcanious replied distantly.

Mortimer turned away from the archwizard, great concern etched into his expression. “Squad Zero, to me, to me,” he called out above the discord. “Arianna, Meilan, Ranth, to me, to me!”

He shouted orders to other wizards nearby. “Get the healers.

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Return quickly.”

He flashed field signals to his squad. Check the perimeter, return report, his hand signals said wordlessly. He grabbed Arianna about the shoulders as she approached. “I fear for the council. Find Kalyphius and Sentium. Take Meilan and Ranth with you. Hurry now!”

As the three rushed off, Mortimer turned his attention to Arcanious. The archwizard remained as disoriented as before. “Do I dare?” he wondered to himself. The strange aura made him unsure of what to do, but he was certain that Arcanious was not himself.

“What in the name of Xjoz is going on?” Mortimer muttered to himself as he helped the archwizard to his feet.

Before he had taken three steps, Pox, one of the healers, was approaching. The healer’s expression mirrored Mortimer’s own concern. “He’s befuddled,” the healer whispered.

“Befuddled?”

“Yes, befuddled. I haven’t seen such a thing in ages, but I am sure.” Pox scratched at his balding head. “I need a crystal. Not sure if—”

“A crystal? The warlocks had crystals, suspended around their necks on heavy chains. There were symbols carved into them, but I had never seen the like before.”

Pox didn’t seem to hear what Mortimer was saying as he guided Arcanious through the rubble and away. Mortimer wanted to follow but Arianna and her friends were already

returning with Kalyphius and Sentium. Seeing the uber wizards eased Mortimer's mind, but it did not put him at ease. Something big was happening. Warlocks didn't attack Skyhall in force without a plan. Why did they take Brozax? Was there some special significance? Had they also tried to take Arcanious and failed?

Before he could say anything, Kalyphius and Sentium were rushing after Pox and Arcanious, leaving him to face Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth. Mortimer scrubbed at his temple. Things were happening so fast. He did not doubt that he himself had been affected by some spell that was meant to stun and confuse but that the power of the spell had been spread across the whole of his squad rather than just hitting him as intended. Was that significant as well, he wondered.

"Mortimer?" Arianna repeated. "Mortimer."

Mortimer eyed the girl, seeming just then to realize she was standing in front of him. He took three medallions from his pocket. "These are for you three. You are temporary members of my squad until Brozax is rescued. Report to Squad Zero headquarters tomorrow morning. Understood?"

Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth said they understood. The three friends then retired to their rooms and fell asleep quickly, their energy sapped by the day's events.



A robed figure smiled as a large group of warlocks wearing crystals walked into his study and wordlessly placed a man in

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the chair opposite him. “So nice of you to join me, Brozax,” he said as magic sparked in his hands.

Brozax looked up at him and tried to summon magic. The warlock laughed at the wizard’s efforts as he prepared his own spell. Their spells shot out at the same moment. Both were extremely powerful, but Brozax’s spell scarcely bothered his foe. “Is that the best you can do, *uber wuhssard*?”

The uber wizard grimaced and prepared to cast another spell, thinking the warlock’s spell was ineffective against him. “You are a pompous fool, Brozax, just as I remember. The only reason you are not in my specially designed prison is because I am keeping you here to see what you’ll do, and frankly, you bore me.”

Another spell hit Brozax, knocking him off the chair he had been bound to. He grimaced as he began rubbing at the rope burn. “Too many years you’ve stayed off the field, Brozax, and in those years you’ve yielded to the pleasures of flesh: food, food, and more food to fill that black hole you call a belly. And now, when you’re hurt by a little rope burn you sit there and rub at it until mommy comes to kiss it and make it all better.”

“Who in the name of good do you think you are?”

“Ah, the little coward’s finding some bravery. Are you jealous because you see a lollipop or a little doll out of your reach? You know, I’m really glad I left Skyhall; I mean, you guys can’t even swear properly.” Brozax raised a fist and started to stand. “Bye, bye,” the robed figure said as he snapped

his fingers.

A moment later, the robed figure called for the warlocks once more, and gave them their orders. “Tell the leader of the shadow men that I want him to prevent those Squad Zero fools from getting lucky and allowing their ineptitude to cause them to blunder into the location of my crystals. One more thing: tell them to prepare for battle.”

The warlocks left as wordlessly as they entered, leaving the robed figure to his thoughts.

As soon as one of the lackey warlocks placed a hand on the handle of the door, the robed warlock placed a hand on his face and began to gaze idly off into the distance. The warlocks leaving the room, who knew better than to make the slightest noise when their master was trying to think, levitated past his doorway until they were sure he couldn't hear them and then softly stepped onto the ground, slowly tiptoeing away.

Alone in the study, the robed warlock's thoughts drifted for an idle moment to his past. Then, an angry mental hand tossed an imaginary explosive onto the train of thought, which latched on as the mechanism soared past the hand on the train tracks of his memories.

The train blew apart and then reformed, zooming off into a new direction, where train tracks of a plan began to form.

His plans formed quickly, as they always did. Once he was finished with the plan he began to look at it from every angle, determined to find any flaws. He had, after all, as long as he

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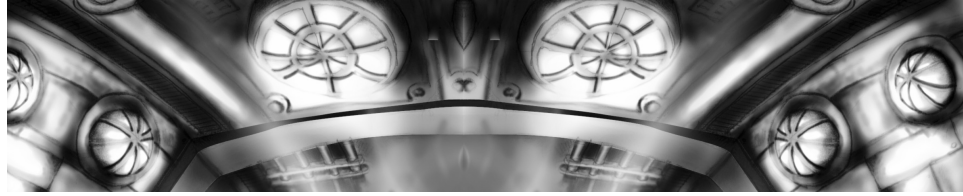
needed to perfect his plan.

The sound of a mouse running across the floor blew up another train, igniting waves of anger. Slowly, he rose to his feet and closed his eyes, concentrating on the sound of footfalls.

His eyes sprang open, and a strange liquid pooled. The mouse foolishly ran into it, bringing upon itself a horrible fate. As the mouse twisted and turned in agony, the other opened his spell book and calmly whispered, “Be glad it only works on vermin,” and slammed the book shut.

He watched the mouse for a moment longer before he ended its pain and returned to laying out his plan. His train tracks were in pieces, and it would take some time to repair them. “Pray thanks for this short reprieve, wizards,” he muttered to himself as he went back to work.

Several hours later, he stood and stretched. “Time to lead some fools on a false trail,” he said to no one in particular as he left the room. A thumping sound emanated from somewhere on his desk, stopping a moment later.



CHAPTER SIX: BEMUSED AND BEFUDDLED

“Welcome to the Squad, temporary members!” a cheerful voice exclaimed as Zoldram led Arianna and her friends to the control room in Squad Zero’s headquarters. “I’m Neeal, and Mortimer asked me to explain the squad system to you. So here we go. Okay?”

Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth nodded.

“There are four squads, Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and us—Zero. We are sent on the most dangerous missions and are the most powerful squad in Skyhall. Squad Beta handles operations on another world, so you won’t see much of them. A squad’s job is to handle assigned missions, respond to calls of help from citizens being attacked by demons and such as well as to investigate certain types of suspicious activities.”

Harken, one of the squad members, snickered at the mention

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of suspicious activities. Zoldram ignored him and continued. “Every team member has a communicator, like the ones Mathias is handing out to you now. This device here—” he pointed to a strange machine dominating the near wall of the control room “—handles our entrance into and exit out of the places we must go. All you need to know about it is that when a light flashes on one of the panels here or here, a rift is opening above the portal stone.” Mathias thumped the large portal stone he was sitting on. “Stepping into the portal will teleport us as close to our target destination as possible. Generally someone will brief you prior to a mission, but sometimes you have to just jump into the portal and figure things out for yourselves. Come with me. We’ll go to lunch and then I’ll show you around.”

Turning to Mathias and Harken as he ushered Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth out, Neeal said, “Go, now, don’t be mobies and get yourselves caught.”

After a hasty lunch, Neeal led the three to various rooms in the headquarters and gave them descriptions of the rooms’ purposes and the uses of any devices they contained. Their tour ended back at the control room where Zoldram attended the central console. Neeal pointed to the console device. “This is where the panels the distress calls come to are located. When the lights flash and this warning sounds, stop whatever you are doing and make sure you listen to the incoming call, if there is any, before you jump in the portal. Generally, there will only be one portal open at a time; but if there is more than one, make

sure to get into the right one. Ah, Mathias and Harken are back.”

The two men stepped out of the whirling portal. Both were tall, about six foot seven, and their faces were scarred. Harken had green eyes and golden hair, while his companion had green eyes and black hair. Arianna was puzzled at how they were so similar until Neeal explained that they were brothers. “Did you find the crystals?”

“We did, but we couldn’t find a way to counter their effects or destroy them,” Harken replied quietly.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Zoldram scowled, and started to slam his fist into a pillar. He paused in mid-strike, and turned to face Harken. “I guess I will have to give the bad news to Mortimer,” he grumbled.

“Let’s just hope he takes it well,” Mathias replied.

They stood there for a moment, deciding whether to tell Mortimer soon or wait until he asked them. Mortimer strode into the room, saving them from having to decide whether to tell him the bad news. “By the look on your faces I would guess that you have not found anything.”

“Sir, we have located the crystals and managed to purloin one but have been unable thus far to activate or destroy it.”

“Give it to me,” Mortimer commanded, holding out his hand. Taking the crystal, he dropped it on the floor and started to conjure a spell. Moments later, it struck, but had no effect on

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the stone. Astonishment flashed briefly on his face and then his features reassembled themselves to display no emotion.

He drew his force blade and levitated the crystal. He lashed out with a double-handed slash, striking the stone with as much force as he could muster. There was the sound of a crack, stirring hope in the assembled group, but that hope faded as quickly as it had come. Mortimer's force blade crumbled, leaving him holding only a hilt.

A moment later, the blade of Mortimer's sword began to repair itself. "Curses!" he exclaimed, massaging his throbbing hands one after the other. "We will have to study it more carefully. Perhaps it resists our magic. If so, it should show magical residue but I detect none. Where's Digorence when you need him? Anyone seen him? I told that fool of a gnome to be here when you returned."

"Negative, haven't seen—"

"Ah, don't be talking about what you don't be knowing," muttered the gnome, making a hasty entrance. "They've only just arrived, and I can only move so fast with these short legs of mine. So I'm here, I'm here. What you got—oh, burn me, but if that isn't—"

"Yes?" asked Mortimer as Digorence's voice trailed off and it became clear the gnome wasn't going to say anything more.

"That, Mr. Morty, sir, is the work of those that shouldn't be meddling. Break it so they can fix, they do. Fix it so they can break it, they do."

“And your point? Your point?”

Digorence snorted and glared, puffing himself up with his huge barrel chest sticking out and his face wrapped in indignation. “Isn’t gnome handiwork if that’s what you’re thinking—is that what you’re thinking?”

“I’ve forgotten about the whole ‘welevision’ thing already. Ancient history, forgotten. Taken care of, or almost at least.”

“In that case,” said the gnome, “this is what I know, and I don’t know much.” Mortimer sighed impatiently.

Digorence finally said, “This is the work of gremlins. That be gremlin script if I ever saw gremlin script.”

“Gremlins can write?” Zoldram asked incredulously.

Mathias added, “Say it isn’t so, and here I thought they were nothing but scruffy, grey-skinned, blue-eyed little nuisances.”

“Hmmpfff. Shows what you know,” said the gnome.

“Mathias, Harken?” Mortimer called out. The two brothers stepped forward. Mortimer passed the crystal to Harken. “Get this to Pox, the healer.”

As the two men hurried away, Mortimer took a seat at the squad-room table. “Brittle,” he said almost to himself. “The trail leads us to Brittle.”

“We need to find another way,” Neel said. “Those twin red suns and the gravity all messed up.”

“At least someone here knows something about gremlins,” muttered Digorence. “I suppose I’m the one who’s going to have to fix that little problem?”

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“Suppose so,” Mortimer said with a smile. “Suppose I’ll be the one to test out your little invention, too.”

Neel didn’t like the idea. “Don’t even suggest anything so dangerous. We need you here.”

“If anyone’s to go to Brittle, it’ll be me. Do we understand each other?” Mortimer said with aplomb. “Now does anyone know the status of Alpha and their rescue mission?”



Acting Commander T’rath, who was a member of Squad Zero before being chosen to lead Alpha in the rescue attempt, followed the trail and led his troops toward a valley, figuring the uber wizard had to be hidden there somewhere. A robed man high in the sky cleared his throat and held the device he had paid the gremlins an outrageous sum for directly behind him. He began to fly, pushing the red button on the device as he flew.

T’rath’s sharp ears heard Brozax’s voice off in the distance and he sprang after it, commanding his squad to follow. His footfalls barely made any sound as he ran, and his momentum was so great he couldn’t stop himself when he came to the end of the trail. He flew off the trail and landed on the ground ten feet below the trail. He moaned as he slowly stood up, and then stopped as he heard Brozax’s voice again. His squad leapt down after him and followed him as he sprinted away.

He almost stumbled when he encountered rocks in his path, but he managed to get around them and kept on running. After

several minutes of running, he could no longer hear Brozax's voice. He looked around and sighed as he sighted a camp off on the western slopes leading out of the valley.

He was sure it was a shadow camp—an encampment of the shadow men. He signaled his men to a halt. "Shadow camp ahead," he whispered.

He began the climb up toward the camp. Sighting a sentry, he started to conjure his magic but stopped when he noticed his squad climbing up after him. He cursed under his breath and quickly, but quietly, ran toward them, warning them to be as quiet as possible. They signaled understanding and continued to his position, making sure they were completely quiet.

T'rath led them back to the sentry position, motioning for his men to spread out and disable all other sentries around the camp. He then stealthily crept toward the sentry, pulling out his force blade and setting the tip at the shadow's neck. "Are you keeping a wizard in your camp, shadow?" he asked, digging the point of the blade into the other's neck.

"No, you fool. Why would we kidnap a stupid wizard? Only a complete idiot would kidnap a wizard," the shadow man replied irritably.

Suddenly T'rath felt a wave of cold sweep through his body, and he collapsed as the shadow drew back its claws and shot toward the camp. T'rath swung his blade around in deft hands, raised the blade like one would a dagger, and then hurled the blade at the shadow.

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The blade struck true, clean and through. As he recovered it from the fallen shadow, he used his communicator to call for his squad's return. The reports from the men were good: three sentries taken care of and no sign of any captives, wizard or otherwise.

T'rath relayed a similar report to base through his communicator. Mortimer's voice confirmed what he knew he must do next. "Destroy the camp. If you don't do this, innocents will fall."

T'rath acknowledged the order and quickly placed groups of two near boulders above the camp. On his signal, the men got the boulders rolling and soon there was a mass of loose rocks and earth descending the steep valley walls. Before long, the rocks and earth smashed into the camp, obliterating tents and crushing the shadow men into oblivion.

Following in the wake of the landslide, T'rath and his men levitated down to the remains of the camp, ready to finish off the remainder of the shadow men. The wizards drew their force blades and watched as the shadows emerged from the rubble of the camp and grimly advanced.

T'rath returned the grim look, knowing he had to exterminate the shadows before they began to assault innocent people, but he wished he did not have to slaughter them. "Why didn't you stay in Dementia," he said to himself as he shot a burst of energy at the lead shadow.

As their numbers dwindled, the shadows continued on

nonetheless, trampling those who had been killed by force-blade blasts. T'rath motioned for Squad Alpha to hold their ground until the shadows came within blade range. They did so without questioning his order, and waited for the shadows to come close enough to be skewered.

The shadows in the front of the advancing group struck first, lunging at the squad, their claws stretched out to allow them to pierce flesh. Some squad members were struck by the claws and flooded with coldness, but many managed to react quickly enough to slash at the shadows before they were hit by the outstretched claws. Once the shadows nearest to them had been dealt with, T'rath led his squad through the camp to search for laggards, instructing the wizards to fling a spell at any they found before entering close quarters combat range.

They did so, bombarding any shadow men they discovered with magic and drawing their force blades only out of necessity. T'rath himself was not so lucky. He was alone when he encountered a pack of six. While his magic downed one instantly, the others were upon him before he could lash out with his magic again. He parried a shadow man's thrust and then stabbed it in its chest, smashing downward with his foot and plunging his blade free, managing somehow to parry another blow as he pried the blade free.

With two down and four remaining, the odds weren't in his favor, but T'rath didn't care. He set upon the four remaining shadows as if he had ten men at his side. The strange thing was

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that within moments members of his squad were around him coming to his aid. They fought as valiantly as he did, parrying blows and blasting their opponents with magic, moving to engage another shadow as soon as the one they were facing fell.

Soon the battle was over, and T'rath and his men emerged from the chaos with no casualties on their side. He shook hands with each of his men and then started the long hike out of the valley, deciding that a long walk would help his men recover some of their strength, as well as give him enough time to mentally create the report he would have to give to Arcanious.

Some time later, he felt a sudden spasm of weakness and fell to the ground. His squad rushed over to see what was wrong just as they too were hit by the weakening spell. How the warlocks could do that with magic, the Squad Alpha wizards could not fathom, which meant they couldn't counter the spell. Futilely, they tried to fight against the effects, which only made them more susceptible. T'rath lay perfectly still, wanting to conserve every last bit of his strength for when he regained the consciousness he was rapidly losing.



The room was dark, lit only by a circle of candles that barely cast any light. In the center of the circle lay Arcanious atop a feather mattress, his features pale and his eyes unfocused. He ranted incoherently in his delusional state, the befuddlement having dangerously altered his perception of reality. "Another biscuit with the tea, mister pony!" he shouted happily as a

spasm shook his body.

Pox beat a steady tattoo into the woodwork of the bench on which he sat, waiting for one of the warlock crystals. He began to hum to calm his nerves, but Arcanious' ravaged mind picked up the tune and his vocal cords began slurring sounds together. Pox sighed and grabbed at a sleeping pill jar on a shelf.

Just as he was about to pop one in his mouth, Harken burst into the room and thrust a crystal in Pox's face. "I had Deren track a warlock down and take the crystal."

"How'd the wound get there then?"

"Some of his buddies came to reclaim the crystal."

"What's the Hunter doing here, anyway?" Pox asked as he took the crystal and placed a hand on Arcanious' forehead. "He came back to see how Arcanious was dealing with the befuddlement."

"Is he going to help us track down the kidnappers of Brozax?"

"No, Squad Beta's having problems of their own."

"Bigger ones than the one here?"

"Here it's a fight between two brothers over a piece of candy compared to what they're facing." Pox looked doubtfully at Harken before escorting him out of the room. Carefully, the healer locked the door and gripped the crystal in one hand.

