

Arianna Kelt and the Renegades of Time



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AND THE RENEGADES OF TIME



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Teen Author

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Arianna Kelt

AND THE RENEGADES OF TIME
(Wizards of Skyhall Book Two)

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RP BOOKS WASHINGTON

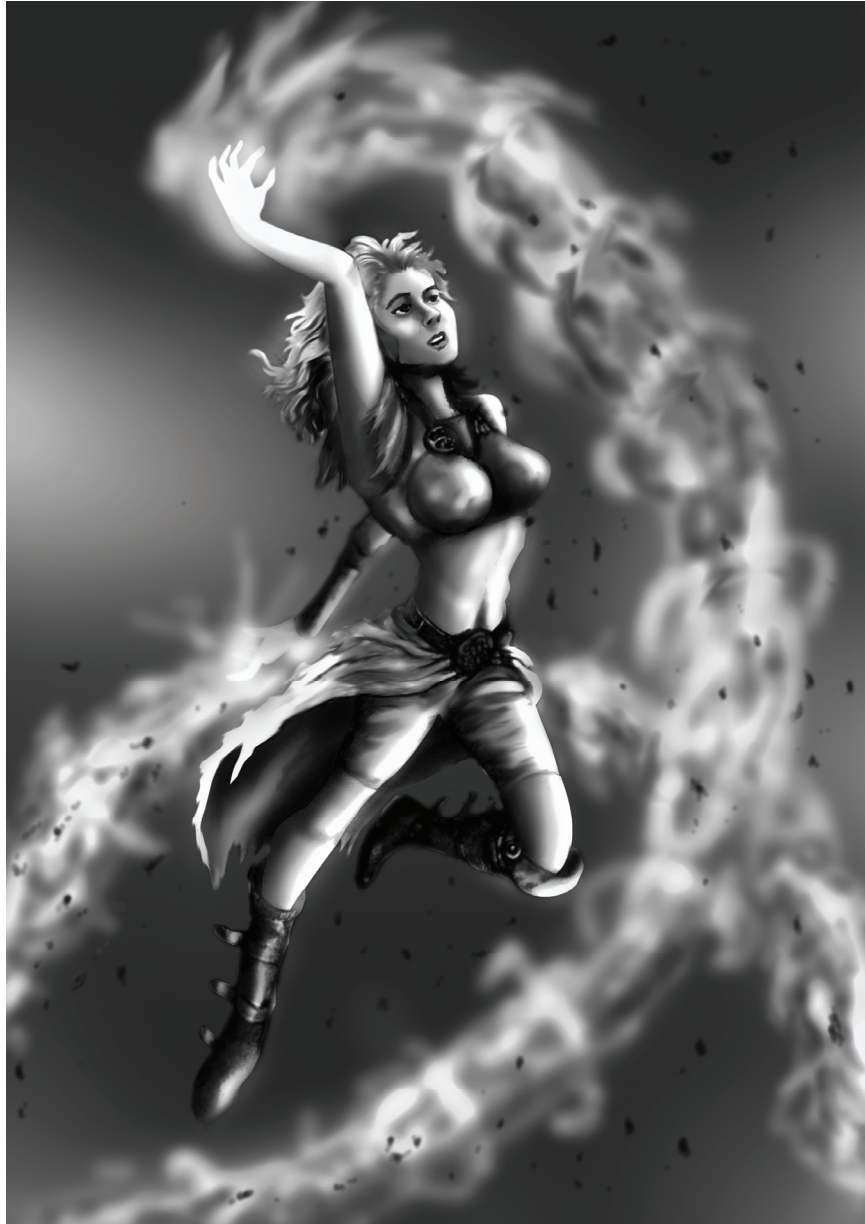
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THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES



ENTER IF YOU DARE

ARIANNA



MEILAN



RANTH



MORTIMER





CHAPTER ONE: MISDIRECTION

Arianna, ex-thief-turned-wizard, sat silently in her room as she and Meilan tried in vain to curb their excitement. Following their saving of Skyhall, their lives had taken an almost-boring turn, and they welcomed this sense of excitement.

Today, they would be starting their first day of intermediate wizard training. As they waited for word from Arcanious, they reflected on fond memories of basic training.

They halfheartedly discussed what they thought or hoped would be taught as they lay on their beds and waited. Eventually their talking stopped, and both sat in silence.

Arianna recalled how her past training had gone by in a blur and hoped that it would go quickly this time also and that it would lead to a new but far less-dangerous adventure.

Eventually she stopped thinking about Mythardiom and let her thoughts shift momentarily. She began to regret where her

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memories were taking her; but, having nothing better to do, she went along with them.

She thought about the orphanage. She thought about how she remembered every moment spent there in perfect detail, yet she couldn't remember how she ended up there.

Her thoughts shifted and she wondered why she had been such a talented thief when she had no training or background (as far as she knew) in thieving. Had there been some mystic force helping her?

She shook the thought out of her head and began to float toward the present in her memories. She also wondered why she had been able to see the wizard in the first place when they were supposed to be cloaked and invisible to humans.

"Let's bring in the desk-all and change this room around to pass the time," Meilan said, pulling Arianna from her thoughts.

"Okay," Arianna said, glad for something to help the time go faster.

They ventured out of their room to search for the desk-all. It took them quite a long time to find it in a small closet marked "Do not open—unpleasant personality enclosed." Arianna found it funny that the note had been signed by Digorence, the ingenious but lazy gnome who was possibly the most unpleasant being in the known universe.

The girls carried the device back to their room. Arianna was about to poke it when its eyes snapped open; it did a little dance on its four legs, and then said, "What do you want?"

“We need you to give us some stuff to decorate our room.”

“You’re right,” the desk-all sneered as it looked at the bare grey room. “This room’s about as bland as your personality.”

Arianna looked shocked but recovered and glared at the device. It gleefully glared back. “Hurry up and get on with it. I’m just dying to go back to the closet where the air is full of that foul gnome’s stench,” the desk-all said, its voice dripping with sarcasm.

The girls discussed for a moment what they wanted and turned back to address the desk-all.

“We want blue paint,” Arianna said after a moment.

The device nearly went into shock. Its eyes rolled around in circles and it nearly fell over. When it finally said something, it did so in a much higher, yet still unbelievably sardonic tone of voice: “First of all, there’s the shade of blue to be concerned with. Then, of course, there’s the type of paint and . . . the . . . amount! And would you like it in a bucket or painted on the walls?” It nearly screamed as it was finishing up what it had to say. “I have a sign!” it raged.

They looked at the desk-all’s sign, which presumably had something cheerful written on it to warn the users to be specific. What the sign said, written sloppily in Digorence’s handwriting, was, “Unbelievably neurotic about specificity. Has almost the same reaction as if you took a television away from a human child. Best to avoid using, in any circumstance.”

The little humanoid-shaped device quivered as it tried to

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calm itself. “Now tell me what you want so I can get on with my dreary existence.”

“Sky-blue wall paint and lots of it,” Arianna said. The desk-all lifted its head to turn and stare at Arianna. As it seemed about to ask her to be specific about lots or possibly to dump buckets of paint on top of her, Arianna conjured a small ball of magic in her hand and idly began to play with it as she returned the desk-all’s stare. The desk-all must have realized its future wouldn’t be very bright if it continued aggravating Arianna and it coughed up the paint. The coughing part was quite literal; the desk-all seemed to be clearing the paint from its throat as one would a ball of phlegm. Then the paint came out of the desk-all in an enormous eruption, sending Arianna and Meilan ducking for cover.

Seeing the girls cringing on the floor, the desk-all laughed openly as it began applying the paint to the walls, sighing as it heard Arianna say, “Hmm, maybe the floor could do with a nice carpet? What do you think, Meilan?”

“Of course,” came the reply. For an hour or so afterward, it was Arianna and Meilan’s turn to torment the desk-all, taunting it relentlessly. Eventually it became tired of asking for specifics and just gave them what they asked for.

Arianna and Meilan gave the room multiple complete makeovers, having the time of their lives while doing so. The desk-all became exhausted from having to keep producing all of the items and taking them back. Eventually, it dove desperately

under Arianna's bed where it remained, refusing to come out.

The girls became tired as well and began to relax. A few moments passed and then they heard a soft rapping at the door. Their hearts raced as they wondered if it were word from Arcanious.

Almost at the same time, the girls looked around the room and realized its disastrous state. The walls were painted with multicolored stripes, the ceiling with pink and yellow polka dots. The carpeting was four-inch-thick shag and neon pink. The girls' beds had furry comforters. In place of their work desks stood a seesaw, and behind the seesaw was a trampoline. Both had seemed a good idea at the time.

The knocking at the door resumed, still soft but more insistent.

"Desk-all, make the room like it was. Please," hissed Arianna, as she peered under her bed into the desk-all's hiding place. Meilan joined Arianna on the floor next to the bed and added her plea.

The desk-all opened its eyes. As it inched forward, Arianna saw for the first time the pale light behind its eyes. "Remember," it said, "you asked for it to be like it was." Then suddenly, Arianna and Meilan were staring at brown walls, brown carpeting, and matching oak desks and dressers. Golden-hued comforters, pillows, and bed skirts were putting themselves neatly into place on the four-post beds. The room was exactly as Mortimer had made it upon Arianna's arrival at

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Skyhall.

The knock at the door this time was loud and impatient. When Arianna and Meilan said, “Enter,” in unison, Ranth opened the door and looked in.

A relieved sigh that passed between the girls caused Ranth to laugh; then he said, “You must have been working hard in here. Well, I just came to tell you to remember to attend dinner in the dining hall. It’s mandatory now, remember?” The two girls bit back laughter of their own and just nodded in reply.

As soon as Ranth left and closed the door behind him, the girls dragged the desk-all out from under the bed. They were about to do something awful to the device when its pained and pleading expression caught them by surprise, for this was such a human expression of emotion.

“Desk-all, we need first-day supplies,” Arianna said in a loud clear voice, her best impersonation of Mortimer. For a moment the desk-all seemed to be smiling up at Arianna and Meilan, then it spat out several leather-bound notebooks, pens, and ink.

The two girls shared a look between them and knew what they must do next. Arianna made a new sign for the desk-all’s closet that read, “Desk-all enclosed. Please leave this door open.” Meilan also made a new sign for the device to carry. This sign read, “Please be as specific as possible with your requests. The desk-all can only help you if you are clear about what you want. Thank you.”



CHAPTER TWO: DARKNESS

After Arianna and Meilan returned the desk-all to its closet and apologized for their misdeeds, they met up with Ranth on his way to the dining hall. As always, the grand splendor of the hall astounded the three as they walked in silently. Directly above them hung a massive chandelier whose thousand-and-one lights were magnified to dazzling brilliance by two score as many crystals. Around them in every direction were delicate yet beautiful plants and sculptures.

To one side of the room sat the novices. Arianna remembered when she was training to earn her status as a novice wizard and smiled briefly before heading to where the squad wizards were to sit.

By the time the three arrived, Arcanious was seated at the main table in the center of the room. To his left sat professors

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and visiting wizards as well as the senior wizards. The three were headed to his right.

Arianna and her friends took their seats with the rest of Squad Zero just as Digorence poked his head into the room and wheeled in his mechanical orchestra. Making as much noise as possible just because he could, he positioned the orchestra in the back of the room and then with a swing of his arm ordered the machines to play.

At first, the music was a sweet soaring melody that was like ambrosia for the ears. Arianna mused that if Digorence wrote such a beautiful song it must have been for or about food, but her musings didn't last long. Suddenly a machine's violin bow decapitated the viola next to it, which crashed into a cello. The three fallen machines short-circuited, and a small electrical surge created by a smirking student caused the machines to be reprogrammed. The result caused everyone to clutch at their ears in agony.

With an arrogant huff, Digorence banged angrily on the machines and wheeled them out of the room. Before he left, he couldn't resist one last halfhearted retort: "I just hope that you know that my machines can play at least ten times better than any of you can."

He slammed the door behind him and stomped angrily off. Eventually everyone settled down and a low buzz of conversation arose among the novice and intermediate tables, but the others were waiting for Arcanious to speak. As the

younger wizards talked amongst themselves and the older ones stared expectantly at Arcanious, Mortimer slipped unnoticed into his seat just as Arcanious started to speak.

The Arch Wizard stood up and looked around the room. “Welcome, everyone, to our dining hall this day. We are proud to announce that we will soon start our intermediate courses at Mythardiom,” he intoned with a faint trace of a smile on his lips.

Many of the older wizards smiled fondly, apparently at their memories of younger days and their own training; and then everyone proceeded to get on with dinner.

Vast portions of food placed purposefully on large round or oval dinner platters floated lazily in from the kitchens as if caught in rolling waves of air, landing neatly in strategic locations on the tables and carrying with them mouth-watering aromas. Some of the platters had covers and those covers now floated away, returning to the kitchens in much the same way as they had arrived.

The assembled wizards ate heartily, thoroughly enjoying themselves. The talk at the tables was mostly idle chit-chat, and a few continued in their disparagement of Digorence. Arianna tried to keep her mind off her excitement and her tongue from voicing words in Digorence’s defense, both of which were proving to be more difficult by the second.

Her partiality for the testy gnome won over her excitement, and she was about to give the pair across from her a tongue

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lashing they would never forget when Ranth, sensing what Arianna was about to do, dropped his knife noisily on his mostly empty plate. Arianna's "Hmmpph!" in rebuke, caused Meilan to burst into laughter; after that, the course of the conversation changed.

Eventually, Arianna and Meilan retired to their rooms, tired and somewhat disappointed. They drifted off to sleep with ease, unaware of heavy footsteps just outside their room.

Suddenly, Arianna jerked awake and found herself bound, blindfolded, gagged, and shivering in the brisk night air.

"Do not try anything heroic," a metallic voice intoned in a monotone.

As Arianna was dumped unceremoniously on the ground, she resisted the urge to reply sarcastically and started walking as the mechanical monster indicated she should. After what seemed more than an hour of walking, she suspected she was being led in circles and that she was being bombarded with a working of magic that was causing a massive amount of dizziness. As she stumbled to the ground she heard a faint voice ordering a stop. She frowned as she heard running water and tried to guess where she was but couldn't.

Suddenly there was a burst of static and a loud screaming that was replaced with the sound of water once again. Arianna found despair and it found her.

The sound of her captors moving ceased and Arianna decided to try to quietly conjure some magic. The last of her

bravado faded when she found no source of magic to tap into. She nearly broke down and started to cry, but she heard a soft gasp followed by a whimper close by. She crawled along the ground, groping in the darkness, and eventually found the soft, cool hand of another reaching out to her. She swept her bound hands up along the arm and felt long hair and the soft edge of a nightgown. She felt certain the other was Meilan.

The gag prevented her from speaking; at any rate, she was afraid to voice the other's name. The thought that this was Meilan comforted her, and the thought that it might not be Meilan sent her thoughts reeling. No, she told herself; best to think that it was Meilan with her in the darkness than to think otherwise.

"Get up," the metallic voice boomed. Arianna struggled to her feet and began to walk, her feet striking something hard like stone almost immediately. She started to move more rapidly and was unable to slow herself down. She was saved from a painful tumble down the steep path by a large, cold hand.

Her captor ordered her to slow down and she was able to make it to flat ground without mishap.

They walked for what seemed like hours, the machine guiding her relentlessly through what she was certain was a series of underground passageways. Once they were underground, the sounds of scuffling feet and shifting bodies made her certain that her captors and those they had taken were many. How many, she could not tell or guess with any

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certainty.

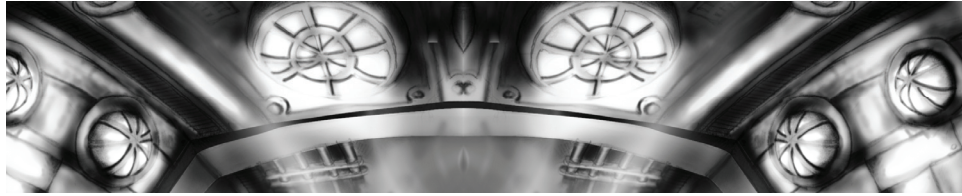
When it seemed that exhaustion had found her every reserve of energy and will, the metallic voice told her to halt. As many long minutes passed slowly in the darkness, she heard the sound of others being brought closer. Eventually her bindings, gag, and blindfold were removed and she found herself among a large group of people.

Looking around in the dim light, she recognized first one and then another, but none of those she saw was Meilan. She tried to make her way through the throng, who were standing around in silence. She, like those around her, wondered where she was and why they were all here. Are we being held for ransom, Arianna wondered, as she searched for the one face amongst many familiar faces that would reel in her soaring anxiety.

Dim light gave way in an instant to the brilliant, brighter-than-white light that only a wizard or a warlock could create. The faces around her distorted, and then it seemed as if she stood in the midst of an enormous throng of stone trolls, for the white reflected off those around her and made her blind to the world.

Panic found her. She reached out for magic, found no wellspring of power, only absence like a vast darkness. Her panic turned to utter terror as she became completely unnerved. She could no longer hold back her tears or her trembles and collapsed to the ground in great fits and sobs. When those

around her did the same, almost to the instant, Arianna realized that they were all under the heavy influence of some unseen magic.



CHAPTER THREE: INDUCTION

Suddenly Arianna saw Mortimer and decided to follow him. Quietly she edged closer to where she thought she saw him break through the crowd. “Well, you told me to make sure they got to the ceremony!” The voice wasn’t Mortimer’s.

“So you made and programmed golems so you wouldn’t have to do any work,” Mortimer replied.

“What? Did you think that I would kidnap all those novice wizards by myself?” Arianna let out a soft gasp as she heard this.

“Amazing,” Mortimer replied dryly. “Are you ready to start the ceremony?”

“Well, we could always wait until the moon falls from the sky,” Digorence replied and went off. Arianna sighed in relief and tried to go to find Meilan but she was interrupted by

Mortimer.

“Welcome, intermediate trainees. Please calm yourselves. Things got a little out of hand, but there is no reason to be afraid right now. This is simply our induction ceremony to welcome you to our fine intermediate training. Now, please, if you would all form a line, we will begin.”

The glaring lights overhead and the strong magic spell generated by the golems made this difficult. Arianna could see that Mortimer was agitated and seemingly distracted as he looked around for the mulish gnome. When the line was finally formed, Mortimer told the intermediates to follow him, and he led them through the passageways, taking them through many twists and turns.

The room he led them into was large and octagonal. Arianna and the other students took seats around the edge of the room, watching expectantly as Mortimer strode to a covered pedestal in the center of the room.

Slowly, he pulled the cloth off the pedestal, revealing an orb burning with inner fire. Arianna could have sworn that it turned to regard her and stared at her. Then it blazed merrily as Mortimer began to speak.

“Our wizard oath consists of three simple words, but our duty as wizards is anything but simple. The words are secret, safe, and secure. Keep wizarding a secret from those who should never know; in order to secure ourselves a bright future, keep the dimensions safe from those who would bend it to their

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will. As a wizard, you must only use your powers for good and agree to do whatever you can, even if it should cost you your lives, to defend the dimensions against the forces of evil. If any of you cannot agree with this, leave now.

“There will be no shame. Leave, or the orb will see through you and destroy you.” He paused as a figure left the room crying.

Mortimer saluted the figure and then turned to the remaining wizards.

He gestured for one of the students to come and place her hand on the orb. “Say the words,” he said gently to the nervous student.

The student did so and then walked into the next room as Mortimer indicated she should. The orb flared for a moment and then resumed its original state.

One by one the students placed their hands on the orb and said the three words. It seemed that nothing eventful would happen and everything would go fine until a small sweat-drenched boy stood up to the orb.

Mortimer looked the boy in the eye and was about to warn him when the youth pressed his hand on the orb and said the words as fast as his mouth would allow him to.

Mortimer cringed and pulled the cloth over the boy so the others wouldn’t have to see what happened.

But the screams said it all as the boy’s body was ripped apart one atom at a time at a speed faster than light. Mortimer pulled

the cloth away as the last of the boy's body disintegrated and the orb returned to normal.

Slowly Mortimer lifted his eyes from the floor and looked at the terrified students. He pointed to a random student. The student shook his head and refused to come forward. "Not me, not me," the boy whispered. "Pick someone else."

Arianna got to her feet and walked toward the orb. As she placed her hand on the orb, Mortimer recognized her and commended her by saying, "Arianna sets a fine example. A wizard must never be afraid of the unknown." And Arianna truly was not afraid when she placed her hands on the orb and started to say the words. The orb seemed to accept her pledge, sending her off to the next room.

Soon the rest of the students had taken their pledges and had entered the next room.

Mortimer pointed at one of the many pods lying around the room. "Step into a pod quickly now. We're going to take a little trip."

Arianna hesitantly did so, wondering why they didn't just use a portal. She nearly screamed as the top closed on her and a gas started to spray. Before she could do so, however, she found herself standing at the edge of a small town. Behind her a woods was dark and foreboding, but in front of her the town seemed inviting.

As she passed by a bakery, the chef smiled and waved to her, pointing to an array of steaming pastries. Arianna started to

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wave back but caught sight of her most hated enemy in his outstretched hands and angrily stamped away. The chef scratched his head in puzzlement and ate the doughnut in his hand as he returned to work.