He knelt by Arcanious and began to chant. The lights flickered as Pox chanted out a prayer. A white light appeared and spread over Arcanious starting at the head and spreading

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downwards. The light pulsed and almost faded, but Pox shut his eyes and chanted louder. Pain washed through him, but Pox held on, determined to finish the spell. Suddenly he arched backwards and the pain shot through him, causing red lines to appear on his arms. He struggled to finish the chant but fell to the floor.

A scream born of pure agony filled the room as Pox struggled to force more healing energy to come from the crystal and be channeled through him. He fell unconscious knowing the crystal had not aided him at all during the spell casting.

He awoke to the sound of the door being smashed in and fires being doused. His thoughts stopped as he wiped his eyes and stared at the circle of fire around him. The candles had tipped over, setting fire to the sacred wine Pox had poured around Arcanious so the fumes would partially dispel the delusions.

“Pox! What in the name of good do you think you’re doing?” Harken screamed as he worked feverishly to call forth water magic to douse the flames.

“I’ve failed, Harken. I could not get the crystal to help me,” Pox replied gravely.

Harken and a pair of other wizards doused the flames. He peered at Arcanious, who was grinning madly, and shut the door carefully behind them.

Pox unclenched his left hand and winced as he saw the cut the crystal had inflicted on him in his unconsciousness as a

result of his tightly holding on to it. “Well, Arcanious, I guess I’ll have to try again, but after the pain recedes.” Pox grimaced and brewed himself an herbal tea while he waited for the pain to die away.

When the tea had finished steeping, Pox sipped it slowly, thinking carefully. *Exactly how do the warlocks summon the powers of the crystals? How does it amplify their magic and not mine? Perhaps it is because mine is of a different nature? But can that be true? Perhaps it is activated by a key word or phrase? Think, Pox, think!*

He thought back to the attack and tried to remember any odd words the warlocks might have said but could remember none. He shook his head and concentrated on the crystal, hoping that just concentrating on it would cause it to enhance his magic. He knelt next to Arcanious and began a new prayer of healing. The white, healing light appeared and began to wash over Arcanious. This time the white light covered Arcanious entirely and Pox jabbed the air in triumph.

Arcanious bolted upright and looked at Pox. “Guv’nor bathroom the in horse A? Tea of spot? Dogs and cats raining it is,” Arcanious mumbled as he grabbed for the tea on the floor. Pox sat down and sighed, trying once more to think how he could get the crystal to work. He could not think of anything, however, and slumped in defeat, hoping some divine intervention could save Arcanious. At that moment Mortimer burst into room, his face showing his immense exhaustion.

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“Pox! How is Arcanious?”

Pox didn't have to say anything because at that moment Arcanious shouted out, “They can't raise taxes! Proceed to throw large and rotten fruit at them regiment!”

Mortimer's face showed his disappointment. Pox muttered as he stood, “Well, at least he's not going through sentences backwards. I cannot get the crystal to amplify my magic.”

“Perhaps it requires a key phrase. I recall one of the warlocks saying *Xaliaronjareron*.” Pox clamped a hand over Mortimer's mouth and made a holy sign with his free hand. “Xaliaron is the demon lord of Dementia!”

“And I should be worried, why? Anyway, it got the crystal working,” Mortimer said as he pointed to the crystal, which was now purple in color instead of its normal transparent color. “You look tired; let me say the prayer with you,” he offered as Pox took the crystal.

“Do you know *The Holy Shall Ward Away Death*?”

“That's the most hypocritical hymn of the whole hypocritical nest of Inettoian hymns!”

Thunder rolled ominously as Pox gasped and pointed a finger at Mortimer. “Tread lightly, Mortimer, you will not be treated kindly by fate should you continue with your heretical ways.”

Mortimer shrugged and knelt. “I serve my master and you serve yours. Let's put aside our trivial religious differences and get this bug out of Arcanious' system.” He raised his hand in

the air and waited for Pox to do the same. They grasped each other's hands and began to chant. The room darkened and lightened as they concentrated their powers relying heavily on the crystal to amplify their power. The white light engulfed Arcanious, who was currently residing in a field of happy butterflies. His body shook and his mumblings stopped as the holy magic worked its way into his system.

Sweat rolled endlessly off the two Skyhallians, who grimaced as they continued to chant. Pox hung desperately on the edge of consciousness, the holy magic taking some of his life force along with his magical energy. Mortimer risked spraying him with water, but this caused a kink in the flow of divine magic, causing the sea of light engulfing Arcanious to partially fade away. The old wizard began to sing then, the gyrations of his body causing him to slur words together. A force tried to push Mortimer and Pox away from each other but they grimly held on, determined to finish the spell.

Motivated by their lack of success both men kept chanting as the whiplash of the divine spell buffeted them and tried to force them to stop chanting. Finally, they could chant no longer and were flung apart, both crashing into opposite walls. Mortimer was the first to stand and he dashed over to Arcanious, saying "That was a strong spell. They must have had a whole team of warlocks amplified by crystals channeling this spell into a spell container to achieve an effect this potent. How do you feel?"

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Arcanious attempted to stand but couldn't. "My legs seem to be asleep."

Pox dusted himself off and handed the crystal to Mortimer. "If you find a way to destroy these, I won't have to prepare an inoculation against this spell-brought-on disease which will doubtlessly drain our coffers."

Mortimer nodded and looked to Arcanious before he strode out the door. Thinking to himself that the archwizard would soon recover fully, he turned right down the corridor and pressed his hand onto a pad and waited for a response. "Warning. Occupant is operating a high risk experiment," a computerized message played. "What's he doing? Looking at his face in the mirror? Ordering a human truck weight to see how much he weighs?" Mortimer chuckled to himself as he pressed on the pad again. The message played again, forcing Mortimer to bash it with a fist.

The machine's memory disk was damaged by the blow causing it to mix up the message, and the voice said, "Operating warning occupant is a high risk experiment."

"Now that's what it should say," Mortimer muttered as he knocked on the door. "Open up, Digorence!"

To his surprise, Digorence opened the door. "Whatcha want, Mortimer?"

The message played again, causing Digorence's face to turn beet red. "Mortimer, what did you do to my recording? Do you think that is funny? What is wrong with you?"

Mortimer looked at him woodenly and waited for him to calm down. Taking deep breaths that made a mass of fat that would have made a second gnome flop up and down, Digorence ridded himself of his anger.

“Digorence, I need to get to Brittle.”

“To Brittle? It’ll take awhile, Mortimer.”

“Fine,” the wizard replied and left. Digorence smiled and shut the door.

To Brittle, Digorence thought to himself as he grabbed a notebook and prepared to get to work.



CHAPTER SEVEN: MISGUIDED

Digorence turned to a fresh page and continued to write down his ideas feverishly, eventually coming up with a solution. Unusually for him, he began to work right away, quickly designing a probe. On an impulse, he built it to resemble himself but without the mountainous stomach region.

He disassembled a smuggled human gun and built one on the probe in case it should run into trouble. He covered the probe with special magic-tampered metal plates, built to withstand the rigors of space travel and to pass through a planet's atmosphere with ease. He placed a camera in the probe and worked the feed into his computers, installing several back-up energy sources. It took him several hours to design the controlling device of the probe and coordinate it to his gnomputer.

Several days later, he set it outside the castle and hurried back into his room. Eagerly, he sat in his large comfy chair and booted his gnomputer. It complained for a moment about the force with which Digorence kicked it, saying he didn't have to be so literal. Digorence had modeled his gnomputer after the human computer, which had no apparent use other than to be hit and yelled at by lazy humans, and one of their trademark phrases had been "to boot it up," which had been followed by "hurry up you darned slow thing" and the literal gnome had programmed it to start after he'd booted it with his foot and said the key phrase.

He'd modified the design so it talked, responded to voice commands, and did a multitude of other tasks humans could never dream of. The screen loaded and displayed a view of a grassy meadow. Digorence ordered his computer to activate the take-off of the probe. It flew gracefully upwards and soon faded out of sight of the naked eye.

The gnome watched the screen and waited patiently for the probe to reach space. It twirled gently around, searching for traces of a rare metal found only in detectable amounts on the planet Brittle, where it had been stolen from the other planets by the gremlins a long while ago.

The idea to search for Agramonium came to Digorence while he was lazing around and drinking coffee after coordinating the control panel to his gnomputer. He remembered the fascinating tales of his youth, tales of gremlins

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raiding distant planets in search for Agramonium, destroying all foreign machinery they encountered on the way. They used the Agramonium to power their technology plants since the metal could supply energy for eons.

His brain was rather sharp and after looking Brittle up in what was called the Grand Library, and what Digorence called an overrated closet, the idea of how to locate the whereabouts of Brittle had come to him, even though Brittle was more of a dimension than a world.

The probe looked into the multiverse (so called because upon the discovery of dimensions the Skyhallians knew there had to be more than a single universe) and detected the dimension. Its next task was to determine the exact amounts of magic needed to distort the space-time continuum enough to activate a portal leading to Brittle. After all, if some bug-eyed gremlins could do it, Digorence was sure he could too.

A week passed and Digorence was tired of being constantly pestered by Mortimer, who believed fervently that the gluttonous gnome hadn't even started working yet. Finally, though, the breakthrough came. He ran to Mortimer with the test results in hand. "Once we do this, we can easily reestablish a warp to Brittle with only a little energy."

"A little energy?" asked Mortimer, wincing as he looked at the report. "This is the most energy we've used since our ancestors made that first fateful journey to Dementia."

The gnome did what he does best, he shrugged, puffed up

his barrel chest, and then began to speak in a less-than-pleasant tone, “And if you’ve a better—”

Mortimer waved off the gnome’s words. “I shall inform Arcanious of this immediately.”

A few hours later a team of wizards stood in a circle around a large piece of what appeared to be a portal stone, waiting for Mortimer’s instructions.

“I need you three to channel a mixture of air and earth and you three to work earth and fire. You six conjure air and the rest of you conjure fire. Create as much as you can and after I signal, mixers combine with each other and then the air-makers will throw theirs at the fire magic, and both groups together will blast it into the other group’s energy with water. Got it?”

The group mentally processed this before they signaled that they were ready. Mortimer nodded for them to begin and started to count. The massive amount of magic began to distort its surroundings and also made everyone standing near it vastly uncomfortable. He signaled and the first group combined with the second group and waited for the third and fourth group to combine.

Water shoved the last group’s magic into the first’s, creating a massive ball of energy. Digorence measured the total amount of energy in the ball and nodded to Mortimer, who levitated the stone into the mass of magic. Slowly, it absorbed the magic until there was none left. The wizards fell back exhausted, and staggered off to rest. Digorence took the stone as it landed on

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the ground with a thud and with Mortimer in tow walked at a moderate pace to his lab.

Once they were there, Digorence set the stone into a device in Skyhall's master control room and set up the necessary links. "If this works, each squad should be able to open a portal to Brittle from their control rooms."

"Thanks, Digorence. For this, I'll ask Arcanious to send you to Atlantis on a short trip to let you decide if you want to stay there for awhile after this is all over. I'll see you around, gnome!" Mortimer waved farewell as he ran off toward Squad Zero headquarters.



Squad Zero headquarters was a jumble of activity when Mortimer arrived. T'rath and the rest of the Squad Alpha members hadn't returned from their assignment. As the first reconnaissance team had returned without finding anything, Squad Zero was preparing a second team to determine what had happened.

The gnomes had searched for communicator signals all over Xjoz but had found none, leaving only two possible conclusions: either Squad Alpha was on another dimension or their communicators had been taken from them and destroyed. "Either way, they must have been taken," reasoned Zoldram who was one of the members of the committee formed to solve this problem. "Mortimer's got too much on his mind now to be bothered with this."

“What do you mean he’s got too much on his mind for this? A whole team has gone missing!”

“We’ll look for them; leave him out of this,” hissed Zoldram, looking away from the committee as Mortimer entered. “Mortimer,” he shouted noisily, both to stop the conversation and to direct Mortimer’s attention. “We’ve all heard about Arcanious and are thankful. Was the experiment a success?”

“It was,” said Mortimer solemnly and then he told Zoldram and the others gathered about the portal upgrade, the gremlins, Brittle, and his plans.

“It’s time,” said Mortimer looking up at the clock.

Zoldram moved to the controls as Mortimer prepared himself. Heads turned as Arcanious entered, his expression betraying his thoughts. “You can’t be serious, Mortimer. The gremlins might attack you despite your business offer and hold you for ransom.”

“Just because they associate with warlocks doesn’t mean they are necessarily evil, Arcanious. They have a reputation for breaking and sabotaging things, so we will turn to them for help.”

“At least allow someone to go with you.”

Mortimer eyed Arcanious for a moment as if he were crazy. Arcanious shrank back a little, resisting the urge to shield himself from the fury of Mortimer’s gaze with his hand.

“No. I will go alone and unarmed.”

“I cannot allow you to place yourself in a position of danger,

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Mortimer. You are needed here. Send another wizard to do this.”

“Will you listen, you accursedly stubborn wizard? The negotiations needed to get a gremlin to help us will have to be very convincing and delicate. I will do this.”

“Mortimer, I, as Commander in Chief of the Wizard Squads, forbid it.” Zoldram and the others wished they were anywhere else but here. Elder wizards rarely argued amongst themselves and if they did it was in privacy behind closed doors and away from the squads.

“Stop arguing with me! You cannot change my mind.” Mortimer signaled Zoldram to operate the controls. Zoldram hesitated.

“Mortimer, if Brozax isn’t found and returned soon, I may well be promoted to the Triwizard Council and you are first choice to take my place as the leader of the squads. Don’t do this thing.”

Mortimer ignored Arcanious and positioned the controls himself as Zoldram warned, “We have never opened a portal to Brittle before, so I can’t guarantee you that you’ll be close to a settlement or close to anything for that matter.”

Mortimer nodded gravely, placed his force blade on the table, and walked into the portal.

Brittle’s twin red suns greeted Mortimer as he appeared in the middle of strange plants. Though there was a doubled supply of heat, the suns of Brittle were old, and were almost

ready to explode, thus giving only a little heat.

He moved to examine the plants, but a voice stopped him. "Poisonous plants," the voice warned. The wizard turned around, and pointed his gaze downward, noting the grey skin and strangely blue ears of the creature. "You are a gremlin, right?"

"No, I'm a pretty little butterfly," the gremlin replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. He danced around the field for a moment before he stopped and eyed the wizard. "What's a whussard want with the likes of me? Come to smite me, old fool, or have you come to fight a gremlin so you can go home to Mommy a hero. 'Look, Mommy, I fought a big nasty gremlin today and he fought back! I almost got hit and bruised my delicate bones.'"

Mortimer smiled despite himself. "As amusing as this is, I must ask for you to stop your pointless insults and listen to what I have to say."

"Such a calm little mommy's boy, aren't you? I bet she was scared to death of the school principal coming to her door saying that someone accidentally bumped into you again and you won't stop crying."

"Once again I ask for your cooperation. I must request an audience with you without all of these pointless remarks."

"What you want, whussard?"

"You finally listen to reason," Mortimer muttered to himself as he fished in his pockets for the crystal. "I have a business

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proposition for your folk.”

“Come, then, follow me to a safe place to talk.” Mortimer followed the gremlin through a patch of pink trees and multicolored flowers until he came to a clearing with a giant umbrella-shaped fungus of some sort dominating its center. The fungus looked sort of like a mushroom, but it was iridescent purple and of no variety Mortimer had ever seen on any other world.

The gremlin scrambled up the stalk of the mushroom, slipping into a door set midway along its fleshy cap. When it emerged moments later, it wasn’t alone. A dozen of its kind followed, and from unseen places on the far sides of the clearing many others emerged.

“Now then, whussard, whatcha want?” said the gremlin.

Unperturbed, Mortimer asked, “See this crystal?”

“Aye, what you want me to do with it?”

“I don’t want you to do anything with it. I want to know how it works and how to destroy it.”



Digorence, after sulking the whole day, walked up to the flying ship with exaggerated sadness, and started the engine, waving slowly to the wizard whose job it was to make sure he actually got on the ship instead of running off and hiding until another person would have to take his job.

Slowly, he sat in the chair, and tilted the ship to the right, hoping to reach Atlantis before long. With a sigh, he engaged

the trans-dimension drive, then gripped the steering wheel tightly as he flew across the dimension borders. Just after entering Earth's atmosphere, he activated the thermal scope and surveyed the area for humans before he swooped low toward the Atlantic Ocean.

He stopped when he was about thirty feet above the surface of the ocean and put the magic shield over the ship and activated the oxygen. His keen ears detected the sound of a human ship coming, and he plunged his craft into the water immediately, forgoing the usual system check to ensure his safety. "Humans, bah!" Digorence exclaimed to no one in particular as he directed the ship to the bottom of the ocean.

"Stupid Mortimer! Why doesn't he offer me a good reward for once? Go to Atlantis to see if I want to spend some time there! Why would I want to stay in a place that reeks like fish and is full of people who carry with them an overwhelming smell of seafood? Oh and then Arcanious has to send me down with a supply ship. Wizard, bah!"

Before long, he saw the opening in the ocean floor and shot into it, turning off the magic shield once he was safe inside the transport tube. After docking, he stepped out of the vehicle and greeted the dragonman on duty. The dragonman nodded in return, and instructed some dockworkers to unload the freighter.

Digorence sighed, and sat down to wait for the work to be completed, wondering why some of the dragonmen remained

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in their ancestral home when they could live in Skyhall. Then he remembered what Mortimer had told him, that dragonmen became stronger with magic when they were in Atlantis, which explained how they could divert so much magic to creating air and maintaining the city's secrecy.

Once the freighter's holds were empty, the dockers refilled the holds with boxes of force blades and other goods the dragonmen specialized in. The work completed, Digorence stepped out of the ship and began to walk to the settlements. Strange sights caught his eye as he walked. Dragonmen stood everywhere, either chatting, shopping, or enjoying a restful day and Digorence wondered where all the workers were. Had he been a more observant gnome, he would have noticed the dark, angry expressions most of the dragonmen had painted clearly on their faces. Instead, he merely saw dragonmen enjoying what he supposed was a day off. The aroma of seafood wafted thickly to Digorence's nose, causing him to cough and choke.

Offended dragonmen shot him heated glances, but after spending so much time with wizards he was used to hostility and he walked on ahead. A pair of dragonmen moved to jump him but thought better of it when Digorence turned around and pointed to a modified Earth gun resting in easy reach. He laughed as they shrank away and walked on, searching for a hotel.

To pay Mortimer back, Digorence had decided to take an actual vacation vacation, and not just a break to put his nose

into places it didn't belong. Secretly he planned to put the entire bill on the wizard's tab too. "Maybe in fifty years he'll laugh about it," Digorence mused. "Yeah, more likely, when he thinks about all the tortures he put me through," he added after a moment's speculation.

He shrugged, however, and decided to go ahead with his plan. A deep rumbling resonated from his ample stomach, causing him to rub it absent-mindedly. Noting the shaking mountain of flesh, a gang of young dragonmen paused to point and laugh. Digorence paid them no mind, for he was searching for a place that served something other than seafood.

"Know any place that serves something other than seafood?" he asked. The dragonman he addressed looked shocked but recovered enough to squint and point at a small street-side cafe down the street. After the gnome walked away, the dragonman turned to his companion. "That gnome must be a Skyhallian spy! After all, what reason would anyone have to come here other than to eat our seafood?"

"I agree. Also, he made tunes that seemed to come from his stomach region!"

"Stop making absurd jokes! We must inform the king."

The two dashed down the street, passing Digorence, who was having a fit over the price of the food. "Okay, okay, if it's this expensive there must be huge portions, right?" he asked after he got over his fit. The chef made a drawing with his arms, watching for the unbelieving expressions that always greeted a

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visualization of the portion size.

“What? Are you mad? That small? And you charge that much? This is robbery, I tell you!”

The startled chef made the drawing again, shrinking back from the gnome’s incredulous gaze. “Double size for our special guest?” the chef said weakly.

“I guess that’ll do for a snack. I’ll take the turkey. Oh, and I don’t want to wait forever, so cook it fast, or I won’t pay!”

“But you must pay,” the chef replied.

“Not if I leave from boredom!” the gnome shot back.

The exasperated chef walked back slowly into his kitchen and fought the urge to hide under his sink. Unbeknownst to Digorence, the dragonman he had talked with earlier escorted agents of their king to an alley overlooking the table at which Digorence sat plucking lint from between his toes, an act that caused the few other diners to take their food and run, leaving their money on the table.

One of the king’s agents spoke, “Arcanious must have got a hint from someone. Get rid of the gnome; Arcanious must not know what we’re up to. Oh, and make sure the special shipments get on his ship.”

Those listening hastily made their way toward Digorence’s table. As they circled around him, the gnome casually slipped a hand down to his side. “Hello, Gnome,” one of the shadows said as they made a circle around him. “How are you liking our fair city?”

“I think it is the perfect place for you to die,” Digorence said pulling out the gun.

“One little gun can’t kill all of us. Besides, if you fire that, you’ll be a wanted criminal. After all, smuggling a mundane firearm is a serious crime in Atlantis.”

“Ah, but you see, the word that creates the loophole is mundane,” Digorence said and fired at the ground. He dove under the table as fire started to burn through the castings of the tiny smoke bombs that littered the ground. The gnome laughed and fired another burst of smoke and fire magic at the ground as he slipped away from the table.

The repeating salvos of explosions and the smoke filling the air around the eatery drew a massive crowd, and they all jostled each other to get a view.

“I never knew I was so famous,” Digorence said to the startled chef who was staring at the ruins of his shop. “Sorry, people, but I’m not signing any autographs or pictures of my *beautiful* face!”

“You must pay for the damages!” the chef/owner screeched.

“No problem. Send a bill to Skyhall addressed to Mortimer the Wizard.”

The chef grimaced but said nothing further.

Digorence placed the modified handgun back in its holster. To avoid being arrested for carrying the firearm, he had modified it so that it looked like a force blade and was capable of firing magic as well as carrying out its mundane duties. Of

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course, actually shooting a bullet would have been illegal, so he never placed any lead pellets in the shells. The shells instead contained a variety of magic pellets, including the smoke and fire bomblets he had used.

As everyone else was rushing away from the burning eatery now, Digorence went as well. He pulled a hood over his face and ran as fast as his short stubby legs would carry him. When at last he reached his ship, he jumped in, made sure the load was secure, and engaged the engines preparing to depart. He radioed for clearance and was surprised when it was granted, for he was sure he was going to have to make a run for it.

On the way up he activated his communicator and tuned it to Arcanious. “Hey, boss-man!” Digorence shouted. “I was attacked.”

“I’m so surprised, Digorence. After all, your personality is *so* congenial. Are you safe?”

“I believe so...”

“Then let’s talk about this later. I’ve got a bit of nasty business myself that I must attend to.”

“Why, thank you so much for your concern, Arcanious,” Digorence replied as he turned off the communicator.

Making sure not to go too fast, Digorence sped upwards, operating the thermal scan to ensure no humans on boats would be able to see him shoot out of the ocean. He emerged from the ocean and accelerated toward the clouds, flying above them and then engaging the trans-dimension drive as soon as he was able.

But the ship never completed the transition and instead stopped dead in trans-space.

He took a breath of thin air and gagged. He began to sweat as he fidgeted in his seat. His face was tight with worry and his thoughts raced as he studied the instrument panel. As far as he knew, no one who had ever made a dead stop in trans-space had ever returned.

He felt cold steel on his neck. "Hello, Worm," a voice whispered his ear. "Listen closely. You want to live, yes?"

Digorence bit back the first response to come to mind, that being "What the heck kind of question is that?" Of course, he wanted to live. Instead he said, "What do you want me to do?"

The other laughed, and told Digorence what he should do to re-engage the ship's drive.

A few nervous minutes passed, and then suddenly Digorence was docking the ship in Skyhall's landing bay. As he disembarked, he was careful to hide the tremble in his lip. Then he engaged the docking official, who at first lectured him on the importance of speed limits and earned a sneer and snide comments in some small talk, as he was instructed to do by the threatening men in his ship. As he talked with the docking official he tried not to look as black-clothed figures slipped out into the night. He cursed himself for being so selfish and cowardly, but put his rage at himself aside and instead directed the dockers to the crates which they were to take to the castle.

Afterward, the generously-proportioned gnome ran at full

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speed, breathing loudly as he ran through the city, stopping every five minutes for a breather. He swerved around a corner and watched as a bunch of children noted the jiggling of his ample stomach and started pointing and laughing. He considered stopping and staring until they started to cry, but sped on to the castle to warn Arcanious.

When he finally arrived at the castle a half an hour later, he found chaos in the castle. He ran up to Arcanious' room and saw the archwizard staring off into the distance. "What's going on?" Digorence yelled at the archwizard.

"Sentium's been kidnapped. Warlocks—," Arcanious replied sadly.

"Uh, about that—You see—I, er, that is, I, uh let the warlocks into Skyhall," Digorence mumbled. The gnome winced as Arcanious stood up and started quivering in rage.

"You did what? What in the name of good did you think you were doing, you sad excuse for a gnome!"

"They destroyed the magic shield of the ship and threatened to drop me off at Disney's Magic Kingdom. Do you know what they'd do to me there?"

"When did this happen?"

"A half hour ago or so."

"Sentium's been missing for several hours."

"But—But—"

"That's enough!" Arcanious snapped. "That's two of the uber wizards gone now, Digorence. What will we do now?"

“Send Squad Gamma to search for Sentium?”

Arcanious was about to insult the gnome further, but stopped, and left to give Captain Olmar his orders. Digorence sighed, and ran after Arcanious.



The warlocks knocked on the door and waited for the robed man to answer it. When he did, they set the uber wizard on the chair and waited outside for their payment and any new orders.

“Ah, Mr. Sentium, how nice of you to join me,” the man said as he began a magic spell.

“I spit on you, you despicable warlock!” Sentium shouted angrily. A moment later, the man calmly opened the door and let the head warlock in. The leader of the warlocks was wise enough not to inquire about the wizard, and was handed several bars of gold, along with instructions to rally the goblins loyal to him.

Before the warlock left, he heard an eerie thumping noise emanating from his employer’s desk. “W-What’s that?” he stammered, absently fingering a knife.

“Oh, that? It’s just a spider, jumping around in a drawer,” his employer answered with a slight smile on his face.

“Happy ponies and rainbows,” the lackey warlock shouted to himself as he fled out of the room and down the corridor.

“And he’s supposed to be their bravest warlock and leader, ha!” the man remarked as he made his way to his desk. He opened the spell book and looked down at one of the pages,

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shaking his head as he saw one of the wizards knocking his fist against the page and the other making rude gestures at him.

“Now, gentlemen, there’s no need for this kind of behavior,” he said.

“Really, it’s not as if I treat you badly. After all, the bread was only slightly moldy, and the water only slightly dirty.”

Brozax, who had been drinking the water, gagged and began to spit. Sentium began to spell a message with his staff. The warlock laughed at the obscenity and turned his back on the wizards for a moment.

He sighted a peep hole in the wall and raised a binocular to his eye. The spying warlock did not comprehend the motion until the warlock pointed a finger at the hole and let out a massive burst of lightning. There was the smell of charred flesh as the bolt made impact with the hidden spy and hurled it against an unseen wall.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” the man said as he closed the spell book and opened the door. The spying warlock sat there, hanging on to his last threads of life. “Die with the forbidden secrets you have learned in your head, fool,” the robed man exclaimed with disgust as he smashed the spy through the wall with magic and then let him drop to the ground.

“Let that be a lesson to all who oppose me and my rules!” he yelled as the warlocks’ gaze slowly drifted to the broken body lying in the courtyard. “Being nice and forgiving is not my job! I will smite any cretin fool enough to oppose my rule and not

have defensive measures prepared. Understood?”

The dumbfounded warlocks merely nodded, too frightened to respond in words. “What a bunch of yellow-bellied, wet-behind-the-ears fools!” he remarked contemptuously as he strode back into the study and opened the spell book. “Let that be a lesson to you as well. Learn what happens to the foolish and learn this quickly, or your fate will be worse than death.” So saying he placed a strange glove on his hand and then reaching into the page of the book, he picked up one of the uber wizards up by his shirt, pulled him out of the page and then thrust him into the opposite page.

He sneered and then pulled off the glove, watching as the thrown uber wizard fell to the floor gasping and groaning. “Be prepared to cooperate, fools,” he warned as he strode out of the room.



“What’s in it for me?” the gremlin asked Mortimer curiously.

“Gold?” the wizard hazarded.

“Bah, I got enough o’ that stuff.”

“Gems,” he tried again.

“Nah, those are of no value here. Now, if ye don’t got anything better ta offer, you can bugger off,” the gremlin said, its natural unpleasant nature revealing itself.

“What do *you* want in return for the means to break the crystal?” Mortimer asked, his voice betraying the faintest hint of his annoyance.

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“Good question that one. I guess I would do it in exchange for—for potato chips.”

“Potato chips?” Mortimer exclaimed incredulously, his rigid layers of self control melting away as he began to heave with laughter.

“Aye, I had one of the addicting things before when I was one of the Lollipop Guild in a movie. I needed some cash, ya see, to buy some things necessary to get me back home after I landed in America during a disassembly of a warlock portal—I hates those fools—and after I tasted those things, I couldn’t stop eatin’ ‘em. My best mate had ta come rescue me from being completely brainwashed by those things.”

Mortimer resisted the urge to laugh and pulled a device from his pocket. “This’ll create any food if you describe it,” he explained as he handed it to the gremlin

“You want to know something about poltergeists,” the gremlin said in a whisper. “They’re poor sods who ate too many of them chips and are addicted to them even in death, so they throw things around to look for potato chips.”

Once again Mortimer forced himself to keep a straight face and sat down and waited for the gremlin to find a solution. He watched as the gremlin walked toward a mound of earth and disappeared.

The gremlin sighed as he walked to a large panel of glass with a label written in gremlin script that read, “Break in case of wizergency.” As the gremlin smashed the glass with a hammer,

the glass broke and a warlock appeared. “Well, what should I tell him?”

“Tell him about the master crystal, you dolt.”

“And what if I tell him the truth?”

“Then you can kiss the opportunity to sabotage some machinery goodbye.” The gremlin paused for a moment to grab a small vial before leaving to see the wizard.

The warlock sent a paralyzing bolt into the gremlin’s back, causing the blue-eared creature to fall to the ground. The warlock floated over to the gremlin and pried the vial from his hands. “Hmm, locator powder, to convince him you actually found the solution, I presume. Very well, gremlin, you may go.”

The little creature started to rise again, but the warlock kicked him to the ground. “What’s that you’re trying to conceal in your pocket?” he demanded, drawing magic from his surroundings.

“Anti-magic powder,” the gremlin said melodramatically as he flung it at the warlock.

“Why this sudden change of heart?”

“I’m no two-timer!”

“So why did you agree to this so far?”

The gremlin paused for a moment to speculate the answer. During that brief pause the warlock prepared to skewer him with his force blade. “Get out there or I’ll finish you and animate your corpse.”

“Why do you even think about sparing me?” the gremlin

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screamed as he fumbled for some hidden powder in his belt. He gasped as the blade sank into his chest, and he desperately grabbed at the nearest bottle. Apparently, the gods were pleased by his change of heart because the powder he sprinkled on his chest repaired his wound and the skewered organs.

Because the wizard will know, the warlock thought to himself. “Because the animation will take time, and the wizard will come to investigate. I want to torture him longer before I strike,” he lied as he flourished the blade.

“I’m not buying it!” the gremlin said, grabbing a crossbow from the wall and firing at the warlock. The warlock blasted the gremlin with a thunderbolt and prepared to blow him up. The gremlin rolled into a secret niche in the wall and watched as the spell hit the ground. Satisfied that he’d finished the gremlin, the warlock began to project an illusion.

Knowing he couldn’t kill the warlock, the gremlin began to silently crawl along one of the many tunnels he had dug in case of an emergency.

The warlock scowled as he completed the illusion, for any wizard could easily see through the illusion, especially if he attempted to make physical contact with his illusion-gremlin. “Why couldn’t the fool have left me his corpse to animate?”



CHAPTER EIGHT: HALF TRUTHS

Kalyphius studied the inept Squad Gamma as they lined up near the outskirts of Skyhall territory. “All right men, as you know, I’m here to ensure you don’t screw up this important mission. Scouts have reported goblin movement near here, and I think they may be linked to the disappearance of Brozax and Sentium. Now move out and search for goblin tracks. I assume you all know what they look like.”

Accompanied by two wizards, the squad began to walk around the area, searching for foot tracks. At last, an hour later, one of the squad members found tracks and the team reassembled, following Kalyphius silently. The tracks led them into a clearing in the middle of the forest. Kalyphius began to laugh insanely as the tracks led him around in a circle in the middle of the clearing.

“Drop them force blades whussards!” a voice rang from the

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trees. Slowly, dozens of goblins slipped out of their hiding places in the trees, clutching bows and cruelly tipped spears.

Kalyphius looked around, trying to keep his hands from shaking.

“Any of yew so much as moves yer hands or starts to say anything, expect to feel a few things puncturing your flesh.”

The uber wizard nodded slowly and dropped his force blade on the ground. He ordered the squad to drop their force blades on the ground as well, but winked as he gave them their orders. They laid their force blades with the points facing toward the goblins, and stood back up to wait for another signal from Kalyphius.

“Now ye will oblige us by comin’ quietly to our camp and not tryin’ to escape,” the goblin said to the squad.

Kalyphius nodded as he placed his foot on his force blade. The squad members, catching on, placed one foot on the hilts of their weapons and waited for another signal. They felt the surge of magic and quickly launched a burst of energy from their blades, commanding it with their mind.

The goblins cursed as their feet were struck by a volley of magical spells, and many of them dropped their weapons and clutched at their feet with both hands, hopping back and forth to keep their balance. The wizards took advantage of the confusion, picking up their blades and advancing toward the goblins. Fire formed in their free hands as they came within blade range, and the goblins scowled as they sighted it.

Retrieving their weapons as well, the goblins ran at the wizards, taking advantage of the long spears most of them held. Their thrusts, however, were clumsy, and the wizards were able to easily dodge them and counter with fireballs. Many goblins were killed by the fireballs, for the fire was able to pierce their tough hide and allow blades to strike vital organs.

The remaining goblins engaged the wizards in a savage hand-to-hand battle, not allowing them to gain enough time to cast another spell or fire a burst from their force blades. During the melee, a cloud of expanding darkness floated toward the group, its movement stopping as soon as it was directly over the skirmish.

The stolen Skyhall airship lowered a small device to the ground directly next to Kalyphius' feet. The uber wizard tried to cry out, but he was caught in the device's teleporting beam and sent aboard the airship before any of the other wizards could intervene. Cursing, Captain Olmar leapt on a goblin, hacking its head off and jumping in the air as a goblin spear aimed low.

In his rage at losing Kalyphius, Olmar ignored all the wounds he was taking as he dashed from goblin to goblin, slashing at them and dashing to the next one. He finally fell when a goblin conjured jagged chunks of earth and sent them into his back.

Learning quickly from Olmar's mistake of forgoing defenses, Starr placed a defensive magic shield around himself and studied the battlefield for a moment before quietly sneaking off

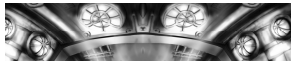
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to stab a goblin in the back. Starr freed his blade and dove to the ground as a chunk of earth shards struck the area his back had been in a few moments earlier.

He sprang to his feet and swerved to the right as an axe slashed toward him. For a moment, he pitied the goblins, who could only cast a spell every so often, and then the moment was gone and he hit the goblin with a fire spell he had been casting while on the ground.

The rest of Squad Gamma, who had been carefully casting spells while parrying goblin attacks, unleashed a barrage of spells on the goblins, sending them all into oblivion.

Exhausted, the squad staggered away from the battlefield and rested a few moments before they began to teleport to Skyhall.



Mortimer smiled as the gremlin walked back out towards him. "I got a solution to your problem, Wizard," he said cheerfully. "They take their power from a giant gem that is like a power generator to them. Destroy that, the crystals lose their power, end of your problem. Take this diamond powder; it should enable you to cut through the master gem. Farewell, wizard," the gremlin called out to Mortimer as the wizard prepared to teleport to Skyhall.

Mortimer was glad he could teleport back to Skyhall without the aid of a portal since he knew Skyhall well enough to transport himself there, and since lugging a portable portal

along with him would be greatly inconvenient. “Next time yer in Brittle, ask for Junksmith!” the gremlin called out a final time as Mortimer teleported away.

When he arrived back at the castle in Skyhall, Mortimer immediately raced back to the headquarters of Squad Zero. He was greeted by Dior whose face clearly displayed his discomfort. “I was sent here to tell you we found the location of the crystals as well as a strangely huge one deeper in the mining tunnel, and also that Kalyphius was kidnapped.”

“What? How?” Mortimer exclaimed.

“The warlocks captured one of our airships and abducted Kalyphius while he was commanding Gamma in an attempt to rescue Sentium and Brozax.”

“Were the other two uber wizards found?”

“Unfortunately not, sir.”

“Send Ranth and Meilan to slice up the massive gem you found, and give them this,” he said, handing the diamond powder to Dior along with a small phial. “When you come back, head to Arcanious’ room and prepare to guard him against attacks. I fear he will be our foe’s next target.”