Arianna eventually walked from one end of the town to the other and then found herself again staring at the woods that encircled the town. Lurking in the shadows, a demon sat and stared at her, daring her to make a move.

Grinning, Arianna summoned a fireball and was about to unleash it on her foe when a voice reached her ears.

“Playing heroes, eh, missy?” the voice asked.

Quickly, Arianna extinguished her magic and turned around. “Yes sir,” she said.

“A little old, aren’t you?” the old man asked with an odd look in his eye.

Arianna cursed silently to herself and put on a smiling face.

“You know . . . I’ve always wondered . . . Suppose . . . Suppose magic really existed?” he asked with a large friendly smile and a glint in his eyes.

Arianna knew something was wrong. The smile was too friendly, almost hungry. She knew she had to answer carefully.

“That’s silly!” she exclaimed as innocently as she could manage.

The friendly smile turned into a mouth of rage and the old man’s eyes seemed to blaze in anger.

“I know it exists!” he shouted and pulled out a large gun

from his coat. "I saw that there fireball, lassy. You will be my proof that magic exists!" he said as he fired the gun.

Arianna poured all her strength into her legs and ran for her life. There was a loud bang from the gun, which propelled a dart into a tree trunk. Sighting the demon, Arianna quickly destroyed it and kept running. Eventually the sound of pursuit stopped, and she found herself standing in front of the pod, hunched over, panting, and out of breath.

With a quick glance behind her, she stepped into the pod. There was a flash, a moment of disorientation. The pod seemed to be moving very fast, and then it stopped suddenly as if it had crashed into a wall. When the pod opened, she groggily stepped out, almost tripping over Mortimer as she did so.

"Mortimer, did that really happen or was that just a virtual training exercise?"

Mortimer ignored her question and continued to wait for the rest of the students to return. He then led the students back to the room containing the orb, where Digorence and the golems were waiting.

"Form a circle around the orb, please," Mortimer said in a clear, loud voice. "If I touch you on the shoulder, you have failed and must follow Digorence to the surface.

"Those of you whom I have deemed worthy of continuing beyond the initial apprenticeship as wizards shall stay here. Those who have regrettably failed may either wait to retry another day or accept a role as a level-one wizard. There is no

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shame in failure. There are plenty of prospects for level-one wizards, and plenty of need in Mythardiom and beyond for your skills.”

Mortimer walked slowly around the circle. He made one complete loop before he began tapping shoulders.

Arianna didn't think she had anything to worry about, so she was hopeful and in suspense about what would happen next. Still, she closed her eyes and took in a breath as Mortimer walked beside her. When she opened her eyes and saw Ranth and Meilan standing at the front of the line quickly forming by Digorence, she couldn't help the incredulous expression that crept across her features and her hopeful thoughts faded. When Mortimer turned back to her and tapped her on the shoulder, she was absolutely crestfallen.

She didn't move to join the others until Mortimer spoke her name, saying “Arianna, please step out of the circle and join the others in line next to Digorence.”

A younger, less mature Arianna—the girl Arianna had been when she had first come to Skyhall—would have stomped her feet as she made her way across the room and then stood sulking, moping, and bitter. The older, more experienced Arianna—the girl Arianna had become after facing trolls, golems, and worse—lifted her head, raised her eyes, and walked across the room. As she took her place in line behind Ranth and Meilan, she was sure she would remember the gnome's smug smile for the rest of her days.



CHAPTER FOUR: SECRET SOCIETY

Ranth was separated from the others and taken away into the night. His captors, two men in long black robes and a gremlin who had reprogrammed the golems and ordered Ranth to move, stood just close enough so that Ranth could discern what they were saying.

He could see the shape of the other wizards around him and tried to call out to Arianna and Meilan. "Arianna, Meilan, are you two all right?" He was shoved into silence by the now malevolent golem watching his every move.

"These golems could prove useful. We should take them with us to Subterranea," said one of the warlocks.

"Indeed. But the gremlins could easily reprogram them to take over Subterranea. I say we leave them here," the other replied, earning a snigger from the gremlin walking next to him.

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“Well, I say we take them.”

“Why don’t we leave them here and ask the masters what they think?”

“Agreed,” the other replied reluctantly.

The warlocks, golems, and the gremlin moved him into the forest, silently raging every time he tripped. Within a few more minutes they were in a vast clearing.

As the warlocks began to cast the teleportation spell that would transport everyone to Subterranea, Ranth heard a soft murmur of voices. He wondered whether these were more captors, or if he had somehow managed to get away. When he felt hands around his head, panic followed. He tried to struggle free but stopped when the gag was removed. Then his hands and legs were untied and he suddenly was uncertain what was happening.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded of his captors boldly.

“We had to do this, you see. This is a secret academy for only the most promising students at Skyhall. We have to take precautions to make sure that not everyone can find this place.”

Ranth looked at the speaker skeptically and laughed. “Right. This is the secret academy everyone’s whispering about.”

When he said this, the warlocks breathed a sigh of relief. “The one in happy ponies and rainbow land,” he concluded lamely, too tired to think of something better to say.

“Well, not exactly happy ponies . . .” one started to say

before the other viciously kicked him.

“Come, now, if you don’t believe us, you can walk around and see for yourself,” the smarter of the two said.

“And what happens when I choose not to stay?” he asked skeptically.

“Why, you go back, of course,” the warlock replied.

“Right,” Ranth replied sarcastically as he left to look around.

He decided that the first thing he was going to do was find Arianna and Meilan. He was certain they had been with him before but now he couldn’t find them.

The supposed academy looked very much like a castle that was surrounded by a field of bright green grass. He looked through the windows and saw what seemed to be legitimate classes.

Of course, however, they could always be just illusions, he reasoned in his mind. He noticed some other students wandering around and went to question them. “Is this actually an academy for wizards?” he asked.

“Indeed! It’s very advanced training. You are very fortunate to be here,” the student said, as if he were reading from a script. Ranth, however, with his mind racing, didn’t notice.

“And why should I believe you?” Ranth asked.

“Because it is the truth, whether you believe it or not.”

“What I believe is that you’re a bloody fool,” Ranth said as the student walked away. The young man’s words did, however, begin to slightly diminish his doubt. Even so, he

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elected to gather some more information and went in search of another student to question.

“You, there,” he shouted to a student dashing away from the school, “why are you running?”

“This school is too advanced for me. I must leave right away before I shame myself further.”

Ranth looked hard at him. “Or you are running because this school is a sham?”

“Well, it’s actually quite a nice school. It’s just way too hard for the likes of me.” Ranth once again failed to notice how robotically the student was talking.

“So what happened to only the most promising trainees?” Ranth said to no one in particular. The student then dashed off without saying another word, and Ranth headed off to continue his search for Arianna and Meilan, confused even more than he was before.

After spending a long time in his search, Ranth sat down next to a tree and tried to relax. He didn’t, however, close his eyes or become too comfortable, for he was still suspicious of his surroundings and made sure he was still alert. An hour passed as he tried to reason out what was happening to him, and then suddenly he caught sight of a strangely familiar face.

With a gasp he rushed over to the figure. “M-M-Mortimer?” he stammered in disbelief.

“Yes?” Mortimer replied with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Is this really a school for the most talented wizards?”

“Indeed it is. I studied here myself.”

“Didn’t you study at Mythardiom?”

“Mythardiom?”

“Um, never mind,” Ranth said and walked off to find his captors. As he walked, he heard snatches of conversation from the students around him.

“They sure weren’t kidding when they said it was going to be difficult.”

“Today’s lesson wasn’t difficult; it was impossible!”

“I’m too exhausted to think.”

“No more fireballs and lightning bolts for me.”

By this time, Ranth was completely convinced of the school’s legitimacy, convinced mostly by the presence of Mortimer. He talked to himself while he walked, making it all the easier for his captors hiding in the treetops to discern his final decision.

“So he has finally decided to stay.”

“Excellent! Our masters will be pleased.”

“He looks strong and determined.”

“He will be a perfect donor,” the second of the two men said with a cackle.

They slipped out of the tree unnoticed and went around the back of the school. While Ranth was busy talking to himself, the two quickly repositioned themselves in their original location.

Ranth walked back to where he had first arrived. He found the two men with their faces buried in large tomes. “Well,” one

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of them said, “Have you finally decided what you are going to do?”

“Of course he has,” the other interjected before Ranth could speak. “He has decided that he would like to study here.”

“Yes, I have,” Ranth replied, startled by the second man’s prediction.

“Well, good. My companion here will take you to your room.” One of the two stood up. “Your abilities as a wizard will be greatly enhanced here at our fine academy.”

Ranth nodded as he followed the other to a hall of residence within the academy. Soon afterward his guide pointed out his room and led him into it.

Alone at last, Ranth locked the door and then moved the dresser in front of it. Sitting with his back against the dresser, he still was not satisfied that he was safe, so he conjured an iron bar and propped it against the door as well. Afterward, he moved his bed into the middle of the room so that if someone were to break through the wall he would have time to retaliate. It took him a long while to fall asleep. When he finally did sleep, it did not last long, and he was plagued with bad dreams.

He was shaken awake by a rat-faced man in a robe. “Come, now, it is time to begin the lessons!”

The strange man began to drag Ranth out the door. Ranth muttered something about getting dressed when his eyes popped open and he shook himself out of his grogginess. “W-What? How did you get in here?”

“It wasn’t hard,” the man replied cryptically.

Ranth decided that there was no way that he was getting a straight answer and so decided to ask something he thought he could get a straight answer from. “How many different classrooms do I go to in a day?”

“One, just one. Now, come, or we will be late.”

Ranth nodded and followed the man out the door and into the hallway. As they walked down the stairs, Ranth noted that although there were torches merrily blazing along the wall he could not feel their heat. He began to suspect that if he plunged his hands into the flame, he wouldn’t feel anything.

And then there were the walls. When he was far away, Ranth could have sworn they were black until he got close enough to see them clearly and they turned grey. He turned around and swore he could see a sort of glimmer over the walls.

“Don’t look that way, young sir. It is awfully easy to get lost in here.” The man then gave him a look that suggested that there were severe punishments for getting lost in this place. As they reached a large wooden door, his guide said, “This is the door to your classroom.”

“May I go in?” Ranth asked.

When the man didn’t answer Ranth placed his hand on the door and began to open it.

His guide let out a loud shriek. “You cannot enter the classroom without the teacher in there! Who knows what you could be up to in there without supervision?”

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“But what about the other students in there?”

The guide’s face turned ghostly pale. He fell to the ground on his back and Ranth promptly knelt down to help him up.

Unnoticed by Ranth, there was a flash of white light in the room as a wizard appeared and then the door opened, prompting a large stampede of students to run hurriedly through the door.

Ranth struggled to enter the door while being carried forward by the stampede and quickly took the first available seat he could find, not wanting to get on the teacher’s bad side.

“Welcome, class, to our most advance courses. You may call me Mr. . . .,” Ranth saw his eyes scan the room after he paused. “Mr. Vase,” he concluded unconvincingly.

“Ha! Mr. Vase! Is your first name Flower, or Petunia, by any chance?” Ranth muttered to himself. This earned him a stern glance from the so-called Mr. Vase.

“To begin this class, I must first test your strength. To do this, each student must come up and cast a spell into my orb. The orb will then tell me how powerful a spell caster you are.”

He pointed to the first student to come up and take the test. When it came Ranth’s turn, he quickly scanned the class for signs of Arianna and Meilan. After he failed to find them, he calmly created the strongest spell he could and unleashed it, frowning as there was barely a single spark of energy and he nearly fell to the ground as it seemed his energy was drained away. Pale-faced and staggering, he returned to his desk.

Surprisingly, none of the students seemed to notice or care about his condition. After the next student took the test, Ranth watched closely and discovered that the other had not experienced the same symptoms as he had. Perhaps this really is an academy for only the most promising trainees and I am not strong enough to be here, he mused to himself as he resolved to strengthen his spell-casting abilities.

The day seemed to stretch on forever as Ranth became wearier and wearier. It took the last reserves of his strength to drag himself after his guide as the man showed him the way back to his room. Another odd thing he noticed was that only some of the students had guides like his. The others seemed to just roam aimlessly. Once he reached his room, he fell into his bed exhausted. While he should have fallen asleep quickly, he couldn't.

Something was bothering him. They were supposed to be studying to become stronger magicians but all they were doing was casting spell after spell. Was this some sort of endurance-building exercise or something?

Plagued with doubts, Ranth finally did sleep. The next day's lessons weren't any easier. After he had finished eating his tasteless lunch, he decided to scout around the academy grounds and slipped out of the cafeteria. He didn't make it very far. While wondering why only some of the students seemed to eat, he bumped into a dead end and when he turned around to go the other way, the hall to the cafeteria was in front of him

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and he found himself walking back into the cafeteria.

Undaunted, he continued through the cafeteria and out the opposite door. But a few minutes later, he found himself back in the hall that led to the cafeteria. In fact, no matter which way he went, his path always led him back to the cafeteria.

Lunch ended, and he returned to class and his studies. At the end of the day, he was drained of all his strength once again and unsure of how long he could keep up this rigorous pace. He staggered back to his room and collapsed onto his bed. He awoke sometime in the middle of the night and slipped silently out of his room and down the stairs.

Carefully, he crept down the hallway and came to a place where he could faintly hear a conversation.

“Soon we will be able to power the gem and time will be ours again!” one said excitedly.

“Shhh, someone could hear you,” another reprimanded.

“Who’s gonna hear me when all the students are too tired to do anything but go to sleep and the illusions are in place.”

“The illusions aren’t in place right now.”

“Oh, right,” the first one said after a pause.

Ranth cursed himself for not paying attention to his surroundings when he heard footsteps and a person clearing his throat.

“What are you doing with your ear to the wall?” the other asked with his head cocked to one side.

Ranth recognized the other as one of the students. He

considered lying but couldn't think of a suitable excuse. "Our masters are planning something. They're using us to create a power gem."

"Really? Here, look into my hand; I have something that can help us see what they're doing."

"Thanks," Ranth said. But as he looked into the other's palm, a white light blinded his vision, and a heavy fist slammed him into a wall. He cursed himself for falling for something so foolish and tried to retaliate, but he was momentarily blinded. His assailant didn't hesitate. He fired two glowing orbs, sending Ranth crashing through the wall.

Groaning, Ranth created an explosive spray of fire, desperately trying to keep his foe away.

As Ranth ran off, one of the warlocks watching over the gem said, "Too bad our magic won't power the gem."

"Keep taunting the boy; he should give us the last magical essence we need."

The master warlock in the hallway who had been posing as a student morphed into his actual form and released a blast of energy so powerful the speaker staggered backward and fell to his knees. The warlock smirked as he turned to the second man, cowering now like a child. "Don't forget that I'm the boss around here and you'll live," the warlock said as he ran after Ranth.

"That light should have knocked you out, boy," the warlock said as he dashed after Ranth. As he rounded the corner, he

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snarled as Ranth dropped down behind him and smashed him in the face with a fist burning with an aura of fire.

The warlock threw back the hood of his cloak, revealing a masked face, as he nimbly protected himself. He swirled his body around and kicked Ranth brutally in the legs as he launched himself into the air and landed neatly on the ground.

“That’s some advanced magic you have there. Try this!” the warlock said as his foot became enveloped in darkness.

Ranth rolled backwards and sprang to his feet, but the other simply teleported behind him and kicked him in the chest. Then when the other grabbed him, he suddenly found himself dropping into his classroom, where he noticed that the sun had risen and class was in session.

His warlock assailant followed him into the room; and with a gesture, the hole in the ceiling was repaired and the doors and windows unlocked. “Here’s your first lesson, wizards: you’re all fools!” The warlock snarled as he blew a hole in the floor and all the students fell into magical cages.

The warlock laughed as Ranth attempted one last burst of magic, which gave the gem in his pocket the last of the magic it needed.

Dark magic flared in the warlock’s hand once more as he brought a huge disc of darkness into his hands and sent it spiraling through Ranth, who screamed in agony as he tried to resist falling into one of the magical cages.

“Give up, boy!” the warlock said, readying another disc.

Ranth's eyes flared as he created one last spell that would have killed the warlock had not one of the lesser warlocks appeared at that moment to take the blow.

Overcome with a sense of defeat, Ranth stopped resisting and fell down toward the cage. The last sound he heard before darkness enveloped him was the warlock's crazed laughter.



The men gathered in the large room.

Carefully they placed the orb into the hole in the machine. "At last, my brethren, the machine is set. Before we set out on our mission, there is one important thing I must do. You know that we used the illusion of Mortimer to fool those students into believing this was an academy. Now, I'm going to add the real Mortimer to our ranks. I take my leave now, my brethren. When I return, Brother Mortimer will be amongst our ranks, and only I will know he wasn't there before."

"How will you do this?"

"This you all shall see in time. Time is the key," the masked wizard replied cryptically as he stepped into the portal.

For a moment there was nothing but darkness, and then he could see the brightly colored world.

As he walked toward Skyhall Castle, he removed his mask and tried to resist the urge to pay his brother wizard a deadly visit by recalling a time when the two were left alone to fend for themselves in Dementia. His brother wizard had been different then, not this weak fool that he had grown into.

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He alone had decided to stay in the shadowy realm to learn of the strange powers of Spider Demon people. He alone had fought his way through legions of demons. He alone had survived. He shook himself from his memories and made his way to the outer grounds of the castle, telling himself that Mortimer was vital to the plan.

Quickly, he made his way to Mortimer's chamber and tapped on the door.

Without fear, a young Mortimer opened the door and said, "What do you want?"

"Mortimer, I want to offer you a chance to come to my prestigious academy."

"And why would I want to do that?"

"Only the most powerful and promising trainees in all of the known dimensions are even considered to come to my academy."

"Your point being?"

"Think of the power you could attain! You could be more powerful than any other wizard in Skyhall!"

"What if I'm not interested in power?"

"What are you interested in then?"

"I want to help and protect the people."

"Well, then, with greater power, your ability to protect and help the people would increase vastly."

"How, then, would I be sure that this is not a scam?" Mortimer asked skeptically.

“Come with me and take a tour of my academy.”

“And if it’s not to my liking?”

“Then I will gladly bring you back here and wish you the very best luck in your future.”

“Agreed,” Mortimer said.

The wizard smiled and teleported them to the academy.

Upon their arrival, Mortimer immediately noticed the wide variety of creatures being taught at the school and the small number of students.

“Please feel free to go in and observe some of the classes.”

Mortimer nodded and wandered into some of the classes at random.

In one classroom, students were being taught to control the weather. One student was playing with a rain cloud, and another was making rock-sized hail fall from the ceiling.

In another classroom, the students were being taught about lightning. He saw ball lightning inside a jar. He saw lightning arcing between two metal rods.

These and many other wondrous sights amazed him. Deep inside he wished to be able to take these lessons, too, and so he had finally convinced himself that he wished to study here.

He went in search of his visitor. “I wish to attend this academy.”

“Excellent,” his visitor said. “I thought you would.”



With thoughts of his mission burning clear in his mind, Harken

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dashed through the streets of Atlantis, weaving in and out of crowds.

He ducked into an alleyway, flew up to the rooftops, and ran as fast as he could to the docking bay. Suddenly his feet hit a patch of loose tiles and he slipped off the roof and onto another one, which proved to be poorly made. When he was able to see again, he found himself in the middle of a dining table surrounded by an extremely angry family.

“After all the work I did to make that meal!” the wife screamed loudly.

“Young man, you need to watch where you’re going,” the father yelled. The child simply stared wide-eyed at Harken. “I am deeply sorry, madam and sir,” he said as he tried to get up.

“I worked so hard to make that, you know,” she said, not giving up. “I had to unpeel the foil, heat the oven, and wait sixty minutes. And now I have to do it all over again!”

“I expect that will be very exhausting,” Harken said dryly.

“Are you being smart with me, young man?” the wife screamed and looked around for something to beat him with.

Harken, however, was already back on the rooftops, making his way to the docking bay.

Several of his pursuers dashed into the house and knocked over the new frozen package of food the woman was holding. “And now you’ve made it so I have to pick it up!” she screamed as she beat on the warlocks with a pan. They levitated through the hole in the roof and dashed after the wizard.

His pursuers paused when they lost sight of him. As they were about to turn back, Harken came flying out of an alley with streams of lightning in his hands. Two of his pursuers fell into an alley, leaving only one behind. He lunged at Harken with a fist. Harken ducked and jabbed his attacker in the face.

As he tried to recover, Harken managed to pry his blade free and stabbed him in the foot and sent him flying off the roof into the alley. Thankful that there were no more pursuers, Harken continued toward the docking bay.

“Would you like to buy a roll?” A bread merchant asked pleasantly as Harken dropped down and entered the main town square.

“Actually, I’m kinda being pursued by forces of evil,” Harken said.

“You don’t say? You know, you don’t get much of heroes being pursued by forces of evil these days. It’s mostly innocent bread merchants like myself being pursued by forces of diet books and health consciousness. That’s modern times for you.”

Harken didn’t reply but dashed off down the square. He stopped for a moment when he realized he wasn’t being pursued. As he reached the docks, he saw a single figure garbed in a plain brown robe blocking his way. “I command you to stop,” the figure ordered. “If you do not, I will have to stop you by force.”

Harken smiled. He was more than a match for any renegade wizard. “Be my guest.”

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“Very well.”

“Show him the power of the renegades,” a black-robed figure said. Harken paused. He thought he recognized the brown-robed figure. He wanted to say the other’s name, but didn’t. It couldn’t be Mortimer. Mortimer was older, for one thing, and not a warlock for another.

The brown-robed figure began to cast a spell. Harken braced himself for the impact as he conjured a magic shield. He was thrown to the floor as the spell tore aside his defenses. “Ouch,” he said to no one in particular; then he dove to one side as the other unleashed a ribbon of fire.

Recovering, Harken launched himself into the air with his force blade drawn, knowing that his foe could easily deflect any of his magic.

The other’s reflexes were legendary. He sprang into the air, parried Harken’s slash, and countered before Harken even realized what had happened.

Harken cursed himself for his mistake and swirled around in the air, bringing his sword slashing downward. With the black-robed figure looking on, his foe speedily brought his sword in a parrying uppercut and kicked Harken heavily.

Harken was spun around, and he grimaced as his foe tossed aside the attack and easily countered. This time, though, Harken was ready and he parried the blow and flew closer to the other, bashing him heavily in the face.

“Enough swordplay!” the black-robed figure called out. He

summoned a thousand tiny balls of darkness and hurled them at Harken to keep him occupied as his partner began to charge up energy. Harken dove and slashed out again and again, barely making it to safety behind a wall.

The brown-robed figure grimaced as Harken managed to hit him with a sphere of lighting. Then purple sparks began to pulsate around him as an intense gale of wind was created as a result of the massive strength of the spell being conjured.

Harken knew there was no way to avoid such a spell without causing total devastation of Atlantis, so he created the most powerful magic shield he could and grimaced as the magic surged toward him.

When the spell was released, it seemed to Harken that everything was distorted. He grimaced as the impact of the spell hit him and fought to keep his footing. The spell broke through his shield and sent him flying backward.

As he flew backward, he fumbled in his pockets for a small vial of liquid. He popped the top open and flung it into the massive purple sphere surging angrily at him. As the antimagic water hit the sphere, it disappeared, allowing Harken to see the massive crevice where there had once been a large section of dock.

“Surrender or be blown away into nothing!” his foe yelled above the din of crashing objects.

Undaunted, Harken dashed toward the other; and, as he expected, he was blown backward by the other’s magic.

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Harken's thoughts soared as he spotted his vessel. Safety was there if he could make his way past his assailants.

He almost managed to escape, but as he opened the door to his ship, the door blasted off, whirled around, and smacked him in the face.

Before he could tumble to the ground, his foes appeared and set upon him. Harken snarled and tried to counter, but the door smacked him once again, sending him crashing into the icy-cold water beyond the docks.

His warlock foe lifted him out of the water with his magic and threw him against a wall.

Slowly, Harken slid to the ground and fell into unconsciousness.



CHAPTER FIVE: LESSONS ANEW

Arianna awoke, confused and disoriented. It seemed all the world was upside down, at least until she spun around and was no longer hanging upside down over the edge of her bed. Across the room, Meilan tossed and turned in her bed, enduring what seemed to be a frightful dream. Arianna called out to her friend, "Meilan, Meilan. You're dreaming; wake up."

Meilan opened her eyes uneasily. "Was it a dream then?" she asked.

Arianna wasn't sure she heard the question right. "What are we going to do now?" she groaned. "We came so far; we failed."

Meilan sat up. "It wasn't a dream then?"

"We were both there last night."

"The circle?"

"Passed that," Arianna muttered.

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“So Digorence really did kidnap us?”

“Focus, Meilan. I need you.”

“We failed. We really did fail. What will we do now? What do you do when you’re a level-one wizard forever?”

“I don’t know, but this doesn’t seem right. Something’s wrong. Ranth, Ranth. Let’s go find Ranth.”

The girls dressed quickly then went in search of Ranth. But Ranth wasn’t in his room. His door was oddly ajar and his bed was made neatly—not something Ranth would do normally.

When the girls returned to their room, there was a talking, singing gnome-o-gram waiting for them—at least that’s what the device said it was. Well, actually it said, “Let’s get this over with. Yes, I’m really a talking, singing gnome-o-gram. No, I’m not a law gnome.”

Arianna and Meilan started to interrupt, but the device cut them off. “Uh-uh-uh. Don’t. Don’t say it. I’m already late for a dozen other appointments and it’s all your fault. You two weren’t in your room like you were supposed to be, so you get none of the special treatment. I’m not even going to sing for you. Why I won’t even—”

The girls said in unison, “Okay, we get it. Say whatever you’re going to say already.”

The device seemed to pout—if talking, singing gnome-o-gram’s could pout, that is.

Remembering how temperamental the desk-all was, Arianna stretched out and patted what she thought must be the thing’s

head. “We’re sorry,” she said. “What message do you have for us and can you please sing it?”

The gnome-o-gram perked up and sang, “Lessons anew, wizards one and two. Don’t be late for your very important date. Be to class by nine, or the brass you’ll shine.”

“Did you say class?” the girls asked in unison. “You did, didn’t you?” Not waiting for a reply, the girls wrapped the gnome-o-gram in a big hug and hurried off toward the lecture hall and the classrooms. Once there, they were directed to the proper class by one of the wizard teachers.

As they took their seats, a wizard in a brown robe turned around to greet them. “Good morning. It’s good to see that I have such eager students as you,” he said pleasantly.

After about half an hour, the rest of the students began to enter the classroom. As soon as they were all seated, their teacher repeated his greeting.

“As you know, intermediate training will vastly improve your wizarding skills. Here you will learn to use familiars and objects to channel your energies, perform tasks for you, and boost your power. Also, I can teach you to combine powers for greater effect.”

While they sat and listened to their teacher, Arianna and Meilan continued to wonder where Ranth was. They also wondered about the previous night’s events and whether there was a lesson to be learned.

The teacher rapped on their desks with his fists. “Humility,”

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he hissed. “The lesson was humility—a wizard must know humility. The gnome-o-gram should have told you all you needed to know.” The teacher continued quickly, “This first day will simply be a review of what you have learned previously.”

Many students groaned; the day was sure to pass by slowly. Arianna and Meilan did not; they were sure that the rest of their days at intermediate training would fly by quickly.

“First, I would like all of the students to introduce themselves so that I and the rest of the class may know who you are.”

One by one, the students introduced themselves and sat down. When they were all finished, the teacher stood up to speak. “Very well, now we can start our review,” he said.

When it was finally time for lunch, the students all rushed out the door. Thankful for the interruption, Arianna and Meilan walked slowly down the path to the dining hall.

Digorence was angrily shouting in the middle of the hallway. The heavy-set gnome was screaming at the top of his lungs at a student who had bumped into one of his golems, knocking it over.

“Do you know long it took me to drag that golem all the way here from the closet over there and then stand it up?”

“Five minutes?” the student hazarded with a slight suggestion of a smirk.

This remark earned him an explosion of rage from the gnome. “Are you being smart with me? It took me two minutes

and I had to walk all the way over there. And now I'm gonna have to bend over and pick 'im up," the gnome raged.

Arianna sighed. "Digorence, you shouldn't be that angry because he knocked over one golem."

"He didn't just knock over one golem. That was the master golem that would program all the other golems, which I had the first student I saw drag and arrange in a line for me. When the master golem was knocked over all the other golems fell down, too. That's a lot of work to do just because someone couldn't use the eyes they were born with and watch where they were going!"

"Wow, Digorence, I'm surprised you're actually going to do a bit of manual labor," Arianna replied.

"Well, now that you mention it, I only have to pick up the master golem so it doesn't go haywire. I can go find some student to pick up the others for me. But then that means I'll have to walk around to find one."

"And everyone knows just how horrible exercise is," Arianna said sarcastically.

"Really? And I thought it was just me," Digorence replied, equally as sarcastically. Arianna decided to give up talking to the ornery gnome and tried to go to the cafeteria to get her lunch, but she wasn't so lucky.

Digorence grabbed her arm and said, "Well, I've found a student. Thank you for volunteering."

Arianna rolled her eyes and almost said something she knew

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she'd regret. Instead, she said, "I'd like to talk to you about last night. And I have a few questions for you about that gnome-ogram. And Ranth is missing, by the way. Do you know anything about that?"

Digorence professed his innocence, then added, "I only do what I'm told to do."

Arianna shrugged and then helped Digorence assemble the golems. No further words passed between them unless, of course, Digorence's grunts and moans counted as words. By the time Arianna got to the cafeteria, Meilan was almost done eating. Like a good friend, Meilan waited for her, however. When they returned to the classroom, their teacher asked them to take their seats.

"I suppose I should warn you all—during your intermediate training you will have a variety of teachers here." He paused for a moment to ensure that everyone was listening. "Tomorrow, you will spend the morning with me. After lunch you are to report to the room two doors down the hall. There you will meet another of your teachers."

The class spent the remainder of the day continuing their review of what they had learned the previous year at Mythardiom. When it was time for the students to leave, the teacher stood up to dismiss his class. "Feel free to wander around the school. We haven't covered all of our review today, class, so be prepared to cover more review tomorrow."

Everyone rushed to leave except Arianna and Meilan, who

had decided to wander around in search of Ranth.

“Perhaps he has a class somewhere else in the school?” Meilan guessed when they tried to reason out where he might be.

Together they went outside and roamed around the garden and fields until it became dark. Inside they wandered around the halls until they were familiar with every part of the school. Eventually, they grew tired, gave up looking for Ranth, and returned to their rooms.

On their way to the students’ quarters they saw Digorence grumpily heading to the cafeteria on his Gnooter, presumably to get something to eat. Too tired to investigate what the gnome was up to, the girls retreated to their rooms and almost immediately fell asleep.

The next morning they hurriedly ate breakfast and went to their classroom. The rest of the students were clearly not as eager as Arianna and Meilan but were attentive and ready to learn. When they had finished their review, their teacher stood to address them. “Tomorrow, we will be covering how to combine your powers with another person’s such as a familiar or comrade.”

Arianna raised a hand and asked, “What are we going to do until lunch?”

“Until lunch I shall give you the background for what you will be learning in your next class.” The teacher walked around the room to wake up a sleeping student and silence a pair of

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talking wizards seated in the back row. “As you know, some of the wizards that studied at Skyhall sided with the warlocks when they were banished from Skyhall. You will be learning how to counter the ancient form of magic the renegades have discovered. You will learn this in addition to history relating to them.

“Since we have nothing else to cover I will dismiss you all early for lunch,” their teacher said to them.

At lunch Arianna and Meilan were anticipating their first actual lesson at intermediate training. They ate quickly and rushed to the classroom they were told to go to.

Eager to learn a lesson that could hopefully enhance their magical capabilities, the two took adjacent seats in the front row. Their new teacher was a scholarly man who looked to be a competent spell caster, with graying hair and a long battle scar down his cheek. Arianna was sure she would learn a lot from this man.

“I know the last thing you expected to do at your intermediate training was to take a history lesson. However, this background information will be vital to you in future missions in which you will most likely have to deal with these renegades. For the past ten years or so, renegade activity has been dying down; however, now sightings of them in large numbers are being reported in many places, including Atlantis.

“In addition, the Squad Zero scout we sent to see what they were up to has not yet returned. It has been over a week and

still he has not returned. Perhaps now would be a good time to tell you the story of why the renegades were banished from Skyhall and their leader imprisoned in the deepest magical prison. I will tell it to you from my first hand experience,” he said, as he looked at his students to make sure they were listening.

“Ten or so years back, I was studying at Mythardiom. I shared a room with a brilliant wizard named Mobius.”

Arianna nearly jumped out of her chair at the mention of her nemesis’ name.

“He was one of the brightest wizards at the academy. He and a magician called Mortimer were the academy’s most promising students.”

Arianna frowned. The name Mortimer seemed so familiar, yet she couldn’t match the name to a face.

“One day, however, Mortimer disappeared. Mobius began to become fascinated with the powers of time control. He would perform experiments in the middle of the night when no one could interrupt him at a crucial moment.

“Soon he was able to make controlled trips in time forward and backward using the research notes of ancient wizards and dimension travelers. However, one day he came across a power-hungry man who soon learned of his powers.

“He talked to Mobius of dark things. He wanted Mobius to use his powers over time to control and rule all of the known dimensions. Mobius refused his offer and came to talk to me.

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One of his jealous rivals at the school overheard him talking to me and used his magical recording device to paraphrase his words to incriminate him in the Tri-Wizard Council.

“Mobius was charged with high treason and was sentenced to serve time in a high security magical prison sphere. No matter how many times I tried to explain to the Uber Wizards what was actually happening, they wouldn’t listen. The jealous student succeeded in being recognized as one of the brightest wizards, but in doing so he brought a terrible fate upon Skyhall.

“Before they shackled his magic, Mobius teleported away and then traveled back to the far reaches of time. By constantly shifting his location in time, he was able to do research to tremendously increase his powers and gather up a large force. He vowed to get revenge on the man who had ruined his life.

“When the council finally learned of the jealous student’s treachery, they removed him from his position as Archwizard, unbeknownst to Mobius. To Mobius it seemed only as if Skyhall had allowed his rival to become Archwizard because he had banished Mobius from Skyhall.

“Mobius then began working against Skyhall, not knowing that the warlocks secretly followed his studies and wished for him to be the leader of their cult. During those long years of time-shifting, Mobius discovered an ancient form of magic only usable by wizards with extreme mastery over magic.

“But the price he would have to pay if he could not control the magic would be many long years of agony. To Mobius, that

was hardly a price at all. He tried the magic without any fear whatsoever, and managed to tame it. With this power, he cowed warlocks into joining him on his mission.

“Luckily, we were able to discover that he had the ancient magic under his control and devised a counter to it. The ancient magic does not have a definite element. Its different forms can only be countered by specific spells. And some have no counters at all.

“Mobius managed to create a watered-down version of the ancient magic that nearly anyone could use and by using his version over time be able to command the actual magic.”

“So that means that all of the renegades have this magic, and that nearly all the enemies we face will have magic we cannot defend against?” Arianna interrupted.

“Fear not. The spells without counters are quite potent indeed and take much energy to cast. Every day we will focus on one form of this magic to counter. There are many more versions of the magic than there are days of training, so we will only cover the most widely used forms.”

“What about the other forms? How do we defend against those?” Arianna interrupted again.

“That is what your fellow squad members are for. Seasoned wizards will be able to help you in times to come. Do not be afraid to rely on your comrades—always. That is what they are there for.

“Now the most frequently used form of this magic is what

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can only be described as purple lightning.”

With a wave of his hand, the teacher transported the entire class outside, and Arianna was stunned to find herself in a large field of grass. Her teacher stood on one side of the field, and Mathias, commander of Squad Zero, stood on the other.

Purple sparks flew around her teacher as he summoned a stream of lightning.

Mathias drew his force blade and slashed at the lightning, creating an arc of green fire that eradicated the lightning.

Her teacher sent another barrage of purple lightning toward Mathias, who stuck out the palm of his hand and created several more arcs of green fire.

This time her teacher lashed out with the purple lightning exceedingly quickly, causing Mathias to swiftly roll to the left, turn around, and destroy the lightning as it bounced off a rock and came back flying toward him.

Suddenly, Arianna heard the sound of Digorence’s gnooter and turned around.

The lazy gnome was dragging a bunch of large machines in a net that was attached to the back of the gnooter with a rope. “These machines, which I so brilliantly designed, will make your training much easier and eliminate those pesky waiting times. Don’t worry. I made sure they cast the spells slowly and weakly enough so a human child could take care of and survive them,” the gnome said with a sneer.

Lines appeared on the lawn that marked each student’s

boundaries.

“Okay, everyone. For some, this will be fairly easy. For others, it may take some practice. Just as we use water, fire’s opposite, to combat traditional fire, so we must use green magic to effectively defeat these kinds of spells.

“Now, as you know, the power of their magic comes from their totally-corrupt and evil spirits. They draw that negative energy forth and unleash it in a deadly form of magic. Close your eyes now. Imagine something serene. Or something good, like a hero saving the day. It is from this that the power to make the green magic comes forth.

“Make the image bolder. Concentrate on it with all your might. This is how you draw power from the force of all that is good. Now let it flow throughout your body. Feel it crawl across your hands, and let it free.”

As the teacher demonstrated, Arianna quickly grasped the idea of creating the arcs of green flame though she had trouble aiming the fire precisely enough.

She was grateful when her teacher announced it was time for them to take a break. She walked over to where Meilan was sitting and sat down next to her friend. “This sure is tough,” she said, her voice showing her exhaustion.

“I agree, but at least we’re training and not stuck forever as level-one wizards,” Meilan said with a half laugh.

Before they could converse more, their teacher interrupted them. “After you have all had time to warm up again, I will

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begin some additional demonstrations on how to mix this magic most effectively.”

After several demonstrations and opportunities for the students to practice, he said, “Prepare for the performance review round. I don’t expect you to have this down perfectly, so don’t worry. I just want to see how far you are progressing and how I can help you. For now, continue practicing until I tell you it is time for review.”

When he said that they could continue practicing, Arianna went to her station swiftly, for she wanted to do her best on the performance review to impress her teacher. She worked furiously until Meilan advised her to take it easy so she wouldn’t tire herself out.

She was both dreading and anticipating her teacher’s review of her progress; she wanted to be able to improve on her abilities as quickly as possible but didn’t want to embarrass herself. Her teacher came around to where she was and told her to just keep practicing. “I will tell you when the reviewing is to begin,” he said gently.

After about five minutes passed, he exclaimed, “Wonderful! You are progressing well.”

Arianna protested. “But I thought you said you would tell me when you would begin the review.”

“The best review is a review of students’ performance when they do not know they are being judged,” he said with a chuckle.

Before he could walk off, Arianna interrupted him with a question. "I have to ask, what happened to the man who cast Mobius into exile?"

Her teacher stopped smiling and stared off into space for a while before answering. "He was made into one of the Uber Wizards with another one of his tricks. No one will believe that he fooled them all into thinking him a hero."

Before she could ask which one of the three was the man or what he had done, her teacher had walked off. Later he gathered everyone and said, "Everyone is progressing wonderfully. Tomorrow you will spend the whole day with me so that we may continue our work and learn of a new form of the ancient magic."

Gratefully, Arianna and Meilan wandered around the fields. After they had enjoyed their break and were becoming hungry, they went to the cafeteria to get dinner. As they walked into the cafeteria they noticed that Digorence had caught sight of them and had quickly turned around to address a luckless cook.

"And what exactly is this green thing you are trying to serve me? Do you call that food? Is it a device you use when you want to torture your taste buds? Don't tell me it's good for me. What's good for me is actual food. And large portions of it. Next time, I don't want to be served any of these veg-tea-bull things, got it?"

Meilan laughed but Arianna looked thoughtful. "Isn't it strange how we keep running into Digorence? Is he watching us

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or something?” she asked her friend.

“I honestly don’t know,” she said as they went to get their food. After they ate, they decided to slip outside to see if Digorence followed them. They remained outside for an hour without sighting him.

“Perhaps he knows we think he’s following us and decided not to for a while?” Arianna asked.

“Most likely he didn’t want to be away from a chair to sit in for more than minute,” Meilan said with a laugh.

“Ha, ha! That’s very funny. Sure, make fun of the gnome. Oh, he’s so fat,” the aforementioned gnome said in a mockingly high-pitched voiced. He did a mock giggle and said, “Ooh that creepy old gnome is following us,” he said as he pretended to faint.

“If you must know, I’m looking for Ranth. I figured he would be with you two,” he said after he stood up, which took him much effort.

Arianna gasped. “You mean you don’t know where he is, either?”

“I’m sure he’s around here somewhere; I just don’t know where,” the gnome said. “Well, anyways, the reason I’m looking for him is Mathias has asked me to tell you that you are to report to Squad Zero headquarters for squad duties.”

“How are we going to get back to headquarters from here?”

“Ask your teacher,” the gnome said as he sped away on his gnooter.

Arianna and Meilan walked back toward the building and to their quarters, wondering what their squad duties would be.

The day's training had left them extremely tired, and so they fell asleep quickly. The next morning they went back to their second classroom, early as usual, to ask their teacher how they were to get to their squad headquarters.

"That will be revealed to everyone at the same time today in class," he said. "If you would please take your seats I can tell you as soon as the rest of the class is seated."

The two girls complied and sat in the first two seats.

When the rest of the class members were in their seats, the teacher waved his hands and brought the class to a room with four portals. "There's a . . . a . . . situation, and a change of plans for today. These are the portals that will take you to your squad headquarters. They can be accessed from any of the classrooms. The first one to the left goes to Squad Zero, the next to Alpha, then Beta, and lastly Gamma. Those of you who are to report for squad duties may go now. The rest of you may enjoy a break day."

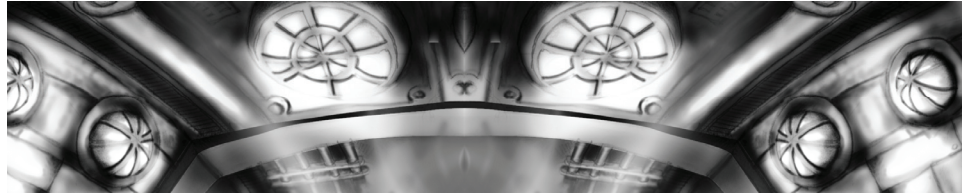
The students going to their squad headquarters lined up behind the portals. Arianna and Meilan were shocked to discover that they were the only two from Squad Zero.