Dior saluted and left, leaving Mortimer to order his crew to stand guard around the castle. Dior stood by the portal as Ranth and Meilan were teleported to the abbey Zoldram and Petker had found while searching for the source of the crystals during Mortimer’s absence, and then returned to the post Mortimer had given him.

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Not long afterward, the ground started to shake. The squad members, who had been very bored, were glad for the chance to take action. Suddenly Mortimer activated his communicator and ordered all those not stationed near Arcanious' room to immediately go to the front of the castle.

Very quickly, those not ordered to stay were lined up near the door of the castle. Many of them gasped when they saw the advancing enemy, but Mortimer's ace students merely gazed at the foe and placed their hands on the hilts of their force blades. "Zoldram, get the gnomes, we're going to need their help to defeat the—"

"Trolls!" screamed one of the newer members, who fainted. Pandemonium's icy grip struck the hearts of the newer members, sending them into hysterics. The more senior members stretched themselves and prepared for a long and arduous battle.

Mortimer merely stood there, staring at the advancing trolls. Their heavy footfalls left depressions in the earth as they marched toward the castle, each carrying an uprooted tree.

The trolls in the front lines hurled their trees at the wizards. A shield was raised, but it was a wasted effort as the trees shot right through the shield and slammed into the stone of the castle. Massive portions of rock fell to the battlements. Wizards threw themselves across the battlements as chunks of stone tumbled downwards, eventually cracking the fortified stone of the battlements.

The trolls, who were being smarter than usual, aimed their trees at the barely visible supports. The first tree, uncannily aimed, broke through the stone guarding the fortifications and rolled onto the ground. The next several slightly cracked the magically fortified wooden beams. Finally, though, a tree trunk smashed through the first several fortifications, bouncing off a beam.

A warlock appeared and used telekinesis to rip the trunks out so another volley of trees could smash through the rest of the fortifications. The wizards, who were catching onto the trolls' plan, formulated a hasty plan of defense.



A warlock laughed as two wizards slipped behind trees and stealthily ran toward their position. He considered blasting them out of existence with a spell or taking them out with an obsolete human gun he had picked up while on a scouting mission on Earth. Then the leader of the group knocked the gun out of his hand and punched him in the face, knocking him to the floor.

“Obey the master’s orders, dimwit!” The stricken warlock wiped the blood off his face and stood up snarling. “I think its time for a new leader!” he snarled, drawing the gun from the floor. Before he could raise it, his leader slammed a swift uppercut into his chin and slammed into him shoulder first, knocking him off the fourth floor balcony and toward the abbey grounds.

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Ranth and Meilan sighted the falling figure and cursed. “There’s more where he came from,” Ranth said as he ducked behind a tree. “Why aren’t they attacking us, then?” Meilan asked. Instead of answering, he dashed toward the abbey, hoping he wouldn’t have to create a shield, for the bright purple color of the magic would attract every warlock who didn’t see him.

Meilan followed him, running as swiftly as she could. Before long, they burst through the abbey doors. Warlocks dropped down, aided by levitation, and sealed the door shut. Ranth cursed another time and began to draw magic. His companion did the same, and soon both had magic blazing in their hands, waiting to be flung.

Slowly, they walked in different directions, looking for any source of danger. A figure floated down from the second floor. “Pathetic, really,” he said as he unleashed two glowing orbs at them. Ranth and Meilan threw shields over themselves, but the orbs cut through them and struck their targets, knocking them against the wall.

Ranth heard a click and looked down. Upon sighting the two rods sticking out of the wall, emitting electronic rays, he grimaced and attempted to stand.

The electronic rays closed in and zapped his legs, not allowing him to move. “Don’t try to move or you’ll be zapped to death. Now, you can come quietly and allow me to lock you up, or you can try to put up a futile fight. I will release the

lighting probes either way.”

“Why don’t you simply kill us?” Ranth asked, not even bothering to hide the scorn in his voice.

“I have a use in mind for you,” the mysterious foe replied.

“Then I’ll fight you!” the wizard yelled defiantly.

“Such stupidity!” A blinding light flashed, and Ranth slumped to the floor unconscious. Meilan looked at the floating warlock with scorn and attempted to attack him, but his voice stopped her. “Do not bring pain upon yourself. I can drop you unconscious painlessly, or inflict as much pain upon you as I can without endangering your health.”

Reluctantly, she lowered her hands and braced herself for the spell. The blinding light flashed again and after his sight was restored to him, the warlock left the room.

“Why do we lock them up in the abbey instead of just killing them?” a particularly stupid warlock asked his employer as he left the room. “They are here to lure the girl here,” he replied. “Ah, so you too have noticed, *the mark*,” a much more intelligent warlock responded.

“Yes I have, and now I pity those Skyhallian fools more than ever for their ignorance of such an important matter.” The second speaker laughed after hearing this and left the room. The warlocks followed him out of the door, leaving the man alone. Smiling, he shrank into the shadows and waited.



Arianna, Dior, and Harken stood quietly in Arcanious’ quarters,

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hoping they wouldn't wake the archwizard. For a long time they stood still, looking around the room, straining to hear every sound. Then suddenly they felt a surge of magic in the room and immediately reacted by pulling out their force blades and erecting a magical barrier over Arcanious.

"Pitiful fools," the strange looking man said as he entered the room. With a single wave of magic, aided by the crystal he wore on his neck, he destroyed the shield placed around Arcanious and knocked the three guarding him brutally against the wall. "Now then, *archwizard*, I've some friends of yours who are *dying* to meet you," he said melodramatically.

Dior and Harken attempted to rise, but they were blown back again by another blast of magic. They groaned as they were slammed against the wall once more. Arianna slowly stood up, fighting against the pain and watching as the man, unconcerned about her, prepared to teleport out of the room. She started to conjure a spell, but the man was quicker, and without looking, he sent a savage gale that hit her and sent her against the wooden door with so much force the door burst open.

He laughed and disappeared, taking Arcanious away with him. Zoldram, who was on his way to get the gnomes, looked at the room and switched his communicator on. "Mortimer, Arcanious is gone," he said into the device.

Mortimer scowled when he heard Zoldram's message and took out his fury on the trolls, who were dangerously close.

Shortly later, the gnomes arrived with their troll-destroying devices and began immediately to start them up, but something was wrong. Instead of destroying the trolls, the machines were helping the trolls. “Mortimer,” one of them said hesitantly, “the gremlins have sabotaged the machines, sir.”

The wizard’s scowl grew more intense. “I’ve eyes,” he said, “I can see.”

His squad took the news in stride and drew out their force blades. Taking careful aim, they let vast bursts of energy fly at the trolls, and though they did not harm the tough creatures much, constant bombardments were slowing them down.

“Ready or not, here we go,” Mortimer shouted to the other wizards as he charged at the trolls. Luckily, his squad outnumbered the trolls two to one, though the trolls were more than twice as tough and strong as his wizards. But before a single wizard could strike at the trolls, they lumbered away, heading toward a large ditch near the castle’s outer wall.

The wizards followed, trying to figure out what the trolls were doing. When they reached the edge of the ditch, the trolls disappeared. “It was an illusion!” Mortimer yelled in frustration. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind forced them into the ditch, where a portal was waiting for them.

The warlocks, who had conjured the illusion with the aid of the crystals, jumped into the ditch after the wizards to ensure they entered the portal. Magic flared in their hands as they walked toward the wizards. Mortimer knew they couldn’t

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defeat the warlocks, and to escape from them would be difficult. Deciding this, he plunged into the portal. Reluctantly, his squad followed, knowing they would be obliterated by the enhanced magic of the warlocks if they remained.

When they emerged, the wizards were greeted with the sight of a robed warlock calmly ripping off the crystal he wore on his neck. “Welcome to my castle, Mortimer and crew. Do you like it?”

“Enough games, warlock,” Mortimer exclaimed fiercely, his eyes blazing.

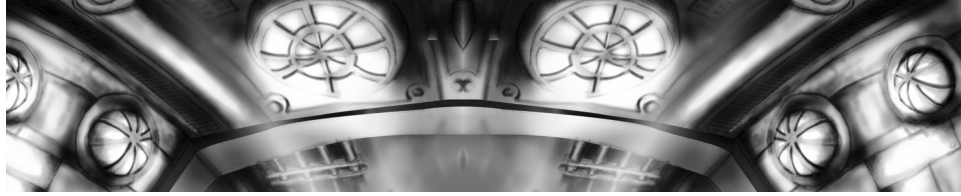
“Why, you beat me to my own line, Wizard.” The warlock burst into a fit of laughter before composing himself and launching a thunderbolt at Mortimer. The wizard motioned for his crew to back off and summoned a chunk of earth to defend himself against the thunder. Water blasted the circular shield of earth and destroyed it, allowing the thunder to hit Mortimer in the chest.

The warlock laughed as Mortimer conjured a stream of flames and attempted to harm him. He countered, sending multiple streams of water and lightning to strike Mortimer. The wizard slumped to the ground, barely hanging on to life. Mathias growled and drew his golden blade and rushed the warlock, thrusting deftly toward his chest and then rapidly flicking it toward the warlock’s face. The warlock parried and began slashing, forcing Mathias backward and keeping the warrior’s feet moving rapidly.

Soon, Mathias began to tire, for he was being forced to move in all different directions, and his arm had to keep moving in order to block the precocious warlock's blows. The warlock seemed never to tire but kept moving and striking, exhausting the stubborn warrior.

Suddenly, the warlock pierced Mathias' side with his blade, and the sudden pause allowed him to ram his blade into the wizard's chest. The warlock smashed downward with his leg and pulled his blade from Mathias' chest and turned to face the rest of the squad.

They began to sling spells at the warlock, but not one of them made it past his defenses. With a strange arcane chant, the warlock conjured a grey orb and threw it at a tree, laughing as it exploded and struck all the wizards. He cackled madly and teleported them back to Skyhall, though why he did that, he did not know.



CHAPTER NINE: MASTERMIND REVEALED

Mortimer awoke clutching at his head. He looked around and tried to figure out where he was. “You’re in the healers HQ, Mortimer of Squad Zero,” one of the healers told him after she realized why he was looking around the room. “The rest of your squad is waiting for you in the main hall. It’s down the corridor to the right.”

It took Mortimer a long moment to orient himself and organize his thoughts. When he walked into the main hall and studied his group, he immediately noticed the missing two. “Anyone heard from Ranth and Meilan yet?” he asked the squad. They shook their heads in response. “All right then, I need someone to—”

A voice on the communicator interrupted Mortimer, “Mortimer, this is Digorence. I’ve detected a lot of strange

movement near that abbey you told me about. I've also had two squad locator beacons emanate sporadically from the grounds, and I think you should check it out."

"Thanks, Digorence. Harken, set the portal for the abbey. Arianna, I'm trusting you to slip inside the abbey and rescue Ranth and Meilan. The rest of us will see what all that activity is about."

Harken finished activating the portal and stepped inside. The rest of the Squad joined him a few minutes later. With Mortimer at the lead, they advanced cautiously toward the abbey, searching for signs of hidden movement.

Mortimer caught sight of the enemy, and swore loudly. "What's the matter, Mortimer?" Neeal asked his commander. The wizard simply pointed at the enemy. "Oh my," Neeal exclaimed.

Ahead of them stood a battalion of various creatures from the dimension Dementia. Imps bearing tower shields stood in the front, shadow men spear-wielders behind them. Warlocks wielding their own twisted versions of the force blade, and goblin archers in the back of the formation. "Well, at least there are no trolls," Neeal said cheerfully.

Mortimer half expected the ground to shake, but when it didn't, he managed to grin slightly. "All right, Squad, we're going to commit the most suicidal act in the history of Skyhall. Arianna, you slip into the abbey, rescue Ranth and Meilan. When you reach them, teleport them to Skyhall and have a

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healer take care of them. If you're in good enough shape, come back and help us win this fight."

Arianna nodded and veered to the right to try and avoid the army. She ran silently, keeping her eyes peeled for ruffled turf where mines or motion detectors could be hidden. Within a few moments, she was near the abbey and behind the army. Some inner sense nagged at her, but Arianna foolishly ignored it and proceeded onward.

She walked up to the door of the abbey, searching carefully for any traps that would be triggered by opening the door or walking near it. Finding nothing, she entered the building. Her eyes caught a blur of movement, and she quickly threw herself to the ground. The axe sent by the motion sensor on the wall opposite the door buried itself in the door, which Arianna had closed after her.

Slowly, she crawled away from the motion sensor before standing up, in case it had another missile ready. She looked around the room, standing as still as possible. Seeing nothing, she began to walk around the room for a closer look. Again she found nothing.

Cautiously, she searched for a way up. She sighted the stairs and checked both the wall and the stairway itself for alarms and detonators. When she was halfway up the stairs she noticed another blur of movement and ducked. Feeling the heat passing her as the object hurtled towards the stairs, she quickly conjured a magic shield and placed it around herself, strengthening it as

she conjured air in her other hand.

As the stairs exploded and shards of wood went everywhere, Arianna propelled herself backwards with the air she conjured, hoping the shield she had hastily conjured would protect her long enough.

The shards of wood shot toward her, but the magical shield she placed stopped them before they hit her. The heat became intense as the part of the stairs that had not been blown to pieces was set on fire. She tried to counter the fire with a water spell, but when she did so, her shield, which had been conjured too hastily to be full-strength and not interfere with spell-casting, began to wane.

When at last the shards stopped flying around the room, Arianna put out her shield and searched for an alternate way to the second floor. Sighting an ancient pillar standing in the middle of the room for no apparent reason with holes that would serve as handholds, Arianna ran over to it and immediately started to climb.

There was a shift in the shadows, which Arianna would have noticed if she had been paying attention to her surroundings. Once again, her highly trained reflexes saved her from being hit by a dagger flung from the shadows. Her sense of vision was distorted, for she was hanging upside down, but she eventually found where the black-clothed figure sat by noting where the deeper shadows were.

Flame burst in her hands as she summoned it forth and

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wasted no time in saying the verbal component of the spell. The fire intensified and became a sphere, which rested gently in Arianna's hand. Taking careful aim, she launched it at her assailant. He screamed as the flame hit him and an explosion ensued as the fire found the explosive and rare chemicals he had stolen.

Arianna let go of the pillar with her legs, managing to land feet first with only a little help from magic. She resumed her climb when the blood returned to her head and she stopped feeling woozy.

A few moments later, Arianna was on the second floor, her eyes searching for traps once more. She followed her communicator to the room where the distress signal came from, walking slowly through twisty corridors. As she neared the oaken door, Arianna heard a click, and she threw herself flat to the floor. A pair of spears quivered in the wall just a few feet above where she lay.

Suddenly, the floor began to cave in, and Arianna leapt upwards, hoping to fall clear of the rotten section. Her luck failed her, and Arianna fell to the first floor. She hastily erected a barrier around her, which cushioned her fall and allowed her to survive unscathed. She burst through the back door into the garden, her eyes searching for the window of the room. She found it and located a section of the wall covered in vines. Arianna pushed the red button on her communicator, "Commander, this isn't where they're keeping their captives.

It's ancient and it has a dying garden, so they must have recently taken it over as a decoy. I almost have the two inside so you only have to hold on for a moment longer."

"Roger that, Arianna." She sighed and began to climb, wishing she knew if she could keep two spells running at the same time without losing one of them. She would not risk it, however, and she began her climb to the second floor. The thorns on the vines were piercing her hands, so she pulled on thick gloves and resumed her climb.

She clambered onto the ledge of a window a few minutes later and prepared to jump to the next one. With a running start, Arianna leapt toward the next window ledge, barely making it. The former thief paused for a moment before taking another vault.

Soon, Arianna reached her destination. She smashed the door open and slipped inside, gasping at what she saw. Ranth lay on the floor, his face deathly pale, tears in his tunic revealing long deep gashes. Meilan was also injured, though not as pale as her comrade. Arianna told Neeal she had found them and asked Meilan if she were strong enough to create a force field if they needed it while they levitated down to the garden. "Yes, Arianna, I can, though I fear for Ranth. The wound in his side isn't deep but it's been bleeding for a while." Arianna nodded and with Meilan's help carried Ranth to the window and began to levitate them down.

The senior wizards along with members of the other squads

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arrived, taking the enemy and the tired members of the squad that were already there by surprise, with many of the vile creatures falling in the surprise attack. Taking command, Mortimer led the group like a general, and his wizards cut through the ranks of the demented creatures like a hot knife through butter. Neeal and his men cheered.

Arianna sighed as her feet touched ground, and she began another spell, hoping she could cast it without fainting or tiring out. The spell completed, she managed to stagger toward the door leading to the castle for a few moments before collapsing. Meilan weakly called for help and fainted beside her friend, her strength sapped.

Within seconds, help arrived and dragged the three to the healers, barely managing to get them there in time. The healers, specially trained wizards who learned the arts of healing instead of regular magic, quickly purged the shadows from the three, removing the energy-draining spells from their bodies, returning some of their lost energy. After this, they bound and healed Meilan's and Ranth's wounds and purged the slow poison in Arianna's blood.

Upon further examination, the healers also retrieved locating devices planted in Meilan and Ranth by a strange force and quickly destroyed them, hoping they had successfully cured the three wizards. Arianna woke three days later and felt as if she had a massive hangover, which the healers said was because of the poison. When Arianna inquired about the poison, they told

her they could not discern where it came from.

Ranth and Meilan recovered well but were both very weak from loss of blood. Neither was scarred, which was strange, but both were very ill. Arianna recovered first but didn't return to the field for a few more days after she left the room the healers kept her in. Things were quiet for a long time at the station, and nothing major happened until a few weeks after Ranth and Meilan rejoined the field.

While they had been recovering, Neeal and Mathias had been scouting the ruins of an ancient abbey near Glastonbury when they witnessed a powerful warlock hold a war council with the leaders of power factions of goblins and shadows. This alliance was plotting to destroy Skyhall. Neeal had sent Mathias back to the station while he followed the warlock to his own fortress in Alpha Ontordo, a secret domain unreachable by anyone save those who could use magic.

Mortimer spent many days running his crew and the others through intense drills, for he wished the only casualties on his mission to eliminate the warlock to be in the ranks of the enemy. The assembled wizards did not complain at having to perform the drills. Rather, they accepted them and performed them as they were supposed to and learned and strengthened their abilities.

After training with Mortimer, the crew felt more than ready to accomplish their tasks, but Mortimer insisted that they continue their training. A few days later, only a week after

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Neeal's discovery of the warlock, Mortimer judged his squad ready to tackle their tasks. Before he left to go to the warlock's secret domain, Mortimer led his group silently through a trail surrounded by dark, ominous trees, warning each to be silent and watch for leaves or twigs on the trail as they moved. Their pace was slow, but they left no marks of their passing on the trail; and they made no noise so they would not be noticed by the warlock or his servants. Mortimer signaled for the group to halt and slipped from one side of the grove of trees to the other, motioning for the others to do the same, one by one.

Each of the squad swiftly and silently reached the other side of the grove and they continued their march. Mortimer didn't need to tell his crew why he had them switch to the other side, for he was sure they would have noticed the guard dogs wandering around that side of the forest.

Mortimer led them to the edge of the tree line and then paused again, motioning for them to follow closely behind him as they walked toward the castle. As they reached the wide courtyard of the castle, the robed man appeared, a long force blade strapped to his belt.

"Your crystals are useless now, warlock," Mortimer said, drawing his force blade from its scabbard.

"Now, now Mortimer, there's no need for this hostility," the warlock replied smugly. Mortimer charged but shot backwards as the warlock lifted a single hand to defeat him. "You really are a fool, Morty. Did you think I really needed those crystals? They

were but a decoy to buy me time to gather my forces. Just what did you think I did for the past ten years while I was in exile?”

Mortimer didn't answer and concentrated on standing. “Bugger off, Mortimer, I've got pressing business. One of your squad members is going to have a brush with death,” he said melodramatically before disappearing.



After witnessing the other's power, Arcanious knew now that Mortimer couldn't defeat the warlock even with Alpha and Gamma's help; they would have to enlist the aid of the gnomes. The warlock entered the room laughing maniacally as he appeared in the courtyard. “So, the powerful master of the wizards at the mighty Skyhall has finally shown up to try his hand at beating me. Well, let me tell you, you ancient bag of bones, you're going to experience a fate worse than death, so you might want to say farewell in your little communicator.” Arcanious' eyes blazed and he conjured an ancient form of magic not taught to the apprentices of Mythardiom. He then began to incant a powerful spell.

The same energy flared in the warlock's hand, and he spoke a different spell, rapidly yet accurately pronouncing each syllable of his spell. Arcanious let his spell loose first, amazed at the speed with which another energy sparked to life in the warlock's free hand and crashed into Arcanious' spell. The warlock aimed his spell at Arcanious, watching as the ancient wizard prepared a counter-spell.

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Suddenly, everything went dark, and Arcanious tensed. He felt the heat of a spell on his skin, which caused him to release his counter-spell. The warlock laughed and launched his real spell, getting rid of the darkness and throwing off his mask as the wizard slowly stood back up after being knocked down by the force of the warlock's spell. Arcanious looked up at his captor and gasped as he recognized the face.

The warlock had long locks of white hair braided into a single ponytail, which marked him as a potent spell-caster. He wore a long, black force blade at his side and an obsidian shield on his back, which was partially covered by his long grey cape. "Recognize me, Arcanious?"

"So, you lived after all. I almost killed you then, Mobius, and I can do it again,"

"No you can't, Arcanious. I have found the closest thing to immortality possible; and now I can crush the life from you and make you feel the pain I felt, the pain *I* didn't deserve." Arcanious laughed and launched a sphere of grey energy at his foe, hoping to take him by surprise.

Using a beam of magic, the warlock lifted the spell out of the air and launched it back at Arcanious. The ancient wizard leapt out of the way of the spell, barely avoiding it again as the warlock used the beam to whip the spell toward Arcanious.

Arcanious was hit by two spells at one time, which caused him to drop to the ground, energy sparking and crackling all around him. Mobius laughed and pulled the long force blade

from his belt, laughing even more intensely when he caught the knife Arcanious had hurled toward his chest in desperation.

Arcanious fell back to the ground, pain clearly etched on his face. He attempted to cast a spell to defend himself, but the ancient wizard didn't have enough strength to finish the spell he began to create. Mobius cackled again and prepared to transport Arcanious into the spell book.

A few moments later, he heard the thumping and opened the book. Peering down at the page he saw the three uber wizards sitting down while Arcanious repeatedly jabbed the boundaries of his prison. "Enjoying yourself, Arcanious?"



CHAPTER TEN: IMPRISONMENT

T'rath groaned as he woke up and tried to stand. After finding that he couldn't, he looked around him and discovered that he was tied to a bed. He tried to conjure fire but discovered that he couldn't. The jailor, noting his efforts, laughed and walked over to his cell to taunt him. "There's nothing ye can do about it, fool. They've placed a seal upon their world so they can have the advantage should any wizards come to exterminate them."

"I'm on Dementia?"

"No, yer in the land o' happy ponies and rainbows!" the jailor replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. T'rath looked at his jailor for a moment before realizing something. "You're a gremlin!" he exclaimed. "No, I'm a beautiful unicorn! See me

float majestically in the air!” the gremlin said sarcastically. “What interest do the Dementians have in me? And where’s my squad?”

“Oh, the demons were getting lonely so they invited you down for tea and scones.”

“Look, Gremlin, enough of your infernal sarcasm!”

“Look, Gremlin, enough of your infernal sarcasm!” the gremlin replied mockingly. “Whatcha gonna do? Shoot me full of fire?” T’rath tried not to let his anger show and succeeded. “Come on now, Mister Wizard, let’s see some magic, or were you too weak to lift your little spell books along with you?”

“Why are you doing this?” T’rath asked through clenched teeth.

“Oh, I’m just here to antagonize you until you run home and cry to Mommy. But don’t tattle on me to Mommy, okay? I would hate to have to come over there and watch you be fed junk and then make sure your night light is on before you let Mommy rock you to sleep.”

“That does it, you cretin!” T’rath shouted as he pushed against the straps with his arms. The extra strength from his anger caused the straps to burst off of him. With his hands free, he immediately began to free his legs. Once he was completely free of the bindings, he paused for a moment to rub the circulation back into his arms and legs before walking up to the cell door. “Thank you, Gremlin,” he said.

“For what? Saying the truth?”

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“So this is yet another one of your tortures,” T’rath said calmly before slamming his fist into the door. By some miracle he smashed the anti magic gem on his cell. “Where’s the rest of my squad?” he asked, trying not to think about the pain in his hand.

“Whatcha gonna do first, cry to Mommy or tattle on me?”

The wizard conjured flame in his hand. Quickly, he chanted and flung the finished spell at the gremlin. He didn’t even bother to move. He just stood there and let the fireball hurl him across the room. Strangely, the keys the gremlin had been dangling in front of T’rath flew into his cell.

T’rath picked up the keys and inserted them into the lock, looking at the gremlin with a puzzled expression. The minute creature winked at him and pretended to fall unconscious. T’rath shrugged and opened the door. He saw there were no other cells in this room so he dashed past the gremlin and into the corridor. “Me name’s Junksmith,” the gremlin said as T’rath passed by. The wizard dashed left as he saw a pair of guards coming his way. Once again he entered an area where he couldn’t use magic, but he had trained in hand-to-hand combat for emergencies and wasn’t too worried.

Sighting a guard, he jabbed him in the back of the head, turned him around, and kicked him brutally against the wall. He dashed over to a cell and saw a small child sitting dejectedly against a wall. T’rath immediately opened the door and motioned for the child to come with him.

Smiling, the child waited until T'rath turned his back to him before he took out a knife from a pocket and raised it to stab T'rath.

"Oh no ye don't!" a voice shouted. Both T'rath and the child swerved around.

Junksmith fired the crossbow he was holding. T'rath watched in horror as the bolt struck the child in the neck. "You killed an innocent child."

"If he's innocent I'm the Queen of Rainbow Land," the gremlin retorted. "It's a decoy. Demon shape-shifters turn into children to make anyone who escapes want to save them as well; and when they turn their backs, they get stabbed and sent to the torture chamber. Come on, I'll steer you away from the fake ones."

"Why are you helping me? And why did you fake unconsciousness?"

"A couple of days back I met a nice chap named Mortimer who came to Brittle to get some crystals destroyed. Now some robed chap hired me to tell him to destroy the master crystal, and in return I'd get a chance to tinker with some gnomish inventions. I felt bad about two-timing him after I destroyed some troll-bane catapults, so I created a crystal ball and figured out the best way to repent would be to help you here.

"So I came here a day after you came here—you were unconscious for three days—and offered to be their jailor for nothing more than food, water, and a room. They agreed, and

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here we are. I faked my unconsciousness to surprise the guards coming to inspect all the noise and get rid of them.”

T’rath nodded and went to the next cell. Junksmith shot the occupant in the head, and went to the next one and shot the occupant.

Before long, they moved to another room, and once again there were no survivors. The shape-shifters couldn’t put up a fight and none of them could shout out without blowing their cover, which meant that each of them believed they weren’t found out. “They must be stupid,” T’rath remarked as they moved on to another room. “Like humans,” Junksmith agreed.

Before long they found T’rath’s squad. “I’m not taking any chances,” Junksmith said as he approached the first squad member. He raised his crossbow, and before T’rath could stop him, he fired. The squad member slumped to the floor and cast a pleading look at T’rath. Anger flared in T’rath as he saw the wizard slowly die. He raised a fist and ran towards the gremlin, aiming low.

Junksmith fired again, this time at T’rath. T’rath stopped and braced himself for the pain. He clutched at the spot where he saw the bolt hit him and then looked down in surprise when he didn’t feel anything. He bent over for a closer inspection and found himself sprawled on the floor. “You sucker punched me!” he exclaimed before he could ask where the bolt went.

“Me crossbow only affects Dementians, fool.”

T’rath glared at the gremlin but let Junksmith finish the

inspection. When at last they located T'rath's squad, and T'rath had double-checked to make sure they were all there, T'rath asked Junksmith to lead them to the exit.

The gremlin paused for a moment to consult a small device before leading them down a corridor. "Just a minute, *jailor*," a voice called out as they turned the corner. Junksmith slowly turned around and raised his crossbow.

Smiling, Junksmith fired at T'rath, and then turned around to fire at the squad. The wizards toppled to the floor, causing the demons holding spell blasters to smile, revealing a mouth full of large jagged teeth. "You fooled us for a moment, little gremlin. That was a good ruse."

Junksmith lowered his crossbow.

"But, unfortunately for you, this is a better one," the demon sneered.

Junksmith whirled around and discovered that he was surrounded on all sides.

"You might as well tell your friends to get up; we know about your little crossbow," it said.

"T'rath, I'm sorry I didn't do a better job," Junksmith whispered as he raised his crossbow and shot the first demon in the head before the rest of them could aim their blasters.

The gremlin jammed the end of the crossbow into his hip, placed the bolt in his mouth, pulled back the string, and fit in the bolt. He took aim and managed to bring down another demon before they fired the blasters.

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T'rath raised a hand and erected a magical barrier just before the volley struck the gremlin. "But...how?" the gremlin stammered.

T'rath grinned and stood up. "They charge those with magical energy they buy from the warlocks, ergo, our magic shields can deflect them."

The demons were infuriated and leapt toward them, bringing out odd-looking weapons but before they could strike they were hit by a magical barrage, which nearly killed all of them.

The remaining creature snarled and looked at the gremlin. "How did you manage to conjure magic? This is a sealed area!"

Junksmith grinned. "A little butterfly dropped the master crystal for this area into a little wizard's cell."

"You—you worm," the demon said to Junksmith as T'rath hit him with a particularly powerful spell he had been casting during the conversation.

"Now, let's fly before another regiment of guards manages to tear themselves away from their pastries without too many tears." T'rath nodded and followed the gremlin along the corridor. The path sloped upwards and ended in a burst of bright light. T'rath shielded his eyes and began to walk to the light. "I wouldn't be doing that if I were you wizard. You'd be walking into an intense cold."

"What?"

"Dementia's sun's about to die; therefore, it's extremely cold."

The light is from the little sunlight reflecting on the snow. The goblins and werewolves have to live underground to stay alive. Besides, the antimagic is in effect out there." T'rath nodded and motioned for his squad to teleport themselves to Skyhall. "If you knew that, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Ye wouldn't have believed me," the gremlin said, slipping back into Brittlia accents.

"Will you come with us to Skyhall?"

"No, I'll be off to Brittle. Don't be a stranger, T'rath!" Junksmith said as he placed some circular devices on the path leading up to the wizards. "Everyone stay here; don't wander down the path. Got it?" he cautioned before he teleported away using yet another device he had concealed on his person.



CHAPTER ELEVEN: MORTIMER'S PLAN

"Mathias, we can beat him, if he is indeed Mobius," Mortimer said a few minutes after the warlock teleported away.

"Who?" the ace wizard asked.

"A man I knew in my younger years."

"But how did you know, sir?"

"He called me Morty, and he brought back memories."

"Were you serious when you said we could defeat him?"

"Don't you remember the spell he invented before he was banned from Skyhall? The history books called him the Masked Man. He tried to invade us by turning our comrades against us using mind control after the *incident*, but he was beaten back.

"When we beat him back, he invented the spell that bound a spell-caster to a certain book of spells, making them invulnerable to all spells except those in his spell book. Now,

we do not have the book he chose. But we can steal it.

“The other squads would never prevail; and besides, he was countering our magic. We couldn’t sling spells quickly enough to harm him.

“I was thinking of someone else besides the other squads. And leave destroying Mobius to me. Arianna, are you ready for another mission?” Arianna stood frozen for a moment, surprise on her face as she attempted to speak. “Of course,” she managed finally. Mortimer smiled and beckoned for her to follow him. When Mortimer finally located Neeal, the three headed toward a vacant table to discuss Mortimer’s plan.

“To defeat Mobius, we’re going to need his spell book. To get this, we’re going to have to steal it. Neeal, this is where you come in. Do you think Arianna can handle this on her own, or do you think she’ll need backup?”

“I don’t know, Mortimer. I think it would be best with a partner, but that’s one more person to worry about while you’re looking for traps. I would go alone, but that’s just my preference.”

Mortimer considered Neeal’s answer for a moment before answering. “I will leave it up to Arianna then.”

Arianna sighed and thought carefully about her choices before answering. “I will go alone.” Mortimer nodded and told her to get some sleep before she headed out to the warlock’s castle. Arianna followed his advice and slept in the barracks briefly before she headed back through the portal in the station.

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Quickly, she slipped through the trees leading to the warlock's castle. Much to her relief, she saw the warlock leave his castle, though this did not bode well for the squad member he had threatened earlier. Even though he was gone, she remained tense, her natural instincts telling her danger was still present. She was sure he would have left guards behind to guard his book of spells. Either that or he took his book with him wherever he was going.

Arianna quickly searched the last two trees in the tree line for traps; and after finding none, she walked toward the courtyard, her eyes searching for possible locations of traps. As she walked into the courtyard, stone eyes regarded her for a few moments, slowly readying their bodies for flight.

She took another few steps forward and quickly flipped backwards as a patch of earth filled with sharpened stakes fell into a wide trench. She took a moment to calm her beating heart before she started to walk toward the castle once more. She gained a few more feet before the gargoyles launched themselves from their perches on the gate, heading quickly toward her.

Rapidly, Arianna began to gather magical energy, hoping to be able to destroy one of the gargoyles before either could reach her. Holding one element in her left hand and another in her right, she rapidly combined the two and finished her spell, hurling it with deadly accuracy at the wings of one of the gargoyles.

The acid melted a sizable hole in the rock wing of the gargoyle, causing the stone beast to fall from the sky. Arianna began another spell, but the remaining gargoyle was quicker and shied a handful of dirt at her eyes. As she dodged the missile, the gargoyle shot toward her and raked her back with its claws, performing a quick u-turn in the air, vicious claws held out in front of it.

Arianna pelted the creature with a bombardment of magical blows, hitting it rapidly and mercilessly with an assortment of weak but easy-to-cast spells. Suddenly, the gargoyle disappeared, causing Arianna to shift her eyes constantly to catch a glimpse of it.

It reappeared in front of her and drew crimson blood with its claws, almost sneering as Arianna lashed out wildly with her magic to defend herself from the sudden attack. She tripped over a large stick in the grass and fell, trying to summon magic as she hit the ground.

The gargoyle drew closer to her, grinning as it realized it could kill her easily if she made a simple mistake. Suddenly, Arianna remembered the gift Neel had given her before she left. She didn't know how to use it, but she had participated in knife duels before and was confident she could use the rapier well enough to buy her some time. When he had given it to her, he explained they could not give her a force blade until she completed her second year at Mythardiom, but she would still need an emergency defense.

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Seeing her draw the slender weapon, the gargoyle drove its claws into Arianna's arm with inhuman speed and forced the weapon out of her hands. With a smirk, Arianna rammed the small knife concealed in her sleeve into the gargoyle's stone eye. The gargoyle snickered and snatched the knife, receiving a hole in its chest for its troubles from a particularly nasty spell Arianna had been casting.

Arianna quickly incanted another spell, hoping to destroy the gargoyle while it was still in shock to avoid fighting it while it still had the superior dexterity to overwhelm her. Fortunately for her, Arianna was able to destroy the gargoyle quickly, though she barely survived, for the gargoyle had almost slashed Arianna's neck after she thought it was dead.

When both creatures stopped moving, Arianna began her climb up the gate, hoping to be in and out of the warlock's castle before he returned. After a moment's thought, she leapt off the gate and levitated herself over it lest a trap should go off. None was set off, however, and Arianna lowered herself lightly onto the grass near the wizard's front door.

Back in Skyhall, Mathias swore, "She'll never find it in time. She's got that whole castle to search, and Mobius will soon be back. We'll have to hold him off along with whatever he's bringing until she returns. We must protect the engines the gnomes built to fire the spells at all costs. They are our only weapon against this warlock."

"Ready the wizards and have every citizen of Skyhall within

the gates of the cities in a score of minutes.” Mathias nodded and left, shouting out orders to his squad as they hurried to complete the tasks given to them. Quickly, Mortimer ran to where the gnomes were fine-tuning the machines they had rapidly designed for him and warned them to be ready to shield the devices.

Swiftly, Mortimer headed back to where Harken stood atop the battlements, joining the wizard as he stared out into the air, looking for signs of Mobius.

At the warlock’s castle, Arianna stealthily levitated toward an air vent and crawled inside of it, deciding it would be a better approach than entering through the front door.

Apparently, the warlock had thought so as well. Arianna hadn’t thought there would be any traps, for wind would constantly stream through the vent. She was wrong, however, for the warlock had put a strange bubble around the motion-sensor bombs so they would not respond to the passage of air through the tunnel. Arianna realized the flaw in this but too late. She plummeted to the ground below her as the motion-sensor bombs activated.

Shielded by a magical barrier, Arianna survived the intense flames and the fall but was stranded in a room full of stone trolls, which quickly came to life. Arianna took one down as soon as she regained her senses, reducing the number of guardians in the room to a dozen. Slowly, the trolls advanced upon her, giving her time to quickly cut down three more with

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swift slashes of air and fire.