Meilan asked, "Where is Ranth?" to no one in particular. After a few moments they were told to step back as the portals flared to life. In the center of the circles, light shimmered and there was a soft buzzing sound that told them they could go in

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when they were ready.

Taking a deep breath, Arianna and then Meilan walked into the portal and were teleported to Squad Zero headquarters.



CHAPTER SIX: A MISSION TO ATLANTIS

Mathias greeted them, "Welcome back, Arianna and Meilan."

"Hello, Mathias," they replied, eyeing the tall man with the scarred face and scarcely looking at the puffy little gnome standing beside him. "Have you found Ranth?"

"Has anyone even been looking?" Meilan added angrily.

"As you know, I have asked that you come back for squad duties. Ranth is still missing. My brother Harken has not yet returned from his mission to Atlantis. All of my other squad members are trying to track the location of the renegades' headquarters. Although it may be very dangerous, I am going to ask you to try and track him down. Digorence will go with you. I would go myself but I am needed here. Do you think you are ready for this kind of mission? You may need to rescue him if the need arises."

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Arianna turned to look at Meilan. With a nod of her head, Meilan signaled that she was prepared to take the mission.

Arianna agreed. She had always liked Harken; his green eyes always seemed to have questions and as with Mathias she was able to look past his scarred face and see who he was on the inside. She said, “We will take the mission.”

“Very good, but before we send you off there’s something else that I—”

“I,” Digorence interrupted, “need to tell you. Through my sheer brilliance, I have designed a device that will allow us to wipe out a certain part of anyone’s memory, like, say, their knowledge of the existence of wizards. I call it the Zombietiser, and it’s the cure for wizard seers everywhere. Once we have located Harken, I wish to take it to Earth and test it, and I’d like Arianna and Meilan to assist me if that’s possible.”

Before Arianna could express her surprise, Meilan asked, “But what if it doesn’t work and some earthman ends up learning about wizards?”

“Well, we can hope that everyone assumes he’s crazy,” Digorence said.

“Or,” Mathias said, “we bring him back here until Digorence gets it right. Digorence’s inventions may go awry from time to time, but they are important to the preservation of everything we are working for.”

“And I was told,” Digorence continued, “that you two are available to help me. So let’s get this Atlantis thing over with so

I can light Skyhall with my shining brilliance.”

Arianna thought Digorence’s ability to mock himself as well as everyone around him was unsettling; but instead of complaining, she groaned. Digorence laughed and sped away to the docking area in Skyhall on his gnooter. “The ship will fall out of the sky from his weight,” she remarked as she and Meilan hurried after the gnome.

It felt good to be back in Skyhall and to be working with Squad Zero. They felt that every step led through refreshingly familiar areas, and the two found themselves taking their time walking through the city.

“I remember when I first came here,” Arianna said to herself as much as to Meilan as she thought back to her first experience at Skyhall. Meilan smiled and nodded, but she wasn’t really listening to her friend; she was reminiscing as well.

When they had made their way to the docking area, they looked around for Digorence. They found him yelling at a man selling food in a concession stand.

“One day you will be able to claim that Digorence, the most precocious and intelligent being in all the known dimensions eats here, and your merchandise will sell like hot cakes! That should be more than enough payment for a few hamburgers.”

“They won’t sell like hotcakes if his customers assume the food makes them look like you,” Arianna said with a smirk.

“Ha, ha! Very funny! Look, I’m on an important mission to save Skyhall. Do you want to let the world end simply because

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you didn't give me free food? I mean, who can save the world on an empty stomach?"

The man sighed and gave Digorence the food just so the gnome would shut up and go away. Digorence was about to climb into the ship when he gave out a large shriek.

"Where is my ketchup?" he screamed. The man sighed and handed him a handful of ketchup packets. "Mustard?" he yelled as the man told him to just help himself to the entire stand. Digorence smiled and took his pick of the goods in the interior.

"Now we can go," he said after he had several bags full of condiments. The two girls sighed in disgust and followed him to the ship.

As they received an all-clear signal, Digorence yanked on the throttle and they plummeted toward Earth. When Arianna and Meilan started to complain about how hot it was getting, Digorence remembered to turn on the camouflage and the anti-heat screen that would keep them from being seen and detected. He grinned viciously as he ripped into a second hamburger.

Arianna looked at the remaining hamburgers and decided to snatch one for herself and another for Meilan. After she did this, she pointed a finger accusingly at Digorence and said, "I'm on to you. You've been an especially mean-spirited, miserable little gnome ever since that business about the gnome-o-vision. Don't think you're going to get away with that kind of behavior around me. I know you're not so mean and nasty. Something's happened to you, but I don't know what yet. I will figure it

out.”

Digorence said in a voice so faint Arianna almost couldn't hear him, “Something's missing . . . It's like there was someone or something important there one minute but missing the next.”

“Missing like Ranth?” Meilan asked.

Digorence's eyes got wide and his face flushed with anger. He threw his hands up in the air, hitting Arianna who had moved closer to hear his voice. “Get away from me! Leave me alone!” he shouted. “I'm a dirty, nasty little gnome and I'll poke your eyeballs out.”

The girls backed away without saying anything further. After breaking through the clouds in the lower atmosphere of Earth, the ship entered clear blue sky for a few moments before it sank into the ocean and then shot downward to Atlantis.

“The renegades will probably be keeping an eye out for us, so it's time to take the back way,” Digorence said to them.

The wonders of the deep sea were within sight of the three. Only the magical field around the ship kept them from being crushed by the pressures of the depths.

As they neared the entrance to Atlantis, they shot past an array of deep-sea creatures that had never been seen by man. The two girls gasped in wonder as they saw things that no one was meant to see. Digorence suddenly directed the ship downward to what seemed to be a part of the ocean floor. Arianna braced herself for a crash but was surprised to find herself in a tunnel.

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“Vacant smuggler’s tunnel,” Digorence told them as he landed the ship in the makeshift dock. “I’ll stay here and finish my snack,” Digorence said quietly as he directed Meilan and Arianna to leave the ship to scout the area.

“You call that many hamburgers a snack?” Arianna said, appalled.

“Gnomes have to eat to keep healthy,” he replied. “Remember, scout the area then return.”

Arianna exited the ship. Carefully she searched around to see if anyone was watching and motioned for Meilan to follow her. The two were in a decrepit part of town full of crumbled houses and shacks. Whether anyone lived here was unclear, but the emptiness made Arianna feel uneasy.

She knew it would be too easy to hide in this area and launch a surprise attack. The ex-thief would have to be careful and incredibly alert.

From the vantage point of a dark corner, Arianna looked out on a deserted street. Meilan crouched behind her. Arianna glanced back at Meilan and asked, “Do you feel it, too?”

“It?” hissed Meilan.

“Like something’s missing, like Digorence said. I can feel it, too. I can’t explain it, but I feel it’s a someone not a something.”

From there, the two made their way through to the main section of town without incident. Once they had made their way to the main streets, it was time to ask if anyone had sighted Harken but without alerting the renegades.

They had been given two recent photographs of Harken so the people of Atlantis would be able to tell if they had seen him or not. The two girls were to use the cover story that he was their older brother.

The girls split up and went around asking the people of Atlantis if they had sighted Harken. None of the people outside the houses had seen him, so they decided to try knocking on doors.

After having several doors slammed in their faces, the two went to the merchant area, eventually coming to a town square. "Have you by any chance seen this man?" they asked people in the town square.

They got lots of blank stares until one man said to her angrily, "This man did not buy any of my bread."

"I am sorry to hear about that."

"Are you here to teach him a lesson about his bread-boycotting ways?"

"Um, yes, yes we are. Did you see where he went?"

"Good! It's terrible when we innocent working-class people are cheated out of our hard-earned profits by bread boycotters. He dashed off toward the docking bay. It's in that direction."

"Thank you for your time," Arianna said as she and Meilan moved away to talk.

"Do you think that the renegades grabbed him at the docks when he was trying to get back?"

"It is possible," Meilan concluded.

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As they started back through the square, the bread merchant tugged at Arianna's sleeve. "Miss," he said to her.

"What is it?" she tried to be patient.

"You might have a hard time getting to the docking bay."

"Why is that?"

The bread merchant paused and leaned in closer. "They say that there's been a bit of a disturbance there and now everyone's there looking at the huge crater in the ground."

"Huge crater?" Arianna exclaimed as she dashed off toward the docking area with Meilan right behind her. When they neared the docks they saw a massive swarm of people milling around trying to see the crater in the ground.

Arianna grabbed Meilan's wrist and pushed her way through the crowds. Getting close to the crater proved to be difficult and she was often pushed back.

"Wait your turn!" people shouted

Others shouted, "No cutting!"

One lady with a big hat said, "Younguns these days! No patience. No patience, I tell you!"

Another lady said, "Watch where you're going, miss!"

Eventually, Arianna gave up. She and Meilan retreated to a quiet section of the docks. When they were sure no one was looking, they levitated to the top of a flat-roofed building. On the rooftops they stealthily made their way to investigate the crater. When they sighted it at last they gasped in horror.

"Shocking, isn't it?" said a voice.

Arianna jumped up and turned around. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Don’t you recognize me?” the figure said as he pulled off his hood.

“Harken!” she exclaimed. He smiled and pulled the hood back over his face.

“You have a ship?” he asked quickly. Arianna and Meilan nodded. “Come, we must get out of here quickly. I must take what I overheard back to Skyhall.”



CHAPTER SEVEN: GROGGY AWAKENINGS

Back at the ship, Digorence was happily gobbling down his last hamburger. Unaware that he was in grave danger, he let out a loud belch and sat back in his pilot chair. He had almost dozed off to sleep when he heard footsteps approaching.

"I know I'm beautiful, but I didn't expect such a crowd," he said loudly as he opened his eyes and sat up.

"Come with us, gnome," commanded one of the renegades suddenly confronting him.

"What if I told you I ate too much to move?" he asked.

"Looking at you, I would be inclined to believe that," the other replied with a smirk.

"A gnome always has to watch his figure. That's why I ate the last few people who bothered me at meal time."

"You do not scare me, gnome," came the reply.

“Maybe if I put on my boogeyman suit, you’ll run away to cry to your mommy,” Digorence sneered.

“I’ve had just enough from you, gnome,” the man raged. He raised his hands to cast a spell and started to chant. The gnome lazily picked up a knife and sloppily tossed it.

“Missed me. Ha! ha!” the man replied.

“You should learn to respect gnomes,” Digorence said as a shipping crate full of metal objects plummeted toward and landed on the Renegade.

The rest of them started charging Digorence. One of them got caught up in the rope from the cargo net; as he dangled on one foot, he began to curse. Another was about to smash through Digorence’s skull when Digorence let out a foul-smelling belch that would have made a dung troll’s eyes water. Digorence took the hammer and pounded his assailant with it.

The last one was dispatched with a Digorence invention that had earned him his title of genius.

“And that,” he said to himself as Arianna, Meilan, and Harken came into the tunnel, “that is a job well done as only Digorence, the genius gnome and the wonderful aroma of human cooking could do.”

“Yes it is,” Arianna replied. Digorence beamed and sat up in his chair.

“Digorence! Digorence, wake up!” Arianna said loudly in his ear. The gnome jumped awake and looked around. There was no one dangling from the ceiling by one foot, no invention that

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earned him the title of genius, and no job well done.

“I should have known I was dreaming. I would never have done that much work,” he said, mostly to himself.

“What?” Arianna asked.

“Oh, nothing,” the gnome said.

“I see that you have found Harken.”

“I would say that it is nice to see you, Digorence, but I am not sure if that is exactly true.”

The gnome gave a hearty laugh and started the engine. “Let’s get going before the renegades actually show up.”

“It’s odd that we didn’t run into them at all.”

“I’m just thankful we didn’t,” Harken said.

As they took off, a Renegade slipped out from the shadows and spoke into a device held in his hand, “It is done. The impostor is with them.”

“Excellent,” came the reply.



The four landed safely in Skyhall and quickly got out of the ship.

“Come, let’s report to Mathias,” Arianna said.

“No!” Harken replied quickly, harshly. “I mean, shouldn’t I report to Arcanious or the tri-wizard council first?”

“Well, I guess that would be better,” Arianna said.

Soon they were heading into the castle at Skyhall. Oddly, Harken still kept the hood over his face. Arianna assumed he had a reason for doing so and didn’t ask. Harken stopped

before he entered Arcanious' room.

Meilan poked a finger playfully in Arianna's ear. Arianna smiled though she was suddenly bone tired.

"I . . . I need to go somewhere after this," Harken said. "Tell my brother I'm okay, please."

Arianna said that she would and went in with Harken to see Arcanious. Meilan waited in the hall, thinking how tired she was.

Arcanious was poring over an ancient manuscript of some sort when they found him. When he looked up and saw Arianna, the tension seemed to slip away from his expression. "We've found Harken," Arianna said quickly, pointing to the tall figure beside her.

"Arcanious, sir. The renegades have made a pact with the ruler of Dementia. They plan to use their power over time to retrieve the ancient artifacts of the demon king before they are cast into the unknown space. We must hurry and lead an assault on Dementia before they do so."

Arcanious set aside the book. "Harken, doing so would be suicide. It would be better to send in a small force. They would be able to slip past the enemy forces and sabotage the time portal."

Harken became agitated. "No, sir. All of the squads, to the last man, should lead the attack."

"To Dementia? I am telling you that would be idiocy!"

Suddenly, Arianna wished she was anywhere else but here.

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She envied Meilan in the hall, and glanced to the door just in time to see Mathias rush in.

“What is going on here?” Mathias demanded. Silently, Harken cursed as he heard Mathias say, “I heard you were back, brother, so I came to see you.”

Arcanious stood and turned to face Mathias. “Your brother wants us to lead a suicide attack on Dementia.”

Harken repeated what he said earlier, “The renegades have made a pact with the ruler of Dementia.”

Arianna screamed as there was a flash of gold and Mathias impaled his brother to the wall, ripping off his brother’s hood with his right hand as his left hand wielded a powerful holding spell. Arcanious’ eyes flared and he reached for his gnarled staff, the ancient weapon of the elder wizards. Meilan rushed into the room as Arianna took a step back.

Mathias held Harken in a magical field. “That is not my brother. Notice how he doesn’t even feel pain. Notice how he doesn’t bleed.”

Arcanious placed his staff down gently and then sat down wearily. “They must have imprisoned the real Harken.”

“This is all my fault,” Arianna said. “I should have paid more attention.”

“No, you couldn’t have known.”

“Arianna and Meilan, take some well-deserved rest. Tomorrow, you go with Digorence to Earth. Arcanious, I request permission to go to Atlantis to try and rescue my

brother.”

“Granted,” the archwizard said.

Arianna and Meilan wearily went back to their rooms. They saw Digorence dragging away the false Harken.

Even though it wasn't even dusk yet, they both quickly fell asleep. Arianna was intensely disappointed in herself for not recognizing that what she thought was Harken actually wasn't.

The next day they were awakened by Digorence, who had already loaded the ship and had his Zombietiser ready.

“Why are you waking us so early?” they asked groggily.

“Early? It's noon,” he said. “Only I get to sleep to noon, but I don't do it on principle because then I really will be the lazy good-for-nothing gnome that people think I am.”

This caused the girls to get up swiftly and look at the time. When they saw that it was indeed noon they hurriedly got ready for their trip. “To Earth, right?” they asked.

“We're not going to Earth today,” the gnome said. “Your teacher has informed me that today he will be teaching a lesson that will make our objective much easier. Follow me and I will show you how to get back to your school.”

“But our classes start much earlier than noon,” Arianna said.

“I've told him to wait for your arrival before starting,” Digorence replied. He took them to a room containing a single portal. “You go in through there and out the door. It should be able to tell which classroom to send you to by reading your mind.”

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Arianna thought to herself the gnome must have taken a sudden liking to them, or more than likely her harsh rebuke had made him rethink the way he dealt with others. She thanked the gnome before stepping through the portal; Meilan followed her. Once they came through the portal they went out the door and found themselves in their classroom.

“Please take your seats,” their teacher’s first words always seemed to be. They quickly complied as they were eager to know what they would be learning. After they took their seats, their teacher began to speak. “Today we will be learning an important spell that will prove to be invaluable on any missions to Earth. It won’t fool any magical beings, however, or those with magical powers so it cannot be used very often.”

With a wave of his hand he brought them to the practice field. “I brought everyone here to assure you that this is not a sleight-of-hand trick.”

Arianna could feel him draw power deep within himself. She felt him place it in an aura around him. Then there was a spark of power of a different element and then her teacher disappeared.

“This is not a particularly hard spell to execute,” her teacher’s voice came from the air. “I’m sure you can all sense where I am as a result of the magic cloaking me. This is why we can only disguise ourselves from humans.

“Now, in order to cast this spell, you must first draw the wind energy deep within you. Then you must let it stream out

and surround you like a cloak or aura. You must be sure not to wrap it around you too tightly or you will restrict your movement or break through the wind energy and end up exposing a limb. When you move with this spell, you must levitate the field of wind around you and make it move at the same pace you are moving, or you will reveal yourself.

“In order to keep this spell going, you must constantly feed it wind energy. You must also use a small spark of earth power to start the invisibility so that you may be one with the earth and become invisible.

“Today we will practice moving with and sustaining our cloaking spell.” After several additional demonstrations on how to mix the forces of magic, he said, “I will start performance reviews in about an hour or so.”

Arianna quickly began to draw wind power deep within herself. She let it out in an oval around her. She made it wide enough so that she could stretch out her arms side to side and not break through the barrier and long enough so that she could take a step forward or backward without having to shift it.

She added the spark of earth power and looked at one of the many mirrors placed about the field. She gasped then, for the spell had actually worked. Her excitement was replaced by disappointment when she reappeared.

“The bigger the spell is, the more energy you’re going to need to constantly feed it.”

“So I will always have to be feeding it energy?”

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“Yes, but not too much or it will start to have an effect on your surroundings,” was the reply.

Arianna nodded and went back to practicing. Once she had mastered the trick of feeding the spell energy, she began to try and move with it. That’s when the spell began to quickly get complicated. She had to make sure she kept levitating the spell forward at the same pace she walked while at the same time diverting some of the wind energy from the levitation spell into the cloak.

She was finally getting the hang of it when she bumped into another invisible student.

“I’m so sorry,” Arianna said as she reappeared.

“No, it was my fault,” a voice replied. Arianna laughed when she realized it was Meilan she had bumped into.

They both went back to getting the hang of the spell. By the end of the day, Arianna had mastered feeding energy into her spell while moving. The only problem remaining was levitating the spell at the same pace she walked. She wished Ranth were there; he would know a trick of some sort to help her around the problem.

“In time you will all master this spell. It can be very complicated to keep it going now but soon it will become very simple. Those of you who have squad missions or duties to do tomorrow are to stay in their squad headquarters for tonight. Everyone else is to remain here in Mythardiom,” the teacher said as he dismissed the class.

The two friends walked back to the classroom, wondering how they would get back to the portal room. A moment after they thought about it, they found themselves there. Arianna was puzzled but assumed that the same device that took them to the right classroom had brought them back by reading their minds.

When they were back in Squad Zero headquarters, they resolved to look around for Mathias. They asked their fellow team members if they had seen or heard from him. They began to become extremely worried when they discovered that no one had heard from Mathias since the day before. They also asked about Ranth, but no one had seen him since the night of the ceremony. This caused them to take a long time falling asleep; once they finally did, their worry caused them to sleep very lightly.

The next morning, they were again awakened by Digorence; but this time, it was dawn, not noon.

“We have to hurry and get this over with. I want to show my prize invention at the next Tri-Wizard meeting,” he said selfishly.

The two girls took some time getting fully awake, which greatly angered the gnome. He sat around tapping his fingers on the table while they shook off their grogginess and found something to eat. When he saw them bring back food he opened his mouth to yell at them to hurry and eat when he remembered something.

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“That reminds me, I haven’t eaten in fifteen minutes!” he cried as he dashed off on his gnooter. Arianna laughed and continued to eat her breakfast. Just as they finished, Digorence returned, tugging a large wagon on the back of his gnooter.

Digorence sat down next to them and took a large sandwich out of a box.

“I think that sandwich is taller than you, Digorence,” Arianna said with a laugh.

“How much taller? Maybe I should have gotten two,” he said sardonically. It took the gnome a long time to finish the sandwich. When he was finally done, he attempted to stand. After he fell back down again, he said, “Perhaps we can take a five minute break.”

“Yeah, all the work of standing up can kill you,” Arianna replied. Digorence tried to think of something to say. He surprised himself by not coming up with anything.

“Are you okay, Digorence?” Arianna teased when he didn’t reply.

“Of course I am,” the gnome said as he got on his gnooter. “Let’s go now, you two.”

“Just how are we going to test your invention?” Arianna asked.

“Genius,” the gnome snapped. “How are we going to test your genius invention is what you should have asked.”

Arianna sighed and said, “How are we going to test your genius invention?”

“Well,” he said slowly, “since you asked, you two are going to cloak yourselves until I find a suitable person for you to reveal yourselves to. When he sees you, I zap him and erase his memories of wizards. Then you remain revealed and he does not accuse you of being wizards.”