When they were finally within striking range of Arianna, she was left with only three stone warriors to fight. The three remaining creatures struck with such speed and strength that they made up for their lost numbers, drawing crimson repeatedly from the mage as they slashed at her with fists and blades. Although wounded, she teleported herself to the far corner of the room, hoping to be able to cut them down as she had the first time they charged.

This time, however, they ran swiftly at her, only giving her enough time to wound one of them. “Human, it is futile to resist us. Surrender now and your demise will be swift. Oppose us further, and you will become stone like us, and there will be no afterlife for you,” the troll said, thinking Arianna would back down.

This didn’t frighten her, however, and she hit the troll with a globe of thunder, shocking it momentarily. The slight pause was all Arianna needed, and she took the leader down with her next spell, leaving only two. The trolls slowly charged Arianna, who nimbly sidestepped and cast a stream of flame into the side of the nearest troll.

The stricken troll screamed and lunged at Arianna, striking her side. As she cringed from the pain, the other troll executed a backhand swing, which caught her in the ribs. As she fell to the floor, she stuck her palm out and conjured a beam of ice, which struck a troll in the head and quickly froze it. She was thankful

that the troll wasn't a wizard and couldn't dispel the ice with its mind. This left her with a single opponent to face.

With a malicious grin, the stone fiend advanced on Arianna, preparing to plunge its sword in her chest. She rolled to the right as the blade came crashing down, the movement bringing intense pain. Quickly, she slashed at the creature's eye with a gust of wind and slowly staggered to her feet, leaning against the wall for support.

The troll, who had recovered from the wound, held out his sword in front of him like a spear and charged toward Arianna, who summoned a spell and launched it at the troll. The spell missed its target and the fiend held the sword higher so it would strike her in the chest when he rammed it into her. Her foe struck out, and Arianna gasped.



Mortimer shoved Harken off the battlements of Skyhall and quickly dove after the wizard, barely avoiding the massive ball of fire that had been aimed at the two. Harken thanked Mortimer and, after casting the spell for a few moments, launched a similar ball of fire into the sky, where a rogue wizard circled the city atop a dragon. "Every one except the wizards and gnomes inside The Dome! Hurry!" Mortimer shouted as fireballs cascaded relentlessly toward the town. Groups of wizards sheltered fleeing parties of those without magical shields, leading them toward The Dome, an ancient building that was completely magic-proof.

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The fireballs came down like rain, racing downward and either striking man, building, or ground or bouncing off the shields of the wizards as they ushered the fleeing citizens toward The Dome. Meilan nimbly stepped to her left as a fireball crashed to the ground where she had been standing. The wizard made her way to where Mortimer stood atop the battlements, knocking the more foolish renegades off of their dragons, ending their vile lives. They would not be able to concentrate enough while they were falling to create a magical shield or levitate themselves back toward their dragons.

“Mortimer, they have established a portal near the abbey. We’ve tried to bring it down, but it seems invulnerable.” Mortimer motioned for her to lead him to the portal, flinging one last thunderbolt into the air before running after her, occasionally zigzagging in order to dodge the rain of fireballs. Meilan headed toward a narrow alley leading out of the city, hoping they would be able to bring down the portal.

“How did you get close enough to the portal to try to bring it down?”

“They didn’t start pouring through until a few minutes ago.” Mortimer nodded and crept silently toward the portal. Dragons and renegades shot out from the portal and took to the skies and headed for Skyhall, lobbing fireballs and other magical missiles at the walled city as they soared toward it. Mortimer stared in awe at the portal, wondering how he could bring it down. Suddenly, the renegades stopped flowing out, allowing

Mortimer to examine the portal more closely. After a few minutes, he sighed and gave orders to the team of wizards inspecting the portal.

“Head back to Skyhall and tell all able-bodied wizards to line up atop the battlements and bring those dragons down. Order the gnomes to keep their machines safe in The Dome and tell Harken and Mathias to head there as well to protect the machines against nonmagical attacks,” Mortimer ordered as he prepared to enter the portal.

The wizards quickly left to defend their city, leaving Mortimer alone with the ancient device. Without hesitation, he stepped through the portal and quickly prepared a spell. No resistance met him, however, and Mortimer studied his surroundings. The wizard headed toward the front door of the warlock’s home, knowing the key needed to close the portal would lie inside. He would have to slip inside quickly, though, in order to avoid detection from the groups of renegades heading toward Skyhall.

Mortimer heard something crash and felt an explosion, which told him Arianna had not disabled a trap quickly enough. Thinking she would be fine, Mortimer headed up the stairs, shielding himself against the various assortment of spells flung at him by the devices planted on the stairs, thankful he had studied the old magic and was able to defend himself from spells that would pass through a modern shield instead of having to locate each device and disable it.

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As Mortimer prepared to enter the warlock's study, he heard the sounds of battle and levitated himself toward the noise on the first floor. The door to the room was stuck, so Mortimer blasted through the wall, sending debris everywhere. Mortimer studied the room and heard a gasp, which directed him to Arianna. The stone troll attempting to skewer Arianna tumbled backward as Mortimer gripped its body with magical hands and pulled back. Mortimer had used a spell only a few of the most senior wizards could use, one that was easily repelled if used against another wizard; but it had proven useful, for he had been able to stop the troll from killing Arianna with it.

Arianna slowly slumped to the floor. Mortimer sighed and teleported himself and Arianna to The Dome, remembering the features of the room so he would be able to teleport directly back when he returned. Arianna smiled weakly as the healers began to clear her wounds of bacteria, which Mortimer took as a sign that she would be fine.

Mortimer disappeared, heading back to the warlock's study to disable the portal. The room was strangely devoid of corpses when Mortimer returned; telling him someone else had entered it, for he had made sure the trolls were dead before he noticed the one about to kill Arianna.

Silently, he conjured a mass of air magic in his hand and crept out of the room, making himself insubstantial as a pair of daggers were thrown at him by a strangely-clad figure. Mortimer stood in disbelief as the figure drew a blade and ran

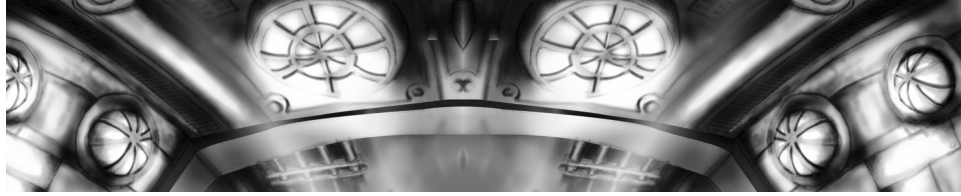
toward him, shielding itself against Mortimer's magical barrage.

Mortimer noticed then it was Neeal and there was a strange glow in Neeal's eyes, telling the venerable wizard his friend was being used—enchanted and entranced by another. “Do not resist Mobius; it is futile. Futile.”

Mortimer was thoroughly irritated at hearing Neeal's words. “Mobius must really be slipping if he's giving his minions such god-awful clichés,” Mortimer said as he blew a hole in Neeal's armor. Neeal screamed and sent a wave of crimson toward Mortimer, launching razor-sharp gusts of wind after Mortimer dodged the first wave and blocked the second with his magic shield.

Wave after wave of magic crashed into Mortimer's shield until he was forced to drop it. Suddenly, cannonballs quickly fell from fake patches of wood on the ceiling and flew at Mortimer, who was trying to regain lost energy. Just before he could erect another barrier, the paralyzing cannonballs all hit him, sending pain careening through his body as the electricity tried to make him go unconscious.

Mortimer held down the communicator button for a moment and quietly said, “Ambush,” before launching a dagger into a hole in Neeal's armor, sending a fire spell to heat the blade to send more pain into Neeal's possessed body. Slowly, Mortimer stopped resisting the electricity and fell to the floor, rapidly losing consciousness.



CHAPTER TWELVE: MARCH OF THE GOLEMS

T'rath and his group watched the gremlin go before they began to cast teleport spells. As they did so, guards rushed up the corridor. After the first few were killed by Junksmith's devices, they stayed back and drew out a pair of objects. They set them on the ground and blew into a tube on the sides of each object. Before the wizards could complete their spells, a warlock appeared and aimed a staff at them.

"It's a disruption spell! Break off your teleportation spell," T'rath attempted to yell before the spell hit. The wizards began to disappear, and they had almost made it through when the spell hit.

T'rath swore as he rematerialized. He turned around to look at his surroundings and saw Skyhall's castle off in the distance. He grinned and turned to his crew. "We're almost home," he said. Suddenly, a shadow burst from the bushes, its claws

stretched outwards at an angle to tear out his jugular. It was greatly surprised when the claws passed through the smirking wizard, who had made himself transparent; and its surprise grew when it discovered the dagger sticking out of its back.

T'rath summoned a stream of fire, which struck the steel blade of the dagger. The shadow howled as pain shot through its body, and then it disappeared, leaving behind the dagger T'rath had rammed into it and the knife one of his fellow wizards had placed in it as it faded away. T'rath quickly placed his dagger back in its sheath. A deep rumbling was heard by the wizards, and they all turned around, fear momentarily flickering in their eyes. "Arcanious," T'rath spoke into his communicator, not knowing that Arcanious was taken captive, "we killed the shadows, but if you don't hear from us in a few hours, don't send anyone after us. Tell Mortimer I'll miss him and to prepare some of those golem-destroying machines the gnomes made for you. I think you'll be needing them shortly. Don't send anyone to help; just prepare to defend Skyhall against a score of golems."

Mathias replied, "There's a score of golems, and you're going to try to stop them?"

"No, sir, we're gonna hold them off as long as we can so Mortimer can neutralize the warlock without having to worry about being attacked by golems while he's busy. Goodbye, Mathias, and with luck, I'll see you again, but don't keep your hopes up, as I doubt I'll survive.

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“All right, men, if anyone wants to leave here to return to Skyhall, by all means, go. You don’t need to sacrifice yourselves today—” T’rath’s voice trailed off as all of the wizards rapidly teleported themselves back to Skyhall, some trying to say the spells so quickly they messed up the spell and had to start over and repeat the spell. “Well, then, T’rath, I guess we’ll be finding out what heaven looks like soon, eh?” he smiled and began drawing energy, and though he was very tired, he held his ground.

The golems thundered into view and T’rath’s eyes bulged momentarily. The golems were massive figures, a dozen feet tall and with tree-trunk-like arms and legs to match their massive chests, their skin a dull orange. The golems laughed at the sight of the lone wizard defiantly standing in their way, power swirling around him.

Their laughter boomed through the air, and T’rath almost laughed as well. Then the laughter died and the golems resumed their march. A chunk of rock lodged in the lead golem’s chest as gales of wind rapidly slashed out a section and then died away. The golems stopped to scoop large chunks of earth from the ground.

T’rath ran back and forth across the stretch of land he was guarding, his black hair streaming behind him in the wind as he ran swiftly. Most of the time, he dodged the missiles, but when he stopped to take a deep breath and a chunk of earth shot toward him, he would extend his palm outwards toward the

mass of earth and deflect it with a powerful blast of wind.

Soon, the golems tired of throwing earth and began to uproot large trees to use against the brave warrior. He stood his ground and blasted at them relentlessly, removing chunks of their chests as rapidly as he could. Once, he cut off both of a golem's legs and watched the man-made monster fall to the ground, but the golem simply scooped out earth from the ground and hurled it at T'rath. When he cut through their chests, however, the golems fell apart and died, so T'rath began to concentrate on cutting out their massively thick chests.

A tree crashed toward T'rath, and the wizard quickly erected a barrier to spare himself from the blow. He cut off the force field and rolled out of the way, allowing the tree to fall and crack the golem's foot. T'rath levitated upward, hoping the golems were stupid enough to fall prey to his next trick. Two of the closest golems held their trees outward like spears and ran toward him at full speed, which pleased T'rath, who was hoping they would do this.

At the last moment, T'rath shot upward, smiling as the golems smashed holes in each other's chests. The rage of the golems increased, and any thought of just continuing on into the valley went away as they sought to crush the life out of the slayer of their brethren.

T'rath cut a chunk in the head of one of the golems and placed a handful of dry grass in the hole, sending a burning star into the crack to ignite the grass. In confusion, the stricken

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golem began to smash at its head with its fists, completely destroying itself. The other golems studied what their comrade had done and learned from their brother's mistake, each knowing that none of the surviving golems would make the same mistake.

The wizard sighed and headed toward the edge of the small plain, watching as a pair of golems lumbered after him and the rest began scooping earth to hurl at their enemy. T'rath blasted a hole in the dirt, lowered himself in it, and waited for the golems to arrive. Both stood next to the wizard and laughed at his predicament, a testimony to their stupidity, and attacked him. One aimed a low kick at him, and the other a high kick, which both thought would allow them to kick the wizard's head off his shoulders.

T'rath teleported out of the hole and appeared behind one of the golems and pushed him forward with a powerful gale of wind. Both golems were too thick-headed to stop their attacks, and one of the golems cracked and destroyed his comrade's foot while the other kicked his companion's head off and into the ravine. The living golem fell to the ground, and when he attempted to stand once more, he lost his balance. With a little help from T'rath's magic, he toppled over into the ravine and shattered.

T'rath took to the skies and began to attack the remaining golems, but from time to time, he was so fatigued that he lost control of his levitation and began to plummet downwards.

Soon, only one adversary was left, and he had jagged cracks running all the way through his body. T'rath raised a fist in the air, for he had stood up to a score of golems and triumphed. He raised a fist in the air again, for he would be able to return to Skyhall and Mortimer. "Yes! Thank you for your mercy, lord of the heavens," cried out T'rath as he began his final spell.

T'rath was about to speak the last word in the spell when a bolt of lightning crashed through his chest. With disbelief in his eyes, T'rath crashed to the ground. Several more lightning bolts shot into him, and T'rath coughed a stream of blood. The warlock, who was floating in the sky, laughed and hurled a final lightning bolt at the wizard before disappearing. T'rath considered his options. When he realized he couldn't teleport back to Skyhall fast enough to escape the thunderbolt or raise a shield in time, he sighed and aimed a thunderbolt at the golem's chest and fired, slowly leaning back and letting the blackness engulf his vision. Though it pained him to speak, he slowly pushed the red button on his communicator and quietly said, "Goodbye, Mortimer," and coughed hoarsely for a moment before he let go of the button. Slowly, the intense pain died away, and the blackness replaced sight.

T'rath's face lost all expression as he left the world of the living and entered the painless realm of oblivion. The warlock, who had come back to watch the wizard die, laughed madly as he saw the wizard's eyes mist over and then teleported back to his castle to resume devising siege plans.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE SIEGE BEGINS

Mathias, who had assumed command of the squads, sighed as he received Mortimer's message but quickly overcame his sadness, and returned to commanding the wizards aligned atop the battlements. "Fire at will! Bring those renegades down from the sky!" he shouted to the wizards, watching as they launched fireballs into the air.

Suddenly, a section of the wall collapsed as fireballs and battering rams pounded at it relentlessly. The men on the collapsed section of the wall leapt for their lives, but many did not make it and fell to the courtyard to meet the mercy of those below. One of the unfortunate wizards, Zoldram, slashed through the chest of an ogre with a powerful current of wind and turned around to impale the heart of a goblin trying to hurl chunks of earth at the backs of those atop the battlements.

Zoldram parried a blow from another goblin and buried a bolt of fire into its chest, executing a backhand thrust with his free hand, which caught a goblin in the neck. Smashing down on the dying creature with his foot, Zoldram retrieved his force blade and drew a force dagger from his belt, launching it upwards. The dagger lodged itself in the neck of a low-flying dragon attempting to burn a group of wizards with its flaming breath.

A goblin launched an arrow into Zoldram's chest, but he didn't care, for he would keep the goblins from coming up the stairs to the battlements for as long as fate would allow. The other wizards who had fallen with him and survived the attacks on them by the goblins ran up the stairs, but Zoldram stayed and danced through the ranks of monsters, slashing them swiftly and lethally, bringing many down with just one well-aimed thrust.

Zoldram felt a pair of daggers bury themselves in his back but fought on, ignoring the orders from those above to return to the walls. An axe slashed at him, but he teleported away before it could hit him. Ducking as another axe crashed toward him, he thrust upward, piercing the heart of a goblin as it attempted to bury a cleaver in his chest. A magical explosion hit the area around this brave wizard, knocking him and many of the other wizards down.

One fell forward from the battlements, landing brutally in the fields outside the walled city. Zoldram saw the wizard fall;

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and he killed the last goblin in the courtyard with a swift thrust and ran toward the fallen wizard, who was being attacked by many of the enemy streaming into the city over the ruins of the collapsed wall. “Stupid wizard, stop trying to be a hero,” Harken exclaimed as he watched Zoldram leap over the collapsed wall and head toward the fallen wizard.

With a raging scream, Zoldram launched himself at the creatures surrounding the wizard but was knocked far away as a dragon’s paw rammed into him. “Neeal! Hold on,” Zoldram shouted, unaware of the other’s treachery, as he attempted to shake off the group of goblins that were furiously attacking him. Realizing that he wouldn’t reach Neeal in time, Zoldram launched a dagger into the dragon’s eye and ran toward it, stabbing any who got in his way with spare daggers, his blade already stuck into the body of a dead goblin.

The dragon smirked and slammed his foot on Neeal’s body, killing him. The rider leapt off his dragon and bent to pick up the wizard’s body but was interceded by Zoldram, who kicked him savagely in the groin, which caused the man to straighten up, and plunged a dagger into his chest and one into his back. Zoldram hoisted the dying man onto the dragon’s back and slammed a dagger into its belly, which made the creature rear and lash out at Zoldram.

The blow caught the wizard in the chest and knocked him to the ground. As he struggled to stand, the dragon picked up Neeal’s body and carried it away, receiving another dagger in

its stomach for its troubles. Zoldram headed back to defend the stairs leading to the battlements, but upon seeing that the stairs were destroyed, he turned back around to fight the goblins.

Fireballs cascaded toward Zoldram, but soon the riders left him and returned to bombarding the wizards, leaving the cannon fodder to deal with the dying wizard. Zoldram coughed out blood as another arrow found its way into his body and chunks of earth rammed into him, summoned by the goblins.

Suddenly, Zoldram felt a blade pierce his lung; and as he struggled for air, another blade passed by his weak parry and found his heart. Zoldram unleashed a final spell before he fell to the ground, entering the realm of oblivion, an unreadable expression on his face as he passed away.

Mathias cursed and leapt to his side as a fireball plummeted toward him, summoning one of his own and hitting the rider who had conjured the fireball. All around him, fireballs created holes in the ground, buildings, and sometimes wizards, as they sought to kill the seemingly endless numbers of dragon riders.

His men were extremely tired and weak, and most of them were ready to faint. One or two of them were horribly wounded, and many had been taken to The Dome for healing. "And only a few hours have passed," he sighed as he fired another fireball into the air, bringing yet another rider down from the skies.

Suddenly, a dragon crashed into a section of the wall, collapsing it. More goblins and trolls streamed toward the city

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and headed for The Dome, which was only being guarded by two wizards. Several wizards finished off the dragon and its rider, and Mathias ordered some of his men to drop back to The Dome. The rest stayed under the command of Harken. The remaining men grinned humorless smiles and bravely waited for the next assault. When it came, all of them wished it hadn't.



“Mortimer, how nice of you to join me in my study,” Mobius said as Mortimer opened his eyes. “I was hoping to torture you a bit more before I locked you away, but I’m afraid that I don’t have the time.”

“Why did Neel go to you?”

“He actually listened to my side of the story and found your treatment of me harsh, brutal, and uncivilized.”

“You mind controlled him, didn’t you?”

Mobius didn’t answer the question, and said instead, “Take a look inside my spell book, Mortimer, and tell me what you see.”

Mortimer decided to oblige him and looked into the spell book. “Arcanious! The uber wizards!” he exclaimed as he saw the stubborn archwizard beating against the page and the three uber wizards playing poker. Upon seeing the cards, Mobius placed a special glove on his hand and then pushed his hand into the book. He grabbed the cards and drew them out. “The fools persist in trying to enjoy captivity. I don’t know how they manage to hide all those things in their robes.”

“You know, if you really wanted to torture them, you could dangle potato chips just out their reach,” a warlock said as he dropped off a report and left the room. Mobius shook his head and reached into the book again. This time, he picked up one of the uber wizards and flung him against the edge of the page, watching as the man dropped into unconsciousness.

“You mongrel!” Mortimer shouted.

“Ready to join them?” Mobius asked. Magic sparked in his hands as he prepared the spell. Mortimer attempted to defend himself but found he couldn’t. Cursing, he waited for the magic to engulf him.

The magic sparks stopped, and in their place sparks of laughter were born. “You really are a fool, Morty, I mean you really are. Come, let us have a fair magic fight,” Mobius said, magic flying in his hands.

Mortimer grinned and stood watching Mobius. Suddenly he flung out his arms and said the last line of the spell he was enacting. He cursed as nothing happened and Mobius laughed. “Did you really think I’d have a fair fight with you?” Mobius burst into more laughter.

“And you really are insane,” Mortimer said as he kned Mobius in the groin. The warlock responded by sending Mortimer on a crash course with the wall, grinning as Mortimer slumped to the floor half conscious. “Tell me, Mortimer, did you think before you agreed to their exile of me? Did you really? Or did you just let them overtake your mind and make

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your decisions for you? Any halfway sane person who knew and spoke the truth would agree that *you* are the evil here, not me. I am merely having my revenge.”

“Nothing good comes from revenge.”

“Hmm, so far I’ve had the satisfaction of imprisoning those who exiled me, and I’ve found someone with the *mark*.”

“The mark?” Mortimer asked weakly.

“You will learn soon enough, Morty,” Mobius said as he prepared once more to send Mortimer into the spell book. “This is your last chance to try something desperate or stupid,” the warlock teased as he began the spell. Feebly, Mortimer raised a shoe in one hand and attempted to throw it at the warlock. “Ha! Such a pathetic last stand,” Mobius commented to himself as Mortimer disappeared into the spell book.

“Idiot!” Mobius called out. He heard the footsteps of someone running up the stairs and sat in his chair, waiting. As the other entered, he looked up and said, “Bring the goblin leaders to me, Idiot.”

“Yes, master,” Idiot mumbled as he quickly left the room. Moments later, he returned, but this time he was accompanied by two of the most foul-faced creatures Mobius had ever seen. “Mass your armies and prepare for a final assault. And afterwards, we can feast to the destruction of a long-hated enemy!”

The goblin leaders quickly left the room, followed by Idiot. Slowly, he counted to one hundred and conjured a paper bag.

Then he made sure he could hear no footprints before he closed the spell book, opened the paper bag, and cursed at the wretched ugliness of the goblins.



Arianna slowly opened her weary eyes and tried to recall what had happened. Then the memories came flooding back to her and she scowled. Wondering where Mortimer was, she slowly crawled out of bed and slipped onto the floor. She walked slowly toward the door, not wishing to wake anyone.

She silently opened the door and slipped through it into the next room. A familiar face greeted her as she looked around the room. “Neeal, what are you doing here in The Dome? Shouldn’t you be out fighting?” Neeal didn’t answer and Arianna shrugged and continued through the room. Suddenly, Arianna felt pain and she staggered to the wall. When she finally pulled the knife from her back, Neeal lunged at her and grabbed it, prying it from Arianna’s fingers.

Neeal raised his arm for a thrust, but Arianna was quicker, and she rolled between his legs and buried a fiery star in his back. He cackled and plunged the knife into her shoulder, kicking her to the floor after he pulled his knife from her shoulder. She cried out in pain and sent a small orb of fire at his face. It exploded, burning his face, but he only shrugged and leapt toward Arianna, knife in hand.

There was a flash of gold, and suddenly Neeal fell to the floor. Neeal’s body rose once more and there was another flash

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of gold. Arianna covered her eyes. “Open your eyes, Arianna. That was not the Neeal we all knew and trusted. If you ever fight an undead that’s not a skeleton, finish it with fire so it will not become animated again,” Mathias told her. Arianna thanked him and was about to ask him where Mortimer was when she heard a faint voice in her mind.

Arianna, can you hear me? You must retrieve the spell book. Hurry, Arianna, before all is lost. Arianna stood there for a moment longer before nodding and teleporting herself to the room she had fought the trolls in.

She tensed as she arrived in the room, half expecting to be attacked. She immediately began looking for spots where motion sensor bombs or cannons could be hidden; and after she searched the room with her eyes, she stepped out into the main room. *The warlock’s study is up the stairs and to the left. Beware of the traps on the stairway.* Arianna nodded and pulled out her three-pronged probe and began to levitate. Slowly, she moved toward the first motion-sensor device. She gently inserted the prong and pulled the device from its position on the staircase and then quickly destroyed it.

She did this to each of the devices concealed on the wall and staircase; and a few minutes after she destroyed the first one, she reached the top of the stairs. A group of renegade wizards ran toward her when she took a step in the direction of the warlock’s room, launching magic at her, but she nimbly ducked and dodged the missiles and returned the fire, killing one of the

renegades and wounding another with thunderbolts and fiery stars.

She dove to her side as a barrage of arrow-shaped fire darts buried themselves in the area she had formerly occupied. She then launched a similar spell at the rogue wizards. They laughed and transformed into shadows, lunging at her with their sharp claws.

Using her dexterity to twist around the shadows at rapid speeds, Arianna dodged the first two blows and then struck out with her foot, hitting a shadow on its neck. It screamed and lashed out at her, but the blow was intercepted by the body of a shadow Arianna had pushed into the path of the blow with her magic. The shadow shrieked as its comrade sucked the negative energy from it and added it to its own, returning it to full health.

Arianna sent two gusts of wind into the two nearest shadows, knocking them backward down the stairs. As they plummeted downward, Arianna sent flaming chunks of rock rolling after them and then turned to face the rest of the shadows. A shadow slashed at her and drew crimson blood, making Arianna wonder why. When the shadows at Skyhall had struck, the wizards had turned pale instead of bleeding. *It is because the shadows repeatedly hit them. Each time they struck a living creature, they sucked a little of the living creature's energy, which replenished their own.*

With her magic, Arianna lashed out against the shadows,

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but sometimes she would have to fight them hand-to-hand while she drew lost energy; and then she would use some of the tricks she had used when police caught up to her while she was fleeing a crime scene. Arianna smiled as she remembered fleeing from them, and then struck out angrily with a powerful burst of magic.

The shadows backed off momentarily and then lunged at her again. As each shot toward her in the air, she hit it in the head with large chunks of earth, knocking it backward. It would rise again, saliva dripping from its mouth as it held its claws in a dangerous fighting stance and ran at her. The wizard scoffed and created ball lightning, which she placed on her finger tip.

A dangerous smile showed on Arianna's face as she attempted one of the spells she found in the gnomish spell book Mortimer had given her. As the shadows grew closer, her smile grew, and when she finished the spell, she launched it with deadly accuracy at the leading shadow.

The shadow shrieked as the lightning coursed through its body. As the other shadows drew closer, the lightning in the lead shadow streamed outwards and caught the others, and soon each of the shadows was being shocked by the deadly lightning that Arianna had conjured.

Arianna kept drawing energy from around her and fed it to her spell, keeping the electricity striking the shadows. They died a moment later, and Arianna, who was thoroughly exhausted, sighed and dropped to the floor. When she regained her energy,

she slowly stood up and headed for the warlock's room.

When she opened the door, a feeling of intense evil hit her. Slowly, she searched for traps on the doorway and doormat and quickly stepped inside. She closed the door when she was inside the room. After she had shut the ancient oak door, she began to search for traps in the room. Finding none, she calmed herself and began to search for the spell book, hoping she could find it and then make Mobius' death slow, to avenge those who had lost their lives in the battle.

Arianna pulled open a drawer and peered inside. Beginning to curse, she searched through the room once more. *It is gone, I am sorry, Mortimer.*

It is in this room. Arianna suddenly noticed Mobius' communicator, which he got from Mortimer. Picking it up, she threw it to the floor and stepped on it. Suddenly, her foot struck something different and she slowly lifted it up.

There, amidst the wreckage of the communicator, was the spell book, which Mobius had shrunken to fit inside the device. *So, he hid it in the communicator. Clever. All right, Arianna, I am trapped in the spell book; turn the book to the third page. Read the spell, and gather air in one hand.*

Arianna did so and Mortimer appeared next to her, grinning madly. Mortimer hurriedly opened the book to a different page and gestured to Arianna to repeat the spell. Soon afterward Arcanious appeared and then the uber wizards appeared as well. Immediately after Mortimer told them of the siege, they

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teleported away to resume command and protect the citizens of Skyhall.

“Come,” said Mortimer to Arianna, “We have a warlock to kill.” She nodded and followed him to the portal, which he deactivated with the key he found inside the spell book.

He handed the key to Arianna, who destroyed it and prepared a teleportation spell. Mortimer waited for Arianna to finish, for he was still drained of his powers even though he was out of the book. Arianna nodded as she finished the spell and within moments they appeared in Skyhall.



Ranth ran as dragons plummeted toward the battlements and collapsed the wall, giving themselves a way in and reducing the area upon which the wizards could safely stand. The dragonriders could easily have bashed through the door, but the wizards would have been sixty feet up in the air safely and could have slaughtered them.

Instead of ramming down the walls, the riders crashed their sturdy dragons into the battlements, giving their troops a way in and eliminating the safe zone the wizards were standing in. Soon, the wizards were forced to jump off the wall, but they took their vengeance on the dragons as they struggled to rise after the crash. Soon the last dragon was dead; however, the wizards were sure more would come.

Back at The Dome, the wizards and healers stationed there erected a massive barrier around the building, but the wizards

knew they would have to destroy the barrier soon because most of their energy was spent.

The wizards in The Dome released part of the barrier at the top of the building, giving their comrades a way in. The incoming mages blasted a hole in the roof and dropped down; and after the last one was in, the missing areas of the barrier were replaced. After everyone had caught his or her breath and all were quiet, Arcanious, who had arrived with the newcomers began his speech.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN: LAST STAND

“Citizens of Skyhall, in a moment this barrier will drop, but one around you will be erected. The rest of us will battle the goblins until Mortimer and Arianna return with the spell book, and then the gnomes can be sent out with their machines. Please make as small an area as possible, so we can have as many wizards as possible in the battle. Ready, wizards? Now, drop the barrier! Charge!” Arcanious grabbed his staff and led the charge, blasting the front ranks, which were all goblin warriors, knocking goblins to the ground with his long ebony staff.

Ranth and Meilan were beside the ancient wizard, guarding him from the attacks he did not see and killing those in his path with magic as well as swordplay. Suddenly, the two were swept away from the raging archmage as a mass of bodies placed themselves between the wizards and their master.

Meilan summoned an earthquake, which knocked many of the goblins to the ground, and then hit them with acid, which rained from the sky. Ranth impaled a goblin's heart, pulling the blade free and striking a second goblin in the face with a stream of intense fire, keeping the creature from harming Meilan, who was quickly defeating the right flank of the group of goblins who sought to separate them from Arcanious.

All around them, wizards blasted magic at their enemies, hitting them with staves or blades while they drew the energy they needed for their next magical attack. Soon the mountain trolls swept in, wielding massive clubs, and the battle intensified. The mountain trolls were not like the ones Arianna had faced. They were tougher and larger than their cousins as well as more savage. Ranth rolled to his side as a troll swung at him with his tree-sized club, barely avoiding it.

With a loud yell, Ranth drove his blade into the creature's arm and held onto it as the creature lifted it up. Ranth swung himself onto the creature's arm and drew a dagger, which he launched at the troll's eye while he sprinted toward the back of the creature's head.

Meilan distracted the troll while Ranth climbed to the top of its head and reached his hands down to pull the dagger from its eye. Ranth was shocked that the creature still lived but pulled the dagger from its eye despite his disbelief and began to ram it into its skull. When the dagger finally stood still, Ranth jumped on the blade and strove to push it into the troll's head, but it

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wouldn't go.

The troll shrieked and slammed his head with his fists, forcing Ranth to roll down the thing's neck and levitate himself to the ground. From the ground, Ranth hit the troll with all the magic he knew, trying to bring it down. Meilan furiously attacked the goblins swarming her, killing many with powerful blasts of potent magic.

Suddenly, Arcanious appeared and plunged his staff into the ground, and he began a chant. The troll toppled over, and Arcanious disappeared, leaving Ranth and Meilan to fight the goblins heading toward them. The wizards fought furiously, each spell they cast sapping their strength and wearing them down. Still they fought on, hoping the fighting would end soon.

High in the sky, Mobius watched the battle unfold, snickering each time a wizard was wounded and scowling every time one of his troops fell. He decided he would not join the battle unless the Skyhall wizards started winning so that he would not have to waste his much-needed energy. Mobius laughed as he thought of what he planned to do after the battle was over and he was the victor.

The wizards inside The Dome cringed as their barrier held strong against a massive barrage of stones and magic. The next volley hit, and the wizards felt the barrier begin to weaken. The goblins and trolls cheered and launched another barrage, destroying the shield. The citizens of Skyhall huddled closer to the wall as the wizards left behind grimly-gripped weapons and

prepared to battle until their last breath came.

Mortimer and Arianna appeared then, much to the wizards' relief. The goblins' cheers died as they recognized Mortimer. The wizard tossed the spell book to the gnomes and began to cast a spell to rid the area of the goblins and the trolls. Arianna had removed the spell on the book, allowing the gnomes to touch the book, and they happily ripped out pages and fed them to their strange contraptions. Arianna smiled and, along with the other wizards, began to help Mortimer rid the area of the goblins.

The gnomes finished their preparations shortly after the last of the goblins and trolls fell, and they proudly marched out behind Mortimer. Mortimer said, "We will use regular spells first to destroy his troops; his spells we will save for the most powerful."

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. I will see you gentlemen again when this is all over. Perhaps then we can celebrate," Mortimer replied, forming a spell as he walked toward the main battle. Arianna followed him into the fray, sending a goblin into oblivion with a gust of wind.

Mortimer unleashed his spell and the armor of the goblins slowly began to melt. Sweat was dripping down Mortimer's face as he sustained his spell, trusting Arianna to defend him. Arianna defended him well, cutting down ranks of goblins with magical explosions and barrages and destroying enemy spells

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heading toward Mortimer and dodging the ones cast at her.

When Mortimer was finished, the two quickly obliterated the ranks of goblins before them, heading toward Arcanious' location. The gnomes grimaced as they started their cannons, and the wizards left as their protectors grimaced as well, though they didn't know why.

The gnomes began firing their cannons, watching as the robotic contraption inside the cannon spoke the spell. Shortly after the cannon was done speaking, the spell fired, which was much larger than it would have been if a wizard had cast it.

The spell struck a troll and felled him, making him prey for the weary wizards, who were wishing for the fighting to end. Mobius fumed and aimed a thunderbolt at one of the machines, but he was distracted by Meilan, who hit him with a thunderbolt before he could finish the spell.

Though the spell struck him, it did not harm him, much to Meilan's dismay. Quickly she ran over to Arcanious and killed the goblin about to stick a knife in the archwizard's back. Meilan sighed and released a wave of energy, which killed a group of goblins aiming bows at the ancient wizard.

"You cannot protect him forever, girl!"

Meilan's response was clearly heard by Mobius as she defiantly said, "Yes I can! You will fall to us, and we shall remain strong!"

"Foolish girl, you cannot stand up against *my* power! It is impossible!"

“Oh yeah?” Meilan asked, watching as a spell flung from one of the cannons slammed into Mobius, who screamed as he crashed to the ground. Both Meilan and Arianna were next to him in an instant. Meilan was blown away, but she managed to hit him in the head with a thunderbolt before she landed in the midst of a rank of goblins.

Arianna attempted to hit him with another spell, one from his book, but the warlock stopped her. “You don’t have to kill me, Arianna. We can rule together.”

“I don’t accept your pathetic offer, you renegade.”

“I didn’t hesitate to kill people before, and I will not hesitate to kill you. I will give you no second chance,” snarled Mobius as he launched a spell at Arianna. Arianna sighed and threw hers, waiting for Mobius’ spell to hit her. The pain did not come.

“Meilan!” Arianna yelled as she saw her friend run in front of the spell.

“Don’t waste time; I’ll be fine, but so will Mobius,” was Meilan’s faint response as she attempted to stand. Arianna nodded and prepared another of Mobius’ spells. The warlock coughed out blood and watched as Arianna’s friend did the same. “One of you will die today, Arianna. Which will it be?”

“You,” Arianna said calmly before she hurled the spell at Mobius. The warlock made no attempt to block the spell. Instead, he sat there with a smile on his face. “Ahh, I feel peace. I am happy now that I can enter oblivion.” Anger flared in Arianna, and Mobius grinned defiantly. “Yes, I see the men who

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died trying to win this battle, and Neeal, oh I see him screaming as I brought him back from the dead and told him I was going to use him to kill you. I remember leaving T'rath for dead in the forests where he fought the golems," Mobius exclaimed, a faraway expression on his face.

"Arianna, do not let your emotions control you. He feeds on your hatred of him. Control the anger, suppress the hatred, and Mobius will die. If you don't, we shall all die," Meilan said as she killed another group of goblins advancing toward them with a series of magical barrages.

Arianna nodded and turned to face Mobius, sadness replacing rage and hatred. "Your friend is right, Arianna. Do you hate me? Are you angry because of what I have done?"

"No, I am not."