“And what if it doesn’t work?”

“How could you even suggest that?” the gnome said in shock.

Arianna decided not to mention the gnome’s myriad of failed inventions.

They made their way to the portal room of Squad Zero where the gnome set the controls for the warp to Earth.

“Here we go,” the gnome said as he got off his gnooter and walked through the portal. Arianna and Meilan followed him through to Earth.



CHAPTER EIGHT: THE ZOMBIETISER

Arianna, Meilan, and Digorence emerged from a wall in an alleyway in a large city. "Digorence," Arianna asked, "Don't you think you look a little different?"

"That's why I brought us to America. With all those fast-food restaurants around every corner, I fit in perfectly," the gnome said.

Arianna noticed that the clothing he now wore wasn't anything you would find in Skyhall. They were Earth clothes. The gnome wore sun glasses and a small designer suit. It took all of the two girls' self control to keep from laughing at his appearance.

Arianna looked at Meilan and saw that she, too, wore Earth clothes. Quickly she examined her pants and discovered that somehow everyone was wearing Earth clothes. Digorence

grinned when he saw her shocked expression. “That’s a new invention. Going to a different dimension? Well, now you’ll automatically blend in!” he beamed. “I call it Dimension Traveler Styler or DTS for short. Do you like it?”

“Well, at least I don’t look as silly as you,” Meilan replied.

Arianna grinned but she didn’t say anything right away. The three walked up and down a few streets. On one of the lawns, in front of a big yellow house, they saw a pair of lawn gnomes. When one of the gnomes turned and winked at her, Arianna knew the two were law gnomes on watch.

Arianna laughed and turned to Meilan. “I remember when I used to call them lawn gnomes.”

Meilan laughed as well and asked, “What was it like living on Earth without even knowing magic or any magical beings existed?”

“It was dreary,” Arianna said with a sigh. “It was almost impossible to have a good conversation with anyone.” Turning to Digorence, she said, “I’m surprised you can handle this much physical activity, Digorence.”

He laughed and went to a restaurant and sat at one of the outside tables. When he sighted a young man walking alone down the street he quickly waddled after him.

“Excuse me, young sir. You have been chosen to be the lucky winner of a fantastic prize.”

“Me?” the young man asked as he turned around.

“Yes, you. If you would please follow me and take this

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compulsory survey, I would be happy to award you your prize.” The two walked around a corner, moving to a place where they’d be out of sight from prying eyes. Digorence signaled for Arianna and Meilan to follow and then for them to cloak themselves.

“Now, for the survey. Er . . . what is your favorite . . . er . . . cheese?”

“Why are you doing a survey about my favorite kind of cheese?”

“I’m having a cheese party for rich snobs,” the gnome said quickly as he turned the young man around and motioned for Arianna and Meilan to reveal themselves.

When the boy saw the two girls appear from nowhere, he nearly screamed. “My god! How did you appear out of the air like that? It must have been . . . it must have been magic!”

The gnome smiled and pulled a device out of his pocket. He pressed a large button and he zapped the youngster unconscious.

A device similar to a laptop computer appeared and Digorence began searching through the boy’s memories. He located the memories pertaining to him, Arianna, and Meilan and deleted them. He finished and zapped the youngster again.

The young man opened his eyes and looked at the three. After about a minute he turned around and lurched away, which made Digorence exclaim, “See, he didn’t say anything. It works!”

“What if he wasn’t saying anything because he didn’t want us to know he knows?” Arianna asked.

“What about the strange way he walked away?” Meilan asked.

“Let’s consider this a successful trial and get back to Skyhall,” Digorence said. “What do you say?”

Arianna and Meilan talked to each other and agreed reluctantly. Then they pressed buttons on their armbands that reactivated the portal so they could teleport themselves back to Squad Zero headquarters. A moment later, Digorence appeared.

The gnome quickly left to find Arcanious. The two girls went after him to see what Arcanious would say. They found him looking grimly at a screen in the headquarters.

“Digorence, you fool!” Arcanious shouted.

“You mean Digorence, you genius,” the gnome replied.

“You actually turned the poor lad into a zombie! He’s going around attacking people!”

“Hmm . . . maybe I wiped out all of his memories and accidentally added memories from my last . . . er . . . test subject.”

“And who was this last subject?”

“He was just some poor soul who was forced to listen to Britney Spears sing without a synthesizer. If you went through that, you’d go around attacking people, too.”

“Can you fix him?”

“Yes, I think so, but I’ll have to . . . to . . . restore all of his

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memories. And it will take a while.”

“Fix him. Then bring him back here and we’ll decide what to do with him.” Digorence started to rush away. Arcanious shouted after him, “This Zombietiser of yours better be worth it!”

Just before turning away, Arianna saw another person standing where Arcanious was standing. A name flashed into her mind but the name held no meaning and then the face and the name were gone. She asked about Mathias, Harken, and Ranth. Arcanious had no new information.

On Earth, the gnome rented a room so they’d have a private place to fix the boy’s memories and got his Zombietiser ready while the two girls went searching for the boy-turned-zombie. Arianna and Meilan tried to act inconspicuous while searching for any signs of chaos or people running. After not finding the boy zombie anywhere, they recalled what Digorence had said about the last test subject and hurriedly started checking record stores.

They found the boy zombie angrily smashing CDs in the second record store they came to. The owner of the store was hiding behind his counter shivering in terror. Using the cloaking spell they had just learned, Arianna and Meilan quickly incapacitated the boy zombie and dragged him out of the store.

They quickly disguised the boy so no one would recognize him as the one who was going around attacking people. Then

they hurried off to meet Digorence.

At the nearby hotel, Arianna spoke to the person at the check-in desk: "Excuse me. Do you know which room a very short man in a designer suit checked into?"

"I'm sorry I cannot tell you this information unless you give me a valid reason why you want to see him."

Arianna thought up a doozy of a lie. "He's my step-father, step-gnome really. He's awful; he's always telling me what to do. Why just the other day, he . . . "

"Okay, okay. Room 202 on the second floor," the clerk said.

"Thank you very much," Arianna said as she helped Meilan get the boy into the elevator before the clerk realized something was amiss.

Arianna groaned as another man entered just before the elevator doors closed. The man looked at the zombietised boy and frowned. "You seem very familiar, like I've just seen you on the TV," he said.

Quickly, Arianna replied, "He does infomercials," so that the man wouldn't be suspicious.

"Oh," the man replied, no longer interested.

Thankful that they gotten so far without an incident, Arianna and Meilan made their way to Room 202. Digorence opened the door and let them in on the second knock. As soon as they were inside, he locked the door and told them to put the boy on the bed. When he pressed a few buttons, three laptop computers, a desk to hold the computers, and a chair

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materialized.

“Portable lab,” he muttered, half to himself, as he began to look through the boy’s memories.

Arianna and Meilan watched as images of the boy’s memories began to flash by on the screens. After a few moments of close examination, the gnome located all of the memories that weren’t his and replaced them with those that were his. Then he started excitedly talking to himself.

Suddenly, he stopped and frowned. “Something’s not right here.” With a puzzled expression he leaned closer to one of the screens. “Oh, great. Just great. I accidentally merged the memories of the two test subjects. That explains the odd behavior.”

He sighed and turned to the two girls. “Now I have to isolate the separate memories of each subject. This could take a while; you might as well take a seat.”

The gnome started flipping through the memories, occasionally spewing out the odd sarcastic comment, until he stopped at a picture of a potent-looking wizard and frowned. “Hmm, this wizard looks familiar, but I can’t say why.”

Meilan moved forward to get a closer look and was puzzled when he seemed vaguely familiar. When Arianna said the person was vaguely familiar as well, Digorence knew that something strange was going on; he fiddled with the machine until he got an audio feed.

The room fell to silence as they listened to the conversation

between the test subject and this wizard called Mortimer. Once the conversation had died out, Digorence sat flabbergasted on the floor. “According to this conversation, this wizard is one of the most powerful wizards in Skyhall and the leader of Squad Zero. But that’s impossible. Yet we all seem to think he’s familiar, but we don’t know who he is. Maybe, just maybe . . . no that’s too absurd of an idea . . .”

“Since when has that stopped you?” Arianna interjected.

“Fine. Maybe this Mortimer fellow is from an alternate universe. Or maybe he’s from another time.”

Arianna and Meilan simply sat there in silence.

“Well, it makes perfect sense. But for now, let’s get this boy back to normal. We can investigate this later.”

As Digorence zapped back the boy’s real memories, he howled out, shot upright, and stared at the three. “You, you must be aliens!” the boy exclaimed. “Have I been abducted? Is this some sort of experiment? Did you take out my organs and replace them with jelly?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Get over it, sonny,” Digorence said, then turning to Arianna and Meilan, he added, “I’ll take Sparky back and break the news to Arcanious. You two go back to headquarters; hopefully Mathias will be back by now.”

The two girls nodded and pressed the buttons on their armbands to reactivate the portal so they could teleport themselves to Squad Zero headquarters. Once there, they searched for Mathias.

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When they finally located him, Arianna told him, “Mathias, we tracked down the zombietised boy and stopped him from attacking people. Digorence is going to ask Arcanious what do to with him.”

“Good work.”

“Did you find Harken in Atlantis?” she asked, changing the subject.

“As soon as I wrap things up here, I’m going back.” He paused, seemed about to say something, then seemed to change his mind. After a few seconds of awkward silence, he spoke once again. “I would suggest you make sure they don’t suggest anything too harsh to the lad,” he said as he left the room.

Remembering her trial in the People Court, Arianna was suddenly afraid for the boy. If he didn’t have any magical powers, he could be left to a life of drudgery in Skyhall, or worse. Without wasting any time, she convinced Meilan that they had to stop Arcanious or others from subjecting the boy to a lifetime of misery. As they neared Arcanious’ room they heard Digorence yelling, “I say we put him on the cleanup crew. I hear the sewers are being infested again.”

“That is not a fair punishment simply because he called you stupid.”

“Especially since he was right,” Arianna interjected. “I do hope I’m not offending you by interrupting, Arcanious, sir, but I think I know what to do with him. He can study to be a wizard like I did. That way you won’t have to imprison him or

anything.”

“Hmm . . . ” Arcanious said as he thought about it.

“I still say cleaning sewers and wiping out infestations would do this lad a world of good. Give him some solid muscles and a good appreciation of boredom and relaxation.”

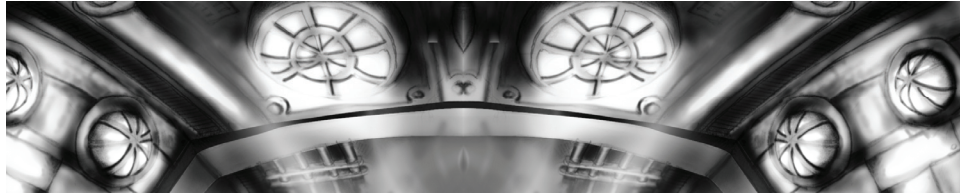
“Digorence, that is enough. I think that Arianna’s suggestion is very good. Since the wizard-seeing had nothing to do with him, I will speak for him at his trial in the People Court. I’m sure Judge Krudy will see things my way. So if the lad has the potential and will agree to becoming a wizard, he will start his training when the next classes begin.”

“And in the meantime?” Arianna asked, seeing the gnome’s sudden mischievous expression.

Before Arcanious could respond, Digorence quipped, “A little work in the sewers won’t do the boy much harm.”

“Oh, very well, then,” Arcanious said, “but don’t you go adding to the infestation just to give the boy more work.”

“Deal,” Digorence said, and so the boy whose name really was Sparky had his fate decided for him. And though Digorence would never admit it, he had developed a soft spot for Arianna.



CHAPTER NINE: THE ZOMBIETISER PART DEUX

Digorence sat alone in his office just staring at his Zombietiser. “If I’m going to be recognized as a genius, I have to get this stupid piece of junk working properly.”

Rolling his eyes, he turned on his master gnomputer.

“I don’t remember doing anything to cause the memory merge, so there must be something wrong with the data,” he mused to himself.

Pulling up the data, Digorence decided that if he was going to find out where he went wrong he would have to think back to the beginning. At that moment, an extremely large and unpleasant-looking thing that could only be called a being, with an even more unpleasant odor, barged into the room.

“Look, mister . . .” the thing started to say.

Digorence raised a hand as if to say not now. When the thing

insisted on speaking, Digorence said, “Hey, is this really necessary? I’m contemplating a matter that is of extreme importance to the universe right now.”

“Extreme, huh?”

“Almost as extreme as that wonderful odor of yours.”

“Why, thank you,” the being started to say.

“Yeah, what’s it called? Maggot repellent? Nose eradicator scent?”

“All right. I’ve had just about enough of you, mister gnome.”

“Apparently that’s just one of the things you’ve had just about enough of.”

“Hey, listen here, buddy. I’m sick and tired of your coming around to my food shop and taking everything and then refusing to pay for it. And every time, you say it’s of extreme importance to the fate of the galaxy when really all you do is take it, eat it, and then go sleep somewhere.”

Digorence’s eyes caught sight of the Zombietiser sitting next to his bed and his eyes started twinkling dangerously. “Really? And how does that make you feel?”

Taken aback, the being looked startled and started to stutter out a reply, “Well, that makes me, makes me really, really angry. Yes, angry, I suppose.”

“Mm . . . hmm . . . Why don’t you lie down a minute, close your eyes and relax just for a minute while I get . . . er . . . something . . . er to pay you for all your trouble. You know, for

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stress-relieving purposes. It'll be great for you. Trust me."

"Well, okay," the being said and lay down on the bed.

"My big bonedness paid off for once. Getting that magically-reinforced steel framing was actually worth it," Digorence muttered to himself as he quickly turned the Zombietiser on and started to use it on the being.

He then located all of the memories of his taking the being's food and not paying for it and was about to delete them forever when the depressing infinitesimal thing that was called Digorence's subconscious decided that it hadn't done anything for the past 40 years (accounting for much in the ways of the gnome's present state of life and wonderful charismatic personality) and that it should probably start before it would just have to shut up forever. Having decided this, it suggested to the gnome that what he was doing was morally wrong, and above all, not very nice.

Digorence, who didn't know what morally meant and wouldn't understand what it meant even with a dictionary, and who couldn't care less if what he was doing was nice or not, simply lied and said to himself, "Hey, I'm just doing this so this thing will leave and I can just figure this out, okay?" His subconscious, now realizing that there wasn't any purpose in its monitoring the behaviors of its body since it just wasn't going to listen, decided now to do something more useful with its time and began to compose some poetry to vent its frustrations and depressions.

After erasing all of his visitor's memories of him, Digorence was about to shut the machine off when another devious thought struck him. In the being's current memory, Digorence placed the words, "Therapist appointment. Needs to be paid well. Note: enjoys free food," and laughed to himself while he retracted the Zombietiser.

The being sat up and said, "What am I doing here? Oh, that's right. I'm at my therapist appointment."

"Yeah, that's right. You just kinda dosed off there. Well, that's all for today. Make sure to schedule another appointment with me later. I've got another patient coming in soon so you better leave."

After a few pathetic tries to get up, the being handed Digorence a hefty wad of cash and turned to leave. "You're a really nice guy, you know. If you want, just stop by my shop sometime. I'll be glad to give you some free food."

Smiling in satisfaction to himself once his "patient" left, Digorence sat there in quiet contemplation, trying to figure out where he had acquired the data from the first subject.

He started to get really angry once he realized that he couldn't remember where he had received the data. Just as he was about to fling a chair at the door, it opened.

'Oh, what is it now?' he cried out in anger.

"Digorence, it's me, Arcanious. I just came by to see if you wanted to attend the weekly luncheon," the arch wizard said with his fingers crossed behind his back.

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“No, no, no. I’m sorry but I must decline. Important matters at hand.”

Arcanious nearly choked from shock because there was free food involved, after all. Hurriedly, he left before Digorence had a chance to change his mind.

Sitting down once more, Digorence clutched his head in frustration. He remembered collecting the data from his test subject. It was just that what was recorded in the data bank wasn’t what he remembered reviewing. He knew there was no way anyone could have changed the data. His gnomputers were the most secure in the universe. After studying Earth computers years ago, he had three different wizards enchant secure firewalls around his master gnomputer to protect it from those who wanted to access it and hack into it. No one could get through three different magically-enchanted firewalls—no one. Now, why anyone would want to break into his gnomputer and see what was inside of it, he had no idea; but it had seemed like a pretty serious issue on Earth, and he hadn’t wanted to take any chances with his precious data.

“I don’t know where this data is from, but I remember recording the data from the test subject. I remember reviewing the data, but this isn’t that data. How can that be?” The gnome thought for a while longer and then realized, “It’s just like that Mortimer guy. He seemed familiar, but I don’t know him. It’s the same thing with my data.”

A couple of sandwiches later, Digorence finally realized a

possible theory and he rephrased his previous line of thinking. “I know where the data is from. I just don’t know when the data is from. But if it’s from an alternate time that isn’t what’s happening now, then how can it be on my gnomputer?”

He boasted to himself about how ingenious that idea was for a while, and then a much more important thought struck him. “If this data is from an alternate time and it’s on my gnomputer, then that alternate time must have really happened, and this Mortimer guy really must have been the leader of Squad Zero. That’s why Arianna, Meilan, and I all recognized him. He was so connected with our lives that we would still know who he was. Or, er, something like that.”

Realizing that he had been talking to himself the whole time, he said sarcastically, “Well, mister genius, maybe you should stop talking to yourself and get this news to Arcanious.”



CHAPTER TEN: RESCUE MISSION

Exhausted but restless, Arianna and Meilan walked around the outskirts of Squad Zero headquarters trying to stretch out their sore bodies and just relax for once. The evening air was cool and helped to refresh them as they studied the lush landscape.

To their left was a vast vibrant green forest that stretched so far into the distance that it made Arianna's eyes hurt to look at it. The path they were walking on was bordered by an array of multicolored flowers, the likes of which Arianna had never seen anywhere else. The unsurpassable beauty of the flowers made the girls wonder if they were part of the enchantment woven into the path.

"It's amazing how beautiful it is here. On Earth it was all buildings. Much of the natural landscape was just destroyed to make ways for more money opportunities. I never thought

outdoors could be so beautiful,” Arianna remarked.

“I’ve never really stopped to admire the outdoors, either. When I was little I didn’t really care; and now, we’ve been much too busy.”

Eventually, Arianna broke the silence that followed with a question, “So what made you want to be a wizard, Meilan?”

Meilan, who was normally extraordinarily quiet, gave a short laugh before replying, “Well, my family always wanted one of us to be a famous wizard for the prestige. And since my brothers were all lazy screw-ups, I was forced to go. I didn’t like the idea much at first, but now I’m glad they forced me to begin my training.”

Arianna stopped walking abruptly then began walking again as she talked. “Why wouldn’t you want to learn how to use magic? I mean, there isn’t any other job that’s cooler than making the world a better place and being able to do the magic that all kids, well Earth kids, see on TV and wish they could do.”

“Well, I just didn’t want to go because I thought I’d be lonely. It seemed scary to me at the time to go off on my own to this strange school and learn all this dangerous stuff. “

“Yeah, I guess it was pretty creepy learning about all these evil forces that I never even knew existed.”

Meilan didn’t answer. Instead, she changed the subject and asked, “You think Ranth’s doing okay?”

“Wherever he is, I’m sure he’s doing fine. He’s pretty

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tough.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s just that I hate that we have to sit here and just wait for news of where he is and how he is. I wish we could go out and do something about it.”

Before Arianna could say, “What’s stopping us?” she noticed Digorence walking a short distance behind them, and pointed him out to Meilan.

“Exactly how long have you been following us?” Meilan asked.

“I wasn’t following you. I just made an important discovery and I’m on my way to see Arcanious. I certainly do not have time to spy on a couple of novices,” he said in his usual unpleasant manner.

“Intermediates,” Meilan and Arianna corrected at the same time.

“Whatever,” Digorence said with a huff. “Like you’d really understand a disturbance in the space/time continuum anyway.” And then he rushed off, still mumbling to himself as he disappeared up the path.

The girls caught some snatches of his conversation with himself. Something about time and having to fix it. Or perhaps he was talking about great wizards back in time. They weren’t really sure, but when Arianna turned to Meilan and the two girls’ eyes met, they couldn’t help but laugh. It seemed that suddenly Digorence was Digorence, and that whatever had been wrong before wasn’t anymore. They couldn’t explain the

feeling, but it was there.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the girls starting talking about Ranth. Maybe Ranth's disappearance had something to do with what was happening. If something was happening. But it was hard to deny that strange things were happening. Harken had gone to Atlantis to investigate the Renegade presence. He was captured and replaced by an impostor. The impostor tried to make Skyhall attack Dementia. Digorence's Zombietiser had gone haywire; and then when he tried to fix it, something had happened. And their friend Ranth had disappeared.

"What happened to the impostor?" Meilan asked Arianna.

"Wasn't Digorence supposed to interrogate him?"

Arianna and Meilan ran to catch up with Digorence, thankful that for once the gnome wasn't using his gnooter.



Meanwhile, Digorence was busy trying to tell Arcanious about this "time" thing he had discovered and Arcanious was staring at the gnome like he was insane, only adding to the gnome's frustration.

"I'm telling you, this is all true," Digorence insisted.

"Listen, Digorence, just because this alternate time data was on your gnomputer doesn't mean it's from our time. You're not as blindingly intelligent as you're inclined to believe."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that," Digorence mouthed before he could stop himself.

Arcanious resisted the urge to crush Digorence with a

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powerful blast of magic as the gnome took a deep breath to prepare to pierce the Fort Knox that was the wall of Arcanious' newfound stubbornness.

"Okay, listen here. The data's not the important part anyway. Take a look at this picture," Digorence said as he pulled up an image on the screen. "Look familiar?"

Arcanious seemed to be at a sudden loss for words, then he said, "Who can say? So many students, so many wizards."

"The name Mortimer ring a bell?"

"Yes . . . but . . ."

"Ah-ha!" Digorence shouted as he jumped up. "His name is Mortimer. He was the leader of Squad Zero and one of the most prominent wizards in Skyhall. The reason I bring up this time-loop theory is because . . ." The opening of the door interrupted the rest of what Digorence had to say.

"I'm getting really sick of people interrupting me," he muttered as Arianna and Meilan apologized for interrupting.

"I'm terribly sorry, Arcanious," Arianna said quickly, "but Meilan and I don't want to wait for someone else to find out where Ranth is. We want to do something about it. And we want to know why no one has interrogated the impostor yet to see what he knows."

"Do you honestly think we haven't tried? No one's been able to get any information out of him. And we are absolutely not going to use that wretched Zombietiser ever again."

"That's because you wizards are too goody-goody to exert

any real fear in him. No evil villain's going to spill it if you ask him like this: 'Oh please, mister, we know you've done some bad things but now you can be good. Pretty, pretty please with a cherry on top, will you tell us where you took all the kidnapped people?'"

"That's enough, Digorence. If you two think you can squeeze a confession out of him, then go ahead and try; but you'll be wasting your time."

"Back to what I was saying," Digorence hissed as Arianna and Meilan started to leave the room.

While Digorence turned around to point at the picture of Mortimer once more, Arianna swiftly grabbed hold of the Zombietiser and hoped that taking it wouldn't get rid of the picture on the screen.

Digorence turned around once more and noticed his Zombietiser was gone. He grinned for a moment before turning to address Arcanious again. "My theory is that they took this powerful wizard away from us before he learned much here and twisted him into one of them. That way they gain a superior, powerful wizard and rid us of one of ours."



Arianna calmly walked into the cell with the impostor. The man sat there without an expression or any sign that he was alive, causing Arianna to think that he was asleep.

Hurriedly, she moved in to activate the Zombietiser and nearly screamed when he suddenly lunged forward, saying, "I

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wouldn't use that thing if I were you. You'll just screw up and erase everything."

"How do you know about this?"

"I have ears, do I not?"

"Why tell me this?"

"I like my memories. All the pain and suffering I've caused makes me proud."

Meilan gave him a disgusted look and said, "You're a sick and twisted creature. You don't deserve to live."

"Such hate-filled words. Yet I doubt you're here just to taunt me. What is it that you're here to know?"

"We want to know where you took our friend. A wizard."

"That's all? Well, I suppose I could tell you. After all, the knowledge would only allow the seeds of despair in your hearts to blossom. Very well, he's in Subterranea at the warlock school. Have fun wishing that you could be capable enough to rescue him. I'll enjoy watching any rescue team that gets sent there only to be torn into itty bitty bits. Oh, yeah, and say hi to Behemoth for me." With that, he leaned once again into the wall and resumed his statue-like expression.

As they left the room, they hurriedly ran toward Digorence's room to put the Zombietiser away so that no one would know they had taken it.

"Do you think we should believe him?" Meilan asked.

"I'm not sure. But it's the only lead we have. I guess we'll just have to talk to Arcanious about it." Meilan agreed and the

two of them made their way to the room where Arcanious and Digorence were having their discussion.

Bursting into the room once more, Arianna and Meilan found Digorence and Arcanious still in a heated discussion. Arcanious, ignoring the girls' interruption, said, "But why would they go through all this trouble for just one wizard?"

Digorence looked over to Arianna and Meilan. He winked and pointed to the empty space next to his gnomputer where the Zombietiser should go, while he replied, "Who knows. Maybe they did it to others, too."

"Well, I don't know, Digorence. I still need time to think about this."

"Yes, time. Time, exactly!" Digorence shouted before letting out a loud "Hmmpphh!"

Arianna decided it was as good a time as any to interrupt. "Arcanious, we have reason to believe that the warlocks have kidnapped some of our students and placed them in a warlock academy in Subterranea."

"Well, it makes sense. Sort of," Digorence said before Arcanious could reply. "The warlocks took away this Mortimer fellow. Now they're taking away our students. Slowly depriving us of talented wizards. They must be planning something big, really big."

Arianna felt that what she said was totally lost on Arcanious and so she spoke out again. "We must go to rescue Ranth!"

"No, child. Ranth's safety is not the most important thing

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right now. This time-loop thing must be stopped first.”

Digorence jumped to his feet again, shouting as he jumped up and down, “OH, NOW YOU AGREE WITH ME?” His agitated display ended as he seemed to consider his own words. And then it was clear he realized that Arcanious finally had agreed with him.

“How can you say that?” Meilan shouted as Arianna, having heard enough, pulled her friend out the door before she did something drastic.

“Nice going, genius,” Digorence muttered under his breath as he, too, began to walk out the door.

“I’ll be back,” he said as he closed the door behind him.

As the gnome caught up with the two girls, he decided he would try to do his best to calm them down before they went off on their own to rescue Ranth. “Look, I know what he said seems a little harsh, but he’s just looking at the big picture and trying to make sure we can keep everyone safe by making sure we still have a sufficient number of wizards here to defend against whatever the warlocks are planning.”

“Yes, I realize the importance of that; but we can’t do that yet. We have to rescue Ranth. I don’t want to just sit here and wait for someone else to do it when I’m perfectly capable of going and rescuing my friend,” Arianna said before Digorence could say anything further.

“Well, all right,” the gnome agreed, surprising the two girls greatly. “But you two aren’t just going to run off by yourselves

with no idea where you're going and with no plan. Come on, I'll go talk with Mathias about this. I'll convince him you two are the right choice for this mission. But when I come and get you, you two have to act like you don't know what's going on."



CHAPTER ELEVEN: DARKHALL

Together Digorence, Arianna, and Meilan walked to the portal room in Squad Zero headquarters. There Mathias sat waiting for them.

“It has come to my attention,” he said, “that several Skyhallians including fellow wizards have gone missing. We suspect the warlocks have something to do with it. I want you and Meilan to infiltrate the warlock academy and pose as students. While you’re there, I want you to gather any information you can about anything that might be related.

“I have to warn you, though, that the people there will be vicious fiends who will backstab you at any opportunity. Be on your guard at all times and trust no one there if you do decide to go. Do you think that you are capable of such a dangerous mission?”

“I think we can handle it,” Arianna said.

“What do you think, Meilan?” Mathias asked.

“I think so, too,” she said.

“Well, if you are going to take this mission, this is what you will have to do. Your destination will be Subterranea but we cannot send you there directly. We will send you to an intermediate destination. You will be met by one of our agents stationed in Darkhall. He will take you to Subterranea and to others who will determine whether they think you truly wish to become a part of their academy. Convince them and get access to their school. Once you are there, look around for any information on our missing wizards or other things that have been happening.”

“What if they all simply decided to become warlocks?” Digorence suggested.

“Ranth would never do such a thing,” Arianna and Meilan said at the same time.

“Well, if you are sure you are going, be ready to teleport back to Skyhall at any second in case things get too rough.”

“Yes, sir,” they said as they got ready to step into the portal.

Digorence groaned as he tried to set the portal to the secret destination. “Great,” he said, “Arcanious entered a password restricting access.”

“Why don’t you ask him to grant us access?” Arianna asked.

“Because he’s not supposed to know about this mission. Just give me a minute and I’ll figure this out. I am a genius, after

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all.”

The two girls sat down and got comfortable while Digorence tried to hack the password. Mathias left after a few minutes to finish his preparations for Atlantis. After about an hour, Digorence was still trying to figure it out.

“Ah ha!” he suddenly cried. “I got it. The password is the month, day, and year my contract at Skyhall terminates!” he said with a laugh. “I should have known,” he laughed again. “Now, be careful, kiddies, don’t let the boogeymen scare you into getting yourself into deeper trouble.”

As the portal flared into life, Arianna took a deep breath and stepped through. Meilan glanced over to Digorence. Her expression said she was uncertain; then she, too, stepped into the portal.



Skyhall’s agent met the girls and helped them get safely to Subterranea. Before he left them, he told them to show no mercy when proving themselves to the Darkhall guardian, and then he gave them a Thought Eater to mask the goodness of their souls.

The land of Subterranea was scarcely lit. Dark-colored birds cawed overhead and strange creatures moved around in the dense brush. Dark demon-shaped shadows and silhouettes were strewn about the landscape, causing Arianna and Meilan to be on their guard every second. The overall effect was vastly frightening, but the two girls resolved to keep their calm.

Ahead, they saw a clearing and ran toward it. As they

reached the middle of the clearing they spun around and caught sight of a figure flying out of the forest like a ghost. Utilizing all of their self control they kept themselves from screaming out.

“What are you doing in Subterranea, my dears,” the figure’s raspy voice seemed to whisper.

“We are here to become warlocks.”

“What makes you think you are worthy?”

“We have powers beyond the likes of Skyhall. We come here to become truly powerful and deal with those loathsome wizards,” Arianna said, lying easily.

“And how do I know that you are not simply some wizards trying to infiltrate our academy?”

Arianna made sure her face did not betray her true purpose. “I have power. Power enough to smite the likes of you.”

“Cockiness! Excellent! Perhaps you have what it takes. Perhaps just one simple test will suffice,” he said, throwing a blast of energy at Arianna.

She countered by bringing a large spire of earth from the ground to absorb the blow, then casting two massive glowing orbs of fire at the ghost-like warlock.

Meilan conjured an intense blizzard, which seemed to completely freeze the ethereal man.

“Impressive,” he said, conjuring a tiny ball of light. He threw it at them and suddenly it expanded to three times the size of the clearing.

They threw magical shields around themselves and turned

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invisible while the glare of the orb kept them from being seen. While the figure was still focusing on powering the spell, they crept behind him and each shoved two balls of lightning into his back.

He howled with agony and stopped casting his spell. Suddenly appearing as a man rather than a ghost, the warlock got on his knees and looked at the two, his eyes brimming with tears. “Please, I’ve got three little ones to feed, spare me.”

“No!” Arianna yelled before Meilan said anything. “No mercy,” she said as she watched the agonized man.

Suddenly he sprang upward as if nothing had happened. “You are perfect candidates for our academy. Follow me,” he said as he sprang off into the forest.

Keeping up with the racing warlock meant allowing themselves to be cut by vines and tree branches, but the pain was better than the alternative of being lost in Subterranea. At last they came in sight of an entirely black castle that stood in the middle of the forest.

Arianna could sense a strong presence of evil residing at the impressive-looking castle, and she resolved to get her mission over with as quickly as possible. When she looked back at Meilan, she saw that her friend was on the verge of breaking down. She reached out and touched Meilan’s hand. The touch, though brief, was enough to stop Meilan’s hands from trembling and her face to recover its color.

The warlock took them inside the castle. Once they were in

the courtyard, Arianna could see evidence of much chaos. Fights were breaking out all over the place, both magical and physical, tables were overturned and broken, and there were many screams of pain.

“We have managed to capture groups of wizards for them to play with,” the warlock said, pointing to a Skyhall wizard being beaten up by several warlocks-in-training. “Of course,” he sighed, “Some of them just have to ruin it by winning against our warlocks,” he sighed, then smiled as he said, “Those we play special games with. Come, see, you’re going to enjoy this.”

The two girls nearly gasped as they caught sight of Ranth leaping off a table and slamming the nearest warlock in the face. With a blast of magic he caught several more on fire. Several senior warlocks stood ready to intervene when he summoned an inferno of fire.

Before they could do anything, one fell back, apparently knocked unconscious. Another’s magic shield could do nothing to protect him from Ranth’s fist.

“Get out of here,” he screamed, as he broke his fellow wizards free from the fights with blasts of magic. When the senior warlocks caught up to him, they brought out their magical hammers and slammed them into the ground.

Ranth levitated over the shockwaves and sent a bolt of potent fire deep within a warlock’s heart.

“I’ll cover; you go,” he shouted as he freed another Skyhallian from the center of a mob of warlocks.

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Arianna decided that this was not the time to leap to her friend's rescue. Every one of the senior warlocks was in the room dealing with Ranth, who kept summoning arcs of fire from the wall to get rid of them.

Suddenly, the ghost man disappeared through the wall. He returned a moment later with a glowing rope full of Skyhallians. "If you will follow me, I will show you the dungeons," he said, dragging the captured Skyhallians away. "I expect that one," he said pointing to Ranth, "will be converted."

"Converted?" Arianna asked.

"Forcibly made a warlock. We insert this machine into his brain and reprogram his thought patterns so that he becomes a warlock. Don't worry about it. I don't suspect such a thing will ever happen to you. If you had any goodness, you'd have jumped in to save the wretch by now. Most I bring in do, you know. You two are special, though; I saw that right away. So I'll let you in on a little secret. We taint their magic and only let them think they have a chance. They really don't, though. A pity, really. The unwilling ones are always strong. His mastery over fire is astounding. No wonder so many have died by his hand even with the taint. Perhaps we can get him to join willingly eventually."

Ranth picked up one of the hammers that a warlock hit him with and was waylaying his foes with shockwaves and arcs of fire. When he was surrounded by a tight circle of warlocks protected by a magical barrier strong enough to resist his fire

magic, he swung the hammer into one of their heads, cracking through the magical shield, and then turned around and did the same to another. It looked like Ranth was winning but then the warlock the two girls were walking with clapped his hands together and the other warlocks hit Ranth with a powerful paralysis spell.

“Come away now,” the ghost man said as he led them deep within the castle, dragging the glowing rope cage of Skyhallians to a dungeon cell. “Perhaps you can watch us convert him later. Just between us, I slipped that one a vial of power enhancement so we could have better entertainment.”

The ghost man showed them around the school and then to their rooms. Before he left them, he said, “By the way, I am Mortimer, Mortimer the Warlock. I run this academy.”

In separate rooms they sat alone thinking of how they were going to set their friends free. Arianna sat on her bed hugging her knees, trying to get out of her mind how horrible and vile the place was. Calming herself down, she thought about Meilan and how she must be feeling, and she knew that once they were together they could build up enough courage to see this rescue mission through.

Several schemes ran through her head, but she knew she needed to talk with Meilan to better determine how this was going to work. She closed her eyes, and the sights of the blood-stained, cracked walls vanished. For a moment she found peace, and with that, clarity of thought.

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Hoping that somehow she could reach out to her friend, Arianna tried to radiate out confidence and a message that somehow they would come out of this victorious.

A few hours passed before Mortimer returned. “You are invited to the conversion ceremony,” he said. When Arianna didn’t immediately respond, he added, “I don’t suppose I need to ask twice. Do I?”

Reunited with Meilan, Arianna walked with Mortimer to a large arena, which was filled to capacity with warlocks and students. The arena was covered by a domed ceiling some twenty feet high.

“We are fortunate to be able to watch two conversions,” Mortimer remarked.

“Who is the other?”

“A powerful Skyhallian wizard named Harken,” he said with a sinister laugh. “Before the conversion, we will once again test their strength, but that’s just for the benefit of a few special visitors. Bring in the behemoth,” he shouted, clapping his hands.

A demon the color of midnight entered the arena to shouts and cheers. While it had had to crawl into the arena through a double-sized entryway, it stood tall now, its two great, impaling horns brushing the top of the dome, sending a shower of sparks across the arena.

Mortimer said with a snicker to Meilan, “How would you like to face the behemoth in the arena?”

Unflinching under the weight of Mortimer's stare, Meilan said, "I'd send it back to wherever it came from."

Arianna reached out and clasped her friend's hand. She did so briefly and secretly so that Mortimer would not see. She was glad to be safe in a viewing area protected by enchantments and proud of Meilan whom she was certain Mortimer was testing because he thought her the weaker of the two.

"Watch and learn," Mortimer said as he disappeared. When he reappeared, he was pulling a magical cage into the arena and inside the cage were Harken and Ranth. As he released the two wizards from the cage, he tossed them their force blades; then he walked to a throne-like chair that was part of a special viewing area Arianna had not seen before.

Magical energy cut a pentagram on the arena floor as Ranth and Harken grimly clasped hands and prepared themselves for battle. Arianna could see that Ranth was terrified of the behemoth but was trying to hide his fear. Harken, on the other hand, wasn't afraid; he was enraged, and his rage gave Ranth strength and Arianna hope.

Arianna and Meilan decided that now would be the best time to slip away to try to free the other wizards and so they slipped unseen out of the arena. As they crept quietly down the halls, the sound of their steps was masked by the echoes of cheers from the arena as Ranth and Harken battled Behemoth.



CHAPTER TWELVE: CONVERSION

Ranth and Harken kept their eyes on the demon called Behemoth as it circled toward them once again. Scars of burning flame were etched across the creature's body, as were jagged spikes ready for skewering wizards. Atop its head were two curved horns taller than either of the two wizards and on its hands were jagged claws of similar length.

As they circled the beast and awaited death, Ranth and Harken unleashed their magic with a fury rarely seen. They combined their spells more often than not and held nothing in reserve. They did not do this because they thought they could win, for they had little hope of defeating this creature. They did not do this because they believed the warlocks' promises of freedom if they survived, for warlocks were a treacherous lot.

Their only consolation was the thought that death would save them from being forced into becoming warlocks, and enraging this monstrosity would bring about their salvation from being used against their friends.

Their foe opened its mouth and spewed a massive stream of fire so potent that it broke through the magical enchantments protecting the spectators, burning a luckless warlock. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Ranth quickly lashed out at the demon and vaulted away to safety, barely avoiding the sweeping claws that would have been the end of him.

But the creature did not bleed from the wound. Instead it spewed molten lava from the wound until it crusted over, and became a faint line of burning fire, joining all the others.

Suddenly Behemoth charged at the two, causing them to dive in separate directions. As it circled to face them, its howl seemed to mock the look of despair and terror on their faces as it tried to decide which to destroy first.

Unable to take it any longer, Ranth shot upwards exceedingly fast and slipped through the creature's clumsy attempt to grab at him. As he reached the creature's head, he shot past it and then grabbed onto the massive horns.

He swung around, kicking downward with all his might and causing Behemoth to roar and rear up. As Ranth swung back around, he pulled out his force blade as he launched into the air. Using the added force of the fall to the creature's head, he attempted to drive his force blade into the creature's skull.

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In a fit of rage, Behemoth tossed Ranth into the air and almost skewered him, but Harken flew to catch Ranth before he met his death.

As Harken lowered Ranth to the ground, he lashed out against the demon with a powerful arc of wind energy. He swore when it didn't even faze his opponent. The demon simply stood there and stared at Ranth, its eyes blazing with fire.

And then it toppled over. Along its body a jagged line appeared, not unlike a fault appearing in a rock after an earthquake. Molten lava erupted from the fault line and then a great explosion of molten rock and fire filled the inner circle of the arena.



Arianna and Meilan tried not to let despair drown them as they looked around the hall, trying to figure out where they should go. The sounds of the battle below them made them want to hurry, but they didn't want to rush headlong into danger.

For some time they stood there against the wall, trying to formulate a plan as they remained hidden in the shadows. Then suddenly, a distant muttering floated toward their ears.

Instantly the two were alert and staring down the hall in the direction of the noise. The muttering grew louder, yet they couldn't see the approaching figure. They spun around and saw nothing, then they turned back around again, too late to realize that they needed to look down.

Arianna dove to the floor as a magical bolt shot past her head, but she did it too hastily and instead of rolling gracefully to her feet her hip hit the floor.

As the short assailant fumbled to reload and dodge Meilan's attacks, something in Arianna's pocket went "Beep" and their attacker suddenly froze. Mystified, Meilan slowly crept forward to see what had happened to the gremlin while Arianna pulled the device out of her pocket.

Suddenly realization dawned and Arianna pried the Zombietiser from her pocket. Glancing at the screen, her eyes read, "Communicating with main unit." The two wizards watched as a screen detached itself from the device held in Arianna's hands, and they prayed it wouldn't make too loud of a noise.

"Well," said Digorence through a large amount of static. "Hang on a moment," he said as he attempted to fix the sound issue.

"Umm, Digorence, we're currently in Dark Hall and I really don't think we have time for you to sit around and try and fix your machine. Any moment now warlocks could be swarming in, so how about getting to the point?"

"Sheesh, if I had known you'd be so ungrateful . . ."

"This is no time for your sarcasm, Digorence! Ranth and Harken could be dying as we speak," Arianna cut in irritably.

"Okay, okay, let me get a quick view of the victims' memories . . ."

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“How about hurrying it up? I’m starting to hear footsteps.”

“Let’s see . . . Got it! The gremlin here knows one of the wizard’s at Skyhall . . .”

“Why is he here?” Arianna asked as the sound of the footsteps grew uncomfortably close.

“Talking to the wizards . . . thoughts of revenge . . . some sort of plan . . .”

“No time, Digorence! The warlocks are coming.”

“In that case, I’ll just make this quick change and release the gremlin. He’ll be of some help now.”

The screen reattached itself with much more speed than before, and the gremlin gradually unfroze. It took him only a few seconds to regain a sense of what was happening, and he quickly had another bolt in the slot of his weapon.

Arianna and Meilan were about to tell him where they were from, but Digorence had been prepared for this and had left a few thoughts in the Gremlin’s mind. “So you’re from Skyhall? Someone’s coming, follow me.”

And with that the gremlin ran straight into the wall, and then disappeared. Shadows started to move across the walls as the girls took a deep breath and ran after the gremlin.

Taking a look around them, the girls discovered that they were located in a small unlit room. The gremlin held a finger to his lips as he listened to the two warlocks walk past.

“This was a disguised portal that I pulled over the wall. Something I’m sure your gnome Digorence would wish he had

invented. Come on now, they left," he walked back out. "Don't expect something like that to happen again. That was the last one I took with me."

"What'd you do with the others?" Arianna asked as they followed the gremlin. She figured if the gremlin would have harmed them that Digorence would have seen it with his zombietiser, and so they followed the gremlin without fear of his betraying them.

"Now I'm sure you'll want to rescue the rest of your pals," the gremlin went on, ignoring the question. "The cells are located downstairs." With that, he disappeared again, leaving Arianna and Meilan to find their fellow wizards alone.

Sighting a last small flight of stairs, they crept down it, prepared to deal with any guards.

Peering into the room, they couldn't see anything at first, and they noticed another small set of stairs leading into what would most likely be the cells.

Prepared to deal with anything that came their way, Arianna and Meilan quickly moved down the stairs, hoping to catch any guards by surprise.

Once they burst in, they quickly looked around the room, wishing they had moved in more quietly. Meilan suddenly saw the magically-bound wizards in the far back of the massive room littered with boxes of ghastly things that made the two girls glad that it was dimly lit.

And then it seemed as if the shadows themselves moved.

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“It must be the ghost man. And I don’t think he has that weird disguise on,” Meilan whispered.

“Okay, on the count of three, a silent burst of magic. One . . . two . . . three!” On three the two unleashed a burst of magic that slammed into the black-clothed figure blending in the shadows—or at least, that’s what should have happened.

What actually transpired was the two girls released all their stored energy only to have nothing come forth from their hands. Arianna was so surprised that as she leaned forward to cast the spell and had nothing come forth, she tripped and fell head first onto the floor.

The dummy fell out of the shadows then, and then Meilan turned around as a warlock hit her firmly in the stomach. Arianna got to her feet in time to see her friend fall over, and then the rage took over. With a leap more powerful than she thought herself capable of, she cleared the distance between the smug-looking warlock and herself, unleashing a blow on the warlock’s head that came too fast to be blocked and too hard to stay conscious.

Landing nimbly on her feet, she quickly knelt down to help Meilan to her feet. As she turned her head from the rest of the room, a figure dropped from the shadows.

Strange shapes and words appeared in the very air as he worked his magic quickly, before Arianna turned back towards the room. She took one step forward, and then a nightmarish apparition engulfed her vision.

Outlined in a color that could only be described, however insensibly, as neon black, the image stretched to the sky and filled Arianna's vision. The word sky floated in her thoughts for a while before she realized that somehow, she wasn't in the cells anymore.

A path literally twisted across the sky in front of her, and Arianna watched as wizards, carried by demons, were taken away as they begged to be rescued. She put the sounds of their screaming out of her mind as she looked around her.

The path in front of her was extremely narrow, and to its sides a fiery pit of lava awaited her. "Thank goodness I can see it," she said before she could stop herself.

As if in response, an eerie mist started to rise from the floor, obscuring her vision. Arianna screamed.

Meilan, who after being hit had landed on the stairs, looked up towards the room and saw Arianna standing right at the start of the floor, screaming. Puzzled, she took a step forward onto the floor, and saw a huge monstrosity with slobbering fangs. She nearly laughed but took a step back instead. Once she was on the floor, the monster vanished, leaving her with a clear view of the room.

"Arianna, it's an illusion, don't open your eyes," she whispered. Some time passed and Meilan began to worry when Arianna didn't reply but didn't know what else to do about the situation.

"It's just an illusion," she told her friend. "What's happening

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isn't real." She closed her eyes and stepped forward into the illusion's boundaries. It didn't affect her, but then she couldn't see where her friend stood.

"Arianna, it's just an illusion. Trust me. If you don't believe it's true, it can't hurt you. But close your eyes first," she repeated.

Meilan tried to find her friend, but walked straight into her, and fell backwards.

Through the mist, a flying creature shot at her, with claws outstretched to grab her. It was too far to the right, however, and the mist must have made it miss, because it only managed to bump into her.

Meilan fell to the floor with a loud thump.

Arianna felt the tendrils of the earthquake behind her and cold sweat formed on her forehead as she tried not to fall off the path.

"I'm here to help, Arianna," Meilan said to her friend with her hands.

"I'm here to help," a friendly voice said. But then the flying creature came back again.

Meilan's fingers gripped Arianna's arm.

Its talons dug into her arm.

"Don't believe in it," Meilan said again, noticing her friend had shut her eyes and started to scream again.

"Don't believe it," came a mocking tone.

"Arianna, close your eyes!" It was the friendly voice again.

Arianna stopped screaming as she shut her eyes, and felt her friend's arm gripping hers.

"It was just an illusion...it couldn't hurt us . . . but what was the point of it? Why didn't they just cut us down?"

"Maybe it was a diversion. Maybe he took the wizards!"

Annoyed that they would have to find the cell where the wizards were being held captive with their eyes closed, the two friends quickly stood up and stretched their arms ahead of them. Perhaps it was better that they couldn't see, as they were spared the sight of the former occupants of the other cells.

Miraculously they managed to get far enough into the cells without harming themselves to hear the terrified mumblings of the wizards caught up in the illusion.

"So that's why the illusions are here. For torture."

"Guys, it's Meilan and Arianna from Skyhall."

Torture. . . .Skyhall . . .

The wizards tried their best not to scream but failed.

"If we can see each other, that means the illusion is connected, and we can find the wizards that way, cut off the illusion, and bust them out. But that means we'll have to open our eyes."

Cut . . . out . . . eyes . . .

The blood curdling screams of the wizards almost made them want to think of another plan, but they braced themselves for what they would see regardless. Before they did, Meilan realized why the warlocks hadn't come to investigate when

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Arianna had started screaming.

As she opened her eyes Arianna was relieved to notice that they were on the other side of the path, even though she knew that they were in an illusion.

The atmosphere around them was incredibly blurred, and the images were warped around themselves, making it nearly impossible to see the terrified group of wizards.

After sighting them they started to run towards their fellow wizards, which only brought more screams from them.

The wizards watched in terror as the two monsters started to run towards them, all that is except for one. While the rest had sat and screamed, he had watched the bloodcurdling sights in quiet, determined not to let his captors win against him. Therefore, when he saw the two monsters charging towards them he instantly ran towards them, deciding that if they killed him he would at least be freed from this ghastly world.

Meilan saw the man running towards them and said aloud to herself, “You’d think if they were really that scared they would close their eyes . . .” and then stopped once she saw that he was charging towards them, not coming to greet them.

“Perish foul beasts!” He screamed as he launched himself at Arianna, who dodged and then kicked him in the shin. Her former life on Earth had prepared her well, and she already had the man on the ground unable to move.

“They think we’re monsters, Arianna,” Meilan said, trying to figure out why.

“Listen to me wizard. I don’t know who you are but I need you to close your eyes okay?”

When he didn’t, Arianna added, “Or I’ll rip them out,” and he instantly obeyed.

“Now open them.” The wizard opened his eyes, and then closed them again. When he closed his eyes, the sounds of the other world faded . . . He let this sink into his mind and then suddenly he shouted to his other companions “It’s an illusion! Close your eyes.”

Arianna turned towards Meilan, her eyes still open, and said, “Umm . . . now what?”

Meilan nearly laughed but had to stop and think. She walked forward with her eyes shut, and felt a cold metal. Her hand moved around and then stopped as she reached a key.

“Arianna this could be a trap. The key is right in the lock.”

“I don’t think so, I doubt they thought anyone other than they could get past the illusions. Besides who would come here other than they?”

“Good point,” Meilan conceded, and she turned the key.

“The illusion is gone,” Arianna notified her, not bothering to hide her shock.

“We’re here to help. Did you lose anyone?” Meilan asked the wizards.

“Surprisingly no,” came a muffled reply.

“Okay guys, before we get out of here we’re gonna have to help rescue Harken and Ranth.”

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“But we could be killed or recaptured. I don’t ever want to be back in here again,” the reply came with uncontested agreement.

“Look, Ranth and Harken have probably saved your butt at least once, and they would continue to do so if they were alive. And come on, you’re not going to just leave two girls to save them are you?” Arianna said, sure she would win them over.

Instead, she witnessed an extremely fast, yet quiet, retreat out of the dungeon. “You’ll be lucky to survive out there!” she hissed at them as the last head disappeared.

They tried to stifle a laugh at the embarrassing scene they had just witnessed, but failed.



Ranth and Harken sighed in despair as the settling of the massive cloud of dust revealed that the demon had split itself into a score of miniature replicas. Grimly they hefted their force blades and readied their magic as the replicas charged toward them.

“This looks like the end, my friend. We can’t fight forever, but if this demon can keep splitting into littler ones, then I think it can.”

“It’s been an honor serving Skyhall, sir. And alongside you as well.”

“Honorable to the very end. Now that’s a true wizard!” Harken remarked to himself as he looked for some way to get the boy out of here alive.

Much to his dismay, the little demons chose this moment to organize and swarm at the wizards. Just as the demons neared sword range, the wizards heard the sound of multiple explosions.

A couple of the slower warlocks were killed in the explosion, but many of them were too fast to be caught in such a simple trap.

However, there were now multiple points of exit from the building.

The two wizards shook their heads in disbelief as a black clad figure appeared out of the air. “Junksmith!” the unidentified wizard shouted as outraged warlocks began to demand to know what was going on.

Ranth frowned; the voice seemed oddly familiar.

A gremlin popped out of nowhere as well. Ranth frowned as he watched the gremlin dispatch the demons with ease. He must be dreaming. After all, just before he was about to die, a wizard and gremlin had appeared from thin air for no apparent reason.

His conviction that he was dreaming grew stronger as Arianna and Meilan entered as well.

“About now would be a good time to escape. Unless, of course, you want to stay and die!” Junksmith cried to the two girls as he ran to Ranth and Harken, who were escaping through the wall.

Arianna ducked a clumsily-swung blow and knocked over

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two warlocks with a gale of wind allowing Meilan to escape from the clump of warlocks surrounding her. Running as fast as they could, they headed out of the building and into the forest of skeletal trees.

The forest provided absolutely no cover, leaving the warlocks with a great view of where the wizards were heading.

“The other wizards—do you think they got away safely?”

“If they didn’t, then we would never be able to find them; and there would be nothing we could do to help them.”

“I’m sure there are those of you that are built for running,” the gremlin interrupted, “but I’m not sure any of us could outrun them for very long. Perhaps we should warp back now?”

“You four keep an eye out for warlocks,” the unidentified wizard said.

Ready to react with a variety of defensive spells, but unsure of whether they would work out here, the wizards watched the approaching warlocks and tried to sense if there were any that intended to be sneaky.

“They’re being surprisingly slow,” The gremlin remarked.

“Yes, it’s almost like they want us to escape,” said the wizard.

There was a burst of something that wasn’t exactly magic, and then they did.

The wizards were back in Skyhall, safe, but their two mysterious companions were not. Too tired and too relieved to

be home to ponder this any further, the four wizards staggered toward the door to the rest of the barracks.

The floor became their beds.



When she awoke, Pox gave Arianna a warm greeting. “It seems that whoever transported you home slipped some kind of sleeping aid into you. Now don’t look shocked, I don’t think they meant any kind of harm. I think they were worried you’d try to do too much. Or maybe it was just a side effect . . . Anyways, you’re needed in Arcanious’ headquarters.

Arianna smiled at the healer, mumbled a quick thanks and left hurriedly toward Arcanious’ quarters. As she reached the door, she started to knock, but instead paused for a moment and heard:

“So what are the renegades planning to do?”

“It seems they have an innate talent for doing the exact thing that could wreak the most havoc upon us.”

“And they are planning?”

“They’re planning to go back in time to save Mobius before his demise and then bring him here to present time.”

“How could we counter such a move?” the archwizard asked.

“We could go back in time and stop them from rescuing Mobius, but that would require a time machine, which we don’t have.”

“We will have to go find them before they get to him, but

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there is one disadvantage for us. We have to be careful not to interfere with the course of history. They do not have such concerns. After all, that is their goal.”

“Of course. But first we will have to infiltrate their base and go back in time.”

“And we have to protect ourselves from a counterattack from Subterranea. I doubt they’re going to forget what we’ve just done,” Harken said.

“Have squad alpha and gamma keep surveillance on the lands surrounding Skyhall. Make sure they report any suspicious activity immediately.”

“I will tell them right now,” he said as he left to go.

“Now I must talk this over with the Tri-Wizard Council. Arianna, I know you’re listening out there. You and Meilan should show Ranth around the intermediate training area and fill him in on what he’s missed,” the archwizard said to them before he left to see the Uber Wizards.

Once Arianna and Meilan were reunited with Ranth, they quickly started to talk.

“What happened to you?” they asked him as they walked toward Squad Zero Headquarters.

“I was kidnapped by warlocks and taken to a fake academy that they claimed was only for the most promising wizards. I didn’t believe them at first but then Mortimer convinced me everything was real,” he said after a while.

“Mortimer? Who’s Mortimer?” Arianna asked.

“Don’t you remember? He’s . . . he’s . . . ” Ranth said puzzled. “Anyways, they were using me and other Skyhallian wizards to power a time gem. They used some sort of memory wipeout on me when I discovered what they were doing, but I seem to remember now. Then we were taken to the warlock academy for the warlocks to have fun with. So what have I missed?”

“First of all, there was this big induction ceremony that took place,” Arianna said.

“That’s where they pretended to kidnap us and take us to this secret place where Mortimer—I mean Mathias—made us take our wizardly vows and tests. Those of us who passed are now learning how to counter ancient forms of the renegades’ magic,” Meilan added.

“Sounds like I missed a lot then,” Ranth said.

The two girls agreed with a laugh and offered to show him around.

“Thanks for offering, but I really gotta pass. I’m exhausted and I bet you guys are too. Let’s save the tour for another day.”

Arianna and Meilan agreed, and the three of them walked slowly to the squad barracks, hoping to get as much rest as possible while they could.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Harken sat alone in Digorence's quarters waiting for the gnome to show up. He had received word that the gnome had requested to see him.

Although the last thing he wanted to do was talk to the ornery gnome, he was curious to know why Digorence wanted to see him.

A couple of moments passed and he heard the sound of the gnome's gnooter zooming down the hallway.

As the gnome entered his room, Harken remarked, "You know, you might actually try to walk. Exercise is good for you."

"You know," Digorence replied with a wry smile, "You might actually try getting a haircut. Not looking like that human David Bowie is good for you."

He drove the gnooter to a wall and started slowly walking to

his chair. However, he decided to be overdramatic and pretend the exertion of walking twenty feet to his chair left him momentarily winded. After he was done panting heavily for air, he turned to face Harken. “So, you have actually seen the renegades’ time machine, have you?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Did you get a clear look at it from many different angles?”

“I tried to fully observe it as well as I could, considering the place was crawling with renegades,” he replied, not sure where the conversation was going.

“Do me a favor and look at this orb,” Digorence said, handing him a white sphere. Harken looked at the gnome, then looked puzzled before he began to stare intently at the white orb. Suddenly there was a burst of light and Harken slumped to the floor.

The orb expanded and reformed as a rectangular screen. Digorence pushed a small plug into the back of the screen and smiled.

“Hello, Zombietiser mark two,” he said as he began to rummage through Harken’s memories.

Not at all sorry for tricking Harken into this, Digorence quickly rummaged through his memories, looking for anything having to do with the time machine. After his light snack arrived on three different carts, the gnome sat down to do some serious work.

For a long time he didn’t move, simply staring at the screen,

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analyzing every aspect of the device he could observe. After he decided he had seen enough, he transferred the data over to a separate program, where he virtually played around with how he was going to build his own device.

Once this was done, he grabbed one of his favorite inventions, cleverly hidden in a ring, and placed it on his figure. He waved it in a circle around his head, and then aimed it at the three empty carts sitting in his room. Not that he would need them exactly, but it was more impressive for his device to be seen holding up three steel carts instead of a few parts that he would be getting.

With the carts floating in the anti-gravity field above him, Digorence hopped on his gnooter and drove off, wondering how many scratches, dents, and scrapes he could make in the walls by the time he exited the castle.

Heading into town, he sought out the few parts he would need to build the device. When he found one, he would simply help himself to it and then leave the owner puzzled as to why his belongings were currently floating next to three carts above a gnome's head.

The victims probably would consider reporting him but figure that no one would believe them. Besides, they wouldn't have lost anything that was of any real value.

Before long, Digorence returned to his work place with a parade flying above his head. Various animals that had been sucked into the field indignantly fell to the floor as Digorence

released them, and they wandered off, grumbling. Then the gnome started to clear up his work space.

The gnome began tossing objects in every direction. The still-unconscious Harken was the first to be sent flying upward. When some of the objects, struck Harken soundly in the head, the wizard was momentarily stirred back to consciousness. But then a carelessly-flung family portrait stunned him back into unconsciousness.

All the exertion of flinging things into his antigravity field caused Digorence to take a short nap. He crawled into his bed and tried to fall asleep. When Harken stirred again and asked why he was floating in the air, Digorence grunted and picked up an object with his beam. He then flung it at the wizard to shut him up so he could take his nap.

Eventually, Harken woke again and considered saying something. After he remembered what had happened the last several times, he resolved to stay as quiet as possible so he wouldn't be the first to find out what happens when someone wakes an ornery gnome.

He didn't have to worry, however, for the gnome soon began to snore so loudly that earthquakes, thunderstorms, marching bands, and cannon fire started up just to try and prove they could be louder than the gnome. Harken immediately began to feel sorry for any of Digorence's family that had to deal with his cacophonous snoring while he was growing up.

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Suddenly, Digorence's eyes popped open and he looked at the awake wizard. "Before you say anything, I do not snore!" he raged.

"I didn't say you snored," Harken stammered.

"I didn't say you did say I snored," the gnome said confusingly.

"But you know, you kinda did sn—"

Digorence didn't allow Harken to complete the sentence. "Have fun back in la-la land," he said instead as he zapped the floating wizard with his Zombietiser.

"Humph! Stupid wizards who accuse poor innocent gnomes of snoring," he grumbled to himself as he quickly went back to work.

Digging in one of the corners of his room, Digorence located two prone figures and quickly switched them on.

"Golem-O-Matic Number 1!" The gnome yelled to his golem-making machine.

"Yes, sir," it responded in a robotic monotone.

"Bend these iron bars and weld them into a circle. We need to make a portal entry."

"Right away, sir," it replied, getting quickly to work.

"Golem-O-Matic Number 2!"

"Sir?" It asked.

"Fetch me," the gnome said smiling, "thirty-two hamburgers, a gallon of ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise, and a six-foot sub. And if anyone asks, you're Harken's golem,"

the gnome ordered, bursting with laughter.

He quickly refocused on his work, trying to figure out how the renegades opened a portal to time and managed to control how far back they went. The gnome was about to give up when two things happened. The first was that his food, enough for several large families, arrived along with a very large bill. As the gnome cheerfully floated the bill up to where Harken would read it the very second he woke up, he saw something that made him zoom in on a particular memory.

In the memory, the gnome could see a bunch of people with wires attached to their heads. Perhaps they were focusing on a certain time in history, the gnome mused to himself. Suddenly he saw a wizard throw a large number of jewels into the portal. The gnome zoomed in on the gems and discovered that they were the cheap kind coveted by humans.

“Hah! Easily obtainable,” he cried to himself. Hungrily he turned to face his food with dreamy eyes. Quickly he shoved mouthfuls of food into his mouth, cramming as much in as possible.

“You know, you are going to die eating like that. You’ll choke or run out of energy chewing and then stop breathing,” Harken, who had recovered again, said with a laugh.

“You know you are going to die having that much bad hair. You’ll put too much weight on your brain or accidentally look in a mirror and stop living,” the gnome retorted.

The vast quantity of food made him so thirsty that he

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downed the gallon of ketchup and mustard before searching for some sort of liquid to quench his thirst. What he found and quickly drank was, of course, not supposed to be consumed.

The taste was so nasty that he suddenly became so lightheaded he couldn't concentrate. The gnome didn't want Harken to know he had foolishly drunk diet soda and pretended that nothing had happened.

"C'mon, Sparky, you're coming to play lookout," he said as he took what little jewels he had and threw them into his portal. The gnome placed a hand on the portal and began to concentrate on a time when his law gnomes had reported that they had witnessed a large number of jewels being placed at a bank and had worried it was the warlocks bribing the humans.

To his complete and utter surprise, the portal flared to life. As Digorence was about to step through, Harken cleared his throat.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked. Digorence looked at him for a moment before dispelling the antigravity field and let him heavily fall to the floor.

When they appeared in the past, Harken placed a hand on Digorence's shoulder.

"I know what you're going to say, Harken. You don't have to tell me how much of a genius I am. I already know it," the gnome said narcissistically.

"Actually I was going to say thanks for the gentle landing," Harken said in a sinister tone.

Digorence laughed and they walked around the town. Since it was dark, they detoured into an alley near the bank. He pulled out a device and disguised himself. As a result of the light-headedness, he forgot to disguise Harken as well.

Back in Digorence's room, the cloaked renegade stopped feeding the spell that kept the portal going. "Everything is going just as planned, boss," he said with a smile.

Meanwhile, Digorence was shocked to discover that he had not only warped himself to the right time but also the right place.

It had been a while since Harken had last visited earth, and he was curious to see how Digorence was going to pull this off. "Aren't you forgetting something, boss?"

"Like?"

"Oh I don't know, the fact that we look like a wizard and a gnome?"

"We just came from a play, you see."

"Which one features a wizard and a gnome?"

"That is not the point," Digorence replied lamely. "Besides, it's late at night. If people are walking around this late they shouldn't be surprised to find a fellow weirdo."

Harken decided not to educate Digorence about the night lovers of society and instead followed the gnome toward the bank in the distance.

"Breaking into a human facility should be as easy as pie," the gnome said.

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“Yes, and what about the poor security guards who are going to get sacked for this?”

“Hey, it’s not like we’re doing this for the money. This is for the sake of Skyhall!”

“Just commenting.”

“Look, Sparky, I don’t need you coming along, making sarcastic comments, and getting me off track. So you play lookout, okay?”

Grudgingly, Harken agreed and stood outside in an alley by the bank, acting as the lookout. Digorence walked around to the front of the bank, which was closed and locked; but that presented no real challenge to the gnome.

Since he couldn’t think straight he simply melted the lock with a vial of his most potent acid and pushed the doors open. The alarm system stared at him in shock. It was so astounded by the gnome’s stupidity that it didn’t even start ringing. It had expected the thief to cleverly disable it with a prong or some other tool like the girl had.

The intruder hadn’t even bothered about the cameras, it realized in shock. In fact the cameras were so shocked that they refused to send a video feed to the control room, or at least this is what Digorence thought later. The entire security system couldn’t believe that someone was stupid enough to just waltz into one of the most highly-protected banks in the world, despite the fact that it was built in a world inhabited by humans.

By the time it recovered and started working, the gnome had already busted open one of the safes and was piling jewels into a bag. Out in the alley, Harken was too busy muttering to himself to hear the figure above him jump into the alleyway a few moments after the alarms started to go off. Startled, he turned around, saw the human, and quickly teleported himself to the other side of the street.

Digorence finished bagging the jewels and ran out of the building and right into Harken, who was nervously waiting for the gnome. He teleported them back to the portal, which for some reason had gone unnoticed, and they stepped inside.

Once they were back inside, Digorence began to empty his bag of jewels.

“I think I’ve had enough excitement for today, especially after that human saw me,” Harken said as he left the room, unaware of the implications of what he had just said.

“Bah! You’re just getting old,” the gnome retorted, not realizing yet what had happened.

Once the wizard had gone, the gnome began to pace around in worry. And then it dawned: “I caused a wizard-sighting,” he said in shock. “I’m surprised that history hasn’t changed . . . I’d better go back and fix this,” he said to himself as he prepared to throw the jewels into the portal.

The gnome stopped to grab a can of regular soda before he tossed the jewels into the portal and stepped through, returning back in time to when he was about to embark on the trip to

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Earth in order to avert the wizard-seeing.

“Wow! The fool really thinks he’s controlling it,” the warlock said as he quietly stepped through as well.

As the gnome appeared in his room, he made sure Harken was still unconscious before he handed his other self the soda.

“That’s all you bring me? You come all the way from the future knowing what I am going through and you only bring me one can?” the other Digorence raged.

“It is done,” the warlock who had put the powder in the drink the first time whispered to his leader. The powder had actually improved the flavor of the drink but had induced the lightheadedness.

“Excellent,” came the reply.

Digorence, now realizing why people never visited him, quickly threw a gem into the portal and stepped back through to his present time.

When he came through, he nearly had a heart attack.

Behind him the warlock laughed.

“You . . . you . . . you manipulated me this entire time!” Digorence cried.

“I enjoyed every minute of this. We have now made it so that our destined master Mobius won against Skyhall. Now we will be able to manipulate fellows such as you through time travel and secure the control of all the known dimensions!”

“Oh, great! another monologue from an evil villain,” Digorence remarked.

“Die with the knowledge that you caused the fall of all the dimensions!” the crazed renegade said.

“Now I understand why they chose you. Seems like your sparkling personality and razor wit failed you. Hey, are you sure mommy would approve of maniacal laughter and evil schemes to conquer the dimensions?” Digorence couldn’t resist as he ran away as swiftly as he could.

The renegade laughed and watched him pathetically try to escape.

Digorence nearly had a heart attack once again as he made it outside.

Skyhall lay in ruins and dark figures walked all over the smoldering ruins.

The gnome could hear the cries of the last remnants of the Skyhallian wizards. Hurriedly he walked to the burnt down forest near Skyhall.

Grotesque bubbling goo abounded where there was once a babbling brook. Making sure he wasn’t being watched, Digorence quickly pulled a fake patch of ground off and placed his palm on the scanner. A device popped up to examine his eye. Once he was cleared, he quickly leapt into his safe chamber.

He securely slammed the entrance shut as claws raked at the door and magic blasted against it. Inside the chamber lay his armory. On racks rested hundreds of firearms programmed to fire powerful bolts of magic.

He looked fondly at all of the equipment on the racks and

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then caught sight of his old suit and sighed. He quickly put on the black suit and the sturdy shoes he had invented and hired a wizard to enchant to allow him to fly through the air quickly.

As the clawing and blasting intensified, he struggled to put on a utility belt.

“It should fit,” he moaned. “I told them to make it so it would fit a hippo,” he joked to himself.

He grabbed a pair of his magical firearms, loaded them with canisters of magic essence, and pulled out his spare gnooter.

And so Skyhall’s most unlikely hero, loaded with all sorts of weapons designed to make the forces of evil cower in fear, took one brave step forward, and fell over.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN: UNLIKELY HERO

The universe crawled to a standstill for a single moment. It couldn't believe what was going on. For once, a gnome was about to commit a completely selfless act. Well, of course, not completely selfless, but almost noticeably so.

A wise Skyhallian philosopher had once said, after spending some time in Digorence's company, "If any being, crazed or not, ever praises a gnome for an act of kindness, bravery, or honor, then the universe will collapse out of shock."

The gnome grimly opened the other exit from his armory and then shot up the ramp on his gnooter. As he burst out of the chamber and flew high into the night sky, Digorence adjusted the gravity field on his gnooter, so that he wouldn't fall.

Surveying the creatures below, he swapped the canisters in his magical firearms, and then the demonic hounds snarled in

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agony as streams of holy magic cascaded down onto them and caused them to explode.

In anger, the renegade controlling the hounds took to the air and began to conjure orbs of magical energy.

Digorence pressed a button on his gnooter, as he swapped the fire arms in his hands for different ones. His gnooter widened out, and the handlebars disappeared, allowing him to control the movement of the device by tilting his body.

The renegade clapped the two orbs together above his head, creating a beam that stretched behind and in front of him.

Digorence quickly dove down towards the ground and sped away as fast as he could as the renegade flung spell after spell at him.

Having no idea whatsoever of what to do, Digorence said to himself in exasperation, “How is it that the heroes in the stories always know what to do?”

Eventually, he spun around and shot the renegade with his most potent magical essence.

With a scream, the renegade fell from the sky, releasing one last desperate wave of magic to try and eliminate the gnome.

By sheer luck, the gnome avoided the blast of magic and managed to formulate a plan as he headed for the ground.

Stepping off the device, Digorence gave it a push and watched sadly as it sped away, held upright by its antigravity field.

Hopefully, his pursuers would follow the sound of the

gnooter, not expecting the gnome to walk.

The gnome groaned at the idea of walking but he knew he would have to if he wanted to survive.

He pulled yet another device out of his pocket and used it to scan for life-forms.

Sighting a small group of rapidly moving life-forms heading his way, Digorence hastily concealed himself to watch as they came past.

A small band of figures quickly came into sight and hurriedly but silently made their way through the area.

Digorence recognized the leader of the band—it was Meilan. Relieved to see a comrade, someone he could trust, he hurriedly stepped out of his hiding place; too hurriedly as it turned out. Her reaction was swift and perfectly executed, knocking Digorence down before he could call out to her.

When he awoke, he groaned and looked up at Meilan.

“Did you have to do that?” Digorence said as he tried to ignore the pain.

“I thought you were a renegade. What are you doing back here, coward?” she said scornfully.

“Coward?” Digorence asked as he tried to stand up.

“You ran away when Skyhall needed everyone the most,” she said as she kicked him back to the ground.

“Hey! I was manipulated by the warlocks to go back in time. Where’s Ranth?” he asked as he started to slowly back away from Meilan.

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“What do you want that disgrace for? He was never able to do spells and just went crazy one day, screaming about some wraith in his head trying to make him kill us all. I heard he was one of the first to die by the hands of the renegades. Seems his swordplay was about as good as his spell casting.”

Digorence frowned and then asked, “Where’s Arianna?”

“Who?” Meilan asked as she idly cast a spell to keep Digorence where he was.

“The wizard-sighting . . . that was Arianna . . .” Digorence realized as he turned to face Meilan. In this reality she looked a lot different, made older by sadness and despair.

“Meilan, you have to help me. I know how to fix this so that this will never happen. All the remaining wizards need to band together and help me retake the time portal.”

“Well, my band is all that’s left of Squad Zero. It’s Beta you hear battling the renegades.”

“Then take this and search for the remaining wizards. I’ll go help Beta.” Digorence said as he pulled out a device and watched it form into a gnooter.

“You go into a fight? Ha!” Meilan said as Digorence flew off on his transformed gnooter.

“Don’t just stand there; let’s get the rest of the wizards,” Meilan ordered as Digorence was beyond sight.

Frowning, she turned to her fellow wizards. “Be careful. Renegades will show up, too. Move out, but slowly,” she ordered.



On his gnooter Digorence pulled out two of his firearms as he appeared over the ruins of Skyhall.

“Digorence?” one of the members cried in disbelief as he cast his head to the sky to see what the mechanical noise was.

The gnome zoomed around the smoldering ruins, dodging enemy attacks as he did his best to shoot them down with his magical bolts.

His appearance boosted the morale of the decimated Squad Beta, mostly because they believed the only reason that Digorence would fight was that a god had taken over his body and therefore they were blessed.

They began to fight ferociously, attacking with a fury and speed the renegades couldn't match.

The gnome used his antigravity beam to grab enemy spells and fling them back at their casters. For a short time, the wizards and the gnome believed they could win.

However, the renegades kept warping in reinforcements from other time periods.

Digorence soon began to tire and called for a retreat. He expanded the gnooter as wide as it would go and told Squad Beta to hop on.

As more and more renegades piled on, the gnooter, loaded with men, took off into the air.

Luckily for the wizards, after years of having Digorence ride on its back, the machine was well-trained to hold heavy loads.

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Renegades angrily took to the skies after the fleeing wizards and gnome.

Digorence told the wizards to erect a magical barrier over them so that the renegades' blasts of magic wouldn't harm them as they tried to shake them off their trail. They did as they were told, using the last reserves of their strength to keep the barrier going.

The gnome caught sight of Meilan in the trees and sharply turned around so the renegades wouldn't see her.

He fumbled for the vial he had placed in a pocket, and attached it in a slot in one of his firearms. Around his gnooter a blue and green aura formed and extended in a several-foot radius around his vehicle.

Any renegade that came in contact with it was instantly sent spiraling downward and frozen by wind and air magic.

Empowered by this new defense, they recklessly shot past the renegades and past the ruins once more. The flabbergasted renegades quickly recovered from their shock and raced after Digorence once again.

Suddenly the gnooter started to plummet straight downward. The gnome cursed as he realized it was because its power source had been depleted.

As it neared the ground Digorence ordered everyone to jump off. He used one of his canisters of magic to power the gnooter for a while longer.

Grunting while he worked, Digorence dragged the gnooter,

pointing it in a new direction before letting it fly off into the night passengerless.

“Everyone hide!” he whispered as the renegades turned to follow the machine. The wizards quickly rolled into the brush and remained as still as possible. Thankfully the gnooter was far enough off so that the renegades couldn’t tell that what they perceived to be people was merely an illusion.

After the last renegade disappeared after the gnooter, the group quickly moved to the cover of the ashen forest.

“We won’t be safe for long,” Digorence said as he pulled yet another bottle from his pocket and placed it into a slot on one of his firearms.

“They have dogs that will sense our scent,” a wizard interjected.

Digorence turned to face him. He glared at the man and said, “I was getting at that,” as he quickly pointed his firearm at the wizard and sprayed him with an odd-smelling gas.

The wizard’s eyes began to burn as the gas hit his retinas and he rolled on the ground writhing silently in pain.

“The rest of you might want to close your eyes,” Digorence warned as he sprayed the whole group.

“Now, we must look quietly for Squad Zero. I gave them the task of finding as many wizards as they could so that we might take control of the time portal. That way I can go back in time and stop this from ever happening. You see, I’m from the future.”

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“But once we take the portal, how will you operate it?”

“I didn’t think of that,” Digorence said.

“Well, let’s regroup and see if we can find a solution all together,” a different wizard suggested.

“Good idea,” the gnome said as he began to walk through the forest. Wishing he had his tracker, he grumbled as he walked through the desolate forest. Behind him walked the remaining members of Squad Beta, keeping alert for signs of renegades.

About a half hour later they heard a twig snap and they all instantly zoomed in on the direction, or at least everyone except Digorence, who watched which way the wizards turned their heads and copied them.

The Squad Beta wizards all had magic conjured in their hands and ready to fire. They were about to unleash their spells when Digorence told them to stop.

Through the brush came Meilan followed by about three dozen wizards.

“These were the only wizards I could find,” she said almost apologetically.

After everyone had rested and all were seated in a circle ready to listen to his plan, the gnome said, “The way I see it, we need to get a technical consultant on how to operate the time portal. To do that, we’ll need to go to a place deeply involved in technology.”

“I would rather,” interrupted the man who had angered

Digorence earlier, “charge alone into the renegade fortress then go to a dimension solely inhabited by gnomes.”

“Then stay here and don’t cry when the renegades and their demonic friends rip you to shreds piece by piece.”

“On second thought, gnomes are great people,” the other concluded.

“To get to Gnomer, however, we’ll need to build a portal since none of you have ever gathered the guts to go there. That means we’ll have to raid the renegade outposts for supplies. I can fetch some of the stuff we’ll need from my stash. The rest of you need to find a crystal globe and some tools strong enough to shape steel unless you can do that with your magic.

“I’ll be going now to pick up the supplies I can bring. But first I’ll create a diversion so that you will have an easier time getting the supplies.”

“You know, the last thing any of us thought would happen was Digorence being a hero and actually helping out.”

“The gods offered me a lifetime of food if I did this,” Digorence said teasingly. Remembering his shoes, the gnome took to the air using his special shoes and his tracking device.

“I’ll go to their outpost and make them all come after me. I’ll hold them off in my miniature fortress and let you guys get the supplies.”

“Is this really Digorence?” Meilan asked.

“Who else could accumulate that much body mass?” someone said dryly as Digorence sped off.

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On his tracker, he searched for a medium-sized gathering of life forms. After he had flown around in the sky for a bit, he was finally able to locate what was presumably the renegade outpost.

To make it seem that he had flown over the camp of renegades by accident, he quickly swerved and turned the other way. He heard cries of, “Get him!” and the sound of hurried levitation.

Laughing to himself about the foolishness of the renegades, he headed toward his secret stash of supplies.

Thankfully, the levitation enchantment he had made on the shoes had worked. Otherwise, there would be no way he could keep ahead of the furious renegades.

In the sky, the gnome had to rely on his magical barrier to protect him from the warlock’s spells since he couldn’t see where their magic was going.

On the ground, Meilan ordered everyone to wait for a while to make sure as many of the renegades left as possible. Although they were foolish, the renegades were not stupid enough not to leave sentries behind. When Meilan gave them the signal, the Skyhallian wizards crept silently behind some crates and stood still listening for sounds of footsteps.

Slowly, Meilan raised her head high enough over the crates to see where the renegades were that had been left behind. Sighting none, she quickly crouched and ran over to the next set of crates. She peered over the top of the crates again and

motioned for the rest of the group to follow her.

They could hear the angry renegades walking around and muttering about having to stay behind. Meilan whispered to the wizards to split up around the camp and look for the crystal globe and the tools. Quickly, she crept past a sentry and dove into a tent. Luckily, the tent was empty and she was able to look around without being caught.

She heard the rest of the wizards silently go off to different directions of the camp. Rummaging around the tent, she located a glittering orb. Raising it up she turned it around to try and determine if it were crystal.

Gently, she brushed her hand over the globe. Suddenly a high pitched noise sounded throughout the encampment. She dropped the globe, since it was creating the noise, and leaped out of the tent.

As soon as she leaped through the tent flap, she broke into a roll to avoid the powerful blasts of magic aimed at head height. Quickly she came out of the roll and summoned a high pressure blast of water to send her foes flying.

The breath was forced sharply out of a warlock as the gushing beam of water hit him in the chest and sent him flying into a tree.

A beam of ice froze another as Meilan sought to escape the encampment. She dashed to the south end of the camp, wondering where her fellow wizards were. Together they were easily handling the sentries but the high pitched alarm was

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drawing demonic creatures to the renegades' aid.

“We have to retreat!” Meilan cried as she sighted renegades in the sky.

“Come on!” she cried again as the renegade reinforcements began to land.

The wizards all regrouped and began to run away in a circle formation. They kept their eyes peeled looking for any signs of hidden or approaching enemies.

The land of Skyhall now seemed permanently dark and charred, as if the fall of the wizards' castle had poisoned the land. As they ran through the blackened land, it seemed that the land was now drowned in shadows and that all living things had deteriorated into death.

The renegades were determined to find the wizards and finally rid themselves of the last of their foes. Dark-winged figures followed the renegades after the fleeing wizards. That would have been the end for the Skyhallian wizards as the winged figures swooped down with their claws outstretched if Digorence hadn't at that moment opened the top of a vial containing a gold liquid.

Golden-colored gas flooded the skies as Digorence zoomed around the winged demons, letting the gas permeate the air. Suddenly a huge burst of light shot through the air like a sonic boom. The light started to burn the demons until they gave one last agonized yell and exploded into black shards.

The fleeing wizards looked overhead and saw Digorence

pointing to the west. They hurriedly broke out into a run and followed Digorence, who remained in the air.

Digorence landed quickly and revealed a tunnel downwards. The wizards hurriedly slid down and let Digorence conceal his hideout. Before he, too, slid down the tunnel, he secured the opening with a shutter made of the toughest metal in the known dimensions.

It had taken much of his precious budget to build this place, but now Digorence realized it was actually worth it.

“Luckily for us all,” he said to the wizards after they had recovered from their near-death experience.

“I had realized that at some point I might have to escape to my home dimension of Gnomer, where no one in his right mind would follow me. Therefore, I had hidden away a portal to Gnomer here. Unfortunately, the power source ran out. I need you wizards to recharge it.”

They heard the impact of various magical explosions as the warlocks blasted away at the ground to try and get to the fugitives.

“You may all, however, wish something to eat and drink and some rest before we do this,” he said, opening the entrance to a secret larder of nonperishable food.

The wizards ate the food and drank from a natural well the gnome had one of his golems dig up.

“Before we do this, Digorence, you owe us an explanation. How is that you have all these weapons here?”

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“Well, since you asked . . . ” the gnome said as he settled back against the wall. “I was accepted to be a genetically enhanced gnome warrior, mostly because of my superior weapon designs. Eventually I was swindled into selling the genetic enhancement formula and I fled to Skyhall in disgrace. Now let’s get to work.”

Different groups of wizards began conjuring different types of magic to power the gem. At Digorence’s signal, they all threw their magic into the center of the room.

He raised his other hand and the orb was lifted gently into the center of the mass of magical power.

Magical light splashed in all directions as the orb began to absorb the energy of the mixed magical energies. The orb was then gently placed into a slot in the top of the inactive portal. The precisely-measured magical components created the rift to Gnomer, which was the dimension they sought to travel to.

“We did it,” Digorence said in triumph.

“What do we plan to do in Gnomer?” asked a wizard who hadn’t been listening carefully.

“We’re going to find out how the time machines work,” Digorence said with a smile.



“You let them get away?”

“They disappeared completely. They must have some sort of escape tunnel or something.”

“Oh, yes! They had an escape tunnel in case someone came

and completely wiped them out. They must have simply teleported away and you missed it. Do you know what the price of failure is?"

"Yes sir," the lackey whimpered.

"When Mobius hears of this, he will be furious."

"I will find them right away," the man said as he dashed off.

Sighing, the