"It's too late for denial, Arianna. I have already used your hatred and anger. You and your friend will die!" Mobius burst into a fit of laughter as his body fell to the ground. A head appeared in Mobius' chest, and was shortly followed by a body.

The creature that emerged from Mobius was covered in green slime and its skin was a vile midnight black. Its arms were scaly and its face was pale with white eyes surrounded by a circle of black. Meilan screamed as a goblin spear landed in her side, but she killed the goblin and its band with a wave of fire.

Before she collapsed, she cast a golden globe at Mobius, causing the creature to shriek insanely. Around them, the battle

reached its climax, but the struggle between Mobius and Arianna had just started. Arianna remembered a spell from Mobius' spell book and began to cast it, leaping out of the way as the creature lunged at her and tried to suck the life out of her with its massive teeth.

Arianna screamed as the energy streamed out of her hand and hit Mobius. Mortimer and Arcanious attempted to assist her, but they were repelled by some sort of field. Mobius screamed as the divine energy hit him and he seemed to weaken. One of its claws slashed at Arianna, cutting her side.

She screamed and attempted to cast a final spell to end Mobius' existence, but the creature would not stop attacking her. Meilan slowly stood up and pulled the spear from her side, wincing slightly. "Meilan! No, don't!" Arianna yelled as Meilan hit Mobius with a divine globe, a spell she had learned from a gnomish spell book. Mobius cackled and slashed at her, wounding her other side. Meilan laughed a bitter laugh and hit him in the chest with a globe of divine light.

Mobius was suddenly outlined in red and pieces of his body began to fall off. He took to the skies, unfolding black wings, but Meilan and Arianna hit him with globes of burning light and he exploded. Weakly, Arianna staggered toward Meilan and collapsed next to her friend, hoping the battle would soon be over.

The battle was ending, with most of the goblins fleeing, leaving the wizards to deal with the trolls and the remaining

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goblins. But the prospect of being done with the battle replenished much of wizards' lost energy. By dawn, the last of the goblins had fled, and the healers worked furiously to save the lives of Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth, who had received many wounds defending Arcanious from wraiths.

Soon, those with only light injuries began to repair the wall and battlements, which required much hard labor. Many of the wizards recovered from their wounds quickly, and only one later died, though in the war they had lost well over three score. Arianna and her two friends hovered near death's door for a long time, not fully recovering until a few days after the construction of the walls and battlements were finished many weeks later.

When the wall and battlements were finished, and Arianna and her companions recovered, Arcanious held a meeting in the town square, and all of the citizens of Skyhall, even those at Mythardiom, came to honor the fallen and the heroes of the war.

After Arcanious finished reading the list of the deceased and had honored them properly, and after the eyes of the families with lost members had dried, he moved on to honor the heroes. The first person he honored was Mathias, the golden armored warrior who would replace Neel as Mortimer's second.

"Mathias cut through the ranks of enemy like a hot knife through butter, and it is because of him that many of us are still alive. He defended Arianna from Neel's animated corpse, not

letting personal feelings get in the way of duty; he defended me from a pair of mountain troll kings; and he defended all of us from an invasion.”

Many applauded, and though Mathias had no living parents, many of the citizens had warm smiles on their faces when they saw him being honored. “The next honorary hero of this war is Ranth. He and his companion Meilan kept following me during the battle to ensure my safety without being ordered to do so, and this man bravely fought a pair of wraiths to save me until they had almost killed him.”

There was also much applause for Ranth, and he attempted to smile but did not succeed. Arcanious went on to honor Mortimer, Meilan, the fallen warrior T’rath, and then Arianna; and each of the heroes received much applause from the citizens of the recently besieged city.

After the ceremony, Arianna met with her friends and they all sat near the colorful village square and relaxed, watching the others celebrate with gusto the end of the war. Mortimer joined them a moment later, saying he needed a break from the noisy and energy-sapping activities in the square.

The three comrades laughed and returned to watching the citizens celebrate. The next morning, Arianna returned to her station, ready for a new day. Her companions had decided to return to work as well, and Mathias greeted them when they came. “You need to take it easy for a while. Okay? I have given you areas where there are usually no shadows or goblins. When

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I think you are better, I will give you better assignments. Have a good day,” Mathias said absently as he checked their names off and left, for he had no other assignments to give out until the next shift.

Arianna bade her friends goodbye, and headed out toward her destination, happy that she would not have to fight on this day. For many days, Arianna received normal assignments and was tremendously relieved though there was always a faint sense of longing for adventure in her heart; however, she was always able to push it aside.

A few weeks after the end of the war, when most of the repairs were finished, Mortimer came to tell her that Arcanious requested her presence at Mythardiom. Not understanding, she followed him silently, wondering why all of the former students were lined outside the door to the ceremony chamber.

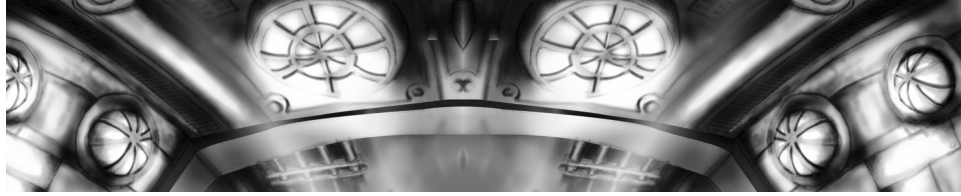
When Ranth and Meilan showed up and took their places in the line, realization dawned. Mortimer walked into the chamber, leaving Arianna to take her place in the line. The doors opened, and merry music flowed from it. Arianna smiled and walked in with the rest of those who should have graduated in the previous ceremony.

This time around, she was not as excited or as anxious, which allowed her to enjoy the moment better. Arcanious and the uber wizards stood at the center of the room, wearing expressionless faces. The last of the graduates sat down a

moment later, and Arcanious began his speech.

Starting with Squad Gamma, he called out the names of the graduates eligible to join the squad as permanent members if they wanted to. He moved on to Beta, and then Alpha. Arcanious paused for a moment before turning the page. “In recognition of their exemplary efforts, Ranth, Meilan and Arianna are hereby granted permission to join any squad of their choice. We recommend Squad Zero,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. The three friends agreed and turned to Mortimer.

Mortimer was grinning broadly as he started to say “Welcome to Squad Zero!” However, the words never left his lips, for the massive double doors of the ceremony chamber were flung open, and a barrel-chested gnome burst in shouting “Welevision, it’s back. It’s everywhere—and I had nothing to do with it.”



PEOPLES, PLACES AND THINGS IN THE WIZARDING WORLD

- Alpha, Squad** The Squad of Wizards ranked just below Squad Zero. They are commanded by Captain Oldstar though T'rath from Squad Zero leads them during the shadow camp invasion.
- Air** One of the four basic elements of magic. Air is the hardest to master because it is difficult to tell if the spell-caster has put enough energy into the spell. If there is not enough power, the spell fails.
- Arcanious** The archwizard of Skyhall, the oldest and most powerful wizard in Skyhall, where he is almost like a king to the citizens. He commands the Senior Wizards, a group of retired field wizards who take care of the problems the citizens have, and is also the Field Marshal of all of the squads.
- Archwizard** The supreme leader of the wizards of Skyhall.



Arianna Kelt A girl of unknown parentage. She is a member of Squad Zero and a former thief. Arianna's last name is from her foster parents. (See illustration.)

Atlantis The city under the ocean floor where some of the Dragonmen live.

Beta, Squad A team of semi-professional wizards who handle special operations on another, more peaceful, world than Earth. They are ranked third.

Brittle The dimension belonging to the destruction-loving gremlins, who bear many burdens upon their small slender shoulders, including being great nuisances as well as machine breakers.

Brozax One of the uber wizards on the Tri-Wizard Council.

Darkhall The city of the warlocks. It lies in Subterranea, the dimension of the warlocks.

Dementia The dark dimension of the shadow men, demons, and other deranged and annoying creatures.

Demons Dark creatures that are pure evil. Many races of demons dwell in the dark lands of Dementia.

Digorence A lazy but ingenious gnome whose inventions earn him awards but whose work habits earn him stern rebukes and threats.

Dior A member of Squad Zero.

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Dome, the An enchanted place immune to magical attacks.



Dragons A race of wise and long-lived creatures. Dragons can be ferocious and loyal allies or fearsome and deadly foes. (See illustration.)

Dragonmen, the A crossbreed race of dragons and humans that resides in Skyhall and Atlantis. Physically, they look like their human counterparts, but intellectually they take after their ancient dragon ancestors.

Earth One of the four basic elements of magic. The main problem with mastering this element is that it is difficult to cast a spell of earth since earth is living and can distract apprentices at crucial moments when they need to concentrate.

Fire One of the four basic elements of magic. Fire is the easiest of the elements to control initially. It is the easiest to summon and create, but it hungers for power and will sometimes lead

apprentices to put too much power in their spells.

Force Blade

A magical sword that is able to store magical energy fed to it by a wizard.

Gamma, Squad

A squad of wizards ranked fourth. Gamma is the weakest rank in the Squad Rankings.

Gargoyles

Demonic creatures made of stone that are frequently used as sentries by dark forces.



Gnomes

A race of highly creative and technologically advanced peoples. (See illustration.)

Gnomes, Law

A secret force of gnomes who engage in stealth missions and maintain surveillance of warlock activity on Earth. Law gnomes are stationed in every major city.

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Gnomer The dimension in which gnomes live. One of the most well-hidden dimensions. Only accessible by portal.



Goblins Human-sized monsters who are commonly used as cannon fodder throughout the galaxy. (See illustration.)

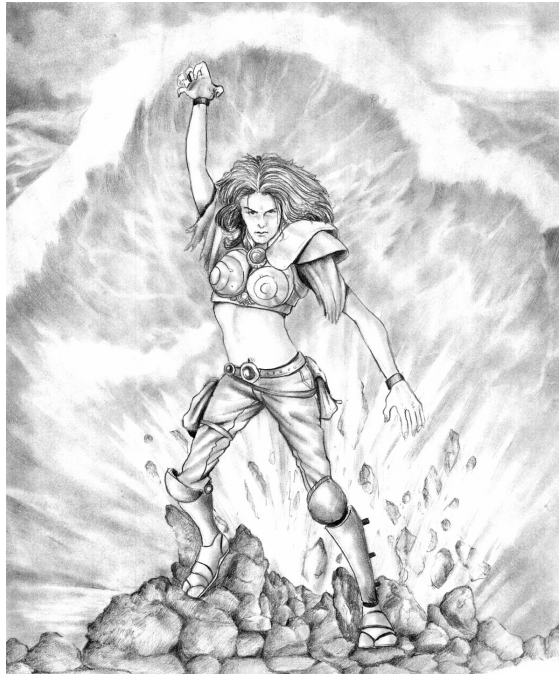
Golems Man-made creatures brought to life with magic.

Gremlins Creatures who love to destroy machines and live in the dimension Brittle. Gremlins are minute in size, about two-and-a-half feet tall. They have grey skin though their ears are strangely blue.

Harken A warrior/wizard who is part of Squad Zero.

Healers, the Men and women born with the ability to heal. They do not require training in using magic, for their gift is an innate ability, but candidates are trained how to cleanse bacteria and stop infections, bleeding, flow of poison, and more at Skyhall. In Skyhall, those with the healing gift train through apprenticeship.

- Imps** Fiendish creatures summoned by warlocks to fight.
- Judge Krudy** The judge who presides over trials involving rare exceptions.
- Junksmith** A gremlin Mortimer meets in Brittle.
- Kalyphius** One of the uber wizards on the Tri-Wizard Council.
- Mathias** One of the ace wizards of Squad Zero though he uses his force blade more often than his will.
- Magical Elements** The four basic energies of magic are fire, water, earth, and air. Water negates fire, fire negates earth, air negates water, and earth negates air.



- Meilan** Arianna's best friend and a member of Squad Zero. (See illustration.)
- Moby** A slacker; someone who'd rather play than work.

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Mobius

A mysterious warlock who is up to no good.



Mortimer

A powerful wizard who is the leader of Squad Zero. (See illustration.)

Munch

A gnomish spy who meets Arianna on Earth.

Mythardiom

The magic academy in which the senior wizards train apprentices. Mythardiom lies in the dimension Xjoz, as does Skyhall.

Neel

Mortimer's right-hand man.

Ocean of Sorrows

A vast ocean near the outskirts of Skyhall's borders.

Olmar

Former Captain of Squad Gamma.

Petker

A wizard from Squad Zero.

Portal

A machine or device that allows instantaneous dimensional and planetary travel.

Pox

A master healer who lives in Skyhall.



- Ranth** One of Arianna's friends. He is a member of Squad Zero. (See illustration.)
- Senior Wizards** A group of retired field wizards who take care of the problems of Skyhall's citizens.
- Sentium** One of the uber wizards on the Tri-Wizard Council.
- Shadow Men** Corporeal demons who dwell in Dementia and are employed by the warlocks to fight.
- Skyhall** The castle and fields claimed by the wizards when they discovered the empty dimension that would become Xjoz. The areas not claimed by the wizards and the citizens who are not wizards are for the wild animals and plants.
- Starr, Captain** Starr was recently given the title of captain, replacing Captain Olmar after the battle with the goblins.
- Subterranea** The dimension the warlocks live in.

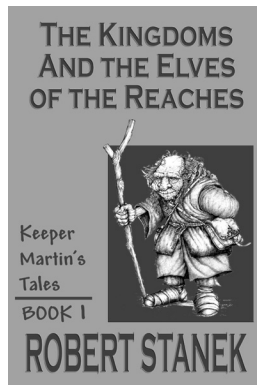
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T'rath	A member of Squad Zero and the Acting Commander of Squad Alpha.
Tri-Wizard Council	An independent council that sets the rules of conduct and oversees the activities of the wizards of Skyhall.
Trolls, Forest	The weaker and more easily defeated cousins of the almost invincible Mountain Trolls.
Trolls, Mountain	A breed of massive and tough trolls who are employed by the warlocks.
Trolls, Stone	A sturdy and vicious breed of trolls who are highly regarded as guardians and are able to stand rigidly for extended periods of time.
Warlocks	Evil wizards that summon demons and cast spells. The summoning of demons corrupts their hearts, so they can only know evil.
Water	One of the four basic elements of magic. Water requires great mental stamina from apprentices, for most spells connected with the element of water take long to cast.
Winker	A gnomish spy who works with Munch.
Wizard, Uber	A top-level wizard.
Wraiths	Spectral warlocks whose mastery over magic enables him or her to escape death and enter the land undead.
Xjoz	The dimension the wizards live in.
Zero, Squad	Mortimer's elite squad of wizards.
Zoldram	A wizard from Squad Zero who is a strong believer in destiny.

The adventure continues with...
Arianna Kelt and the Renegades of Time
Wizards of Skyhall #2

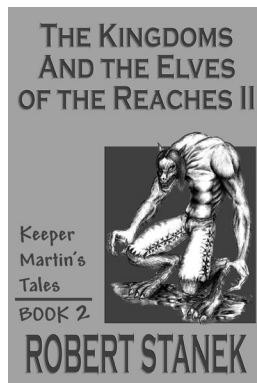


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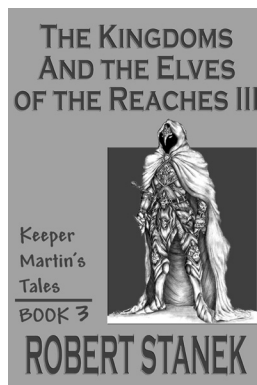
The Kingdoms & the Elves of the Reaches

Inside you'll discover the breathtaking world of Ruin Mist where the mystical and the magical abound, and you'll fall in love with a boy who would become a mage, a princess who is just now seeing the world around her, a warrior elf who undertakes an epic journey, and their friends.



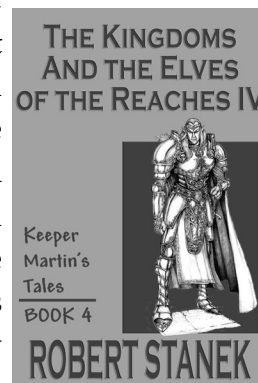
The Kingdoms & the Elves of the Reaches 2

Adrina, Emel, Vilmos, Galan and Seth must survive the greatest challenge Great Kingdom has faced in hundreds of years: the dissolution of the Kingdom Alliance and the battle to save Quashan'. Survival in a changing world depends on their ability to adapt and if they fail, their world and everything they believe in will perish.



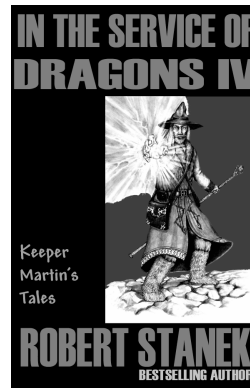
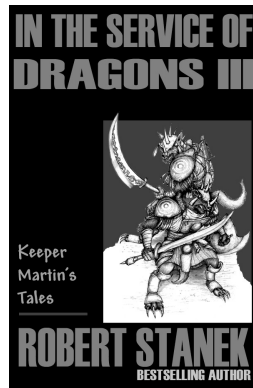
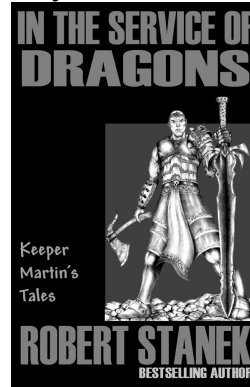
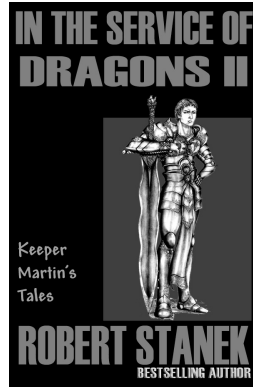
The Kingdoms & the Elves of the Reaches 3 & 4

Adrina, Emel, Vilmos, Galan and Seth face even greater challenges as their world is transformed. Vilmos, in his quest to become the first human magus in a thousand years, must control the darkness within him. Adrina must accept her place and work together with Emel to help the elves make their plea to Great Kingdom's council. What happens along the way will amaze you.

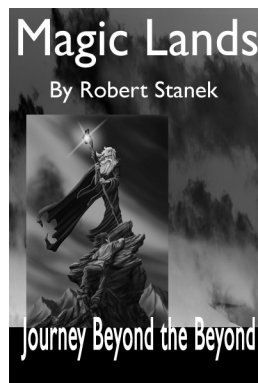


IN THE SERVICE OF DRAGONS

The continuation of the story of Ruin Mist...



MAGIC LANDS



Following the village elder's advice, Ray leaves his home village, setting out for the place lost and deep where he will find a companion for his journey to the stone land and where he will discover that there is no easy path from childhood to manhood. "Beware lashing tail and gnashing teeth," the village elder warns him, "and if Old Bull doesn't get you, Mother Slither surely will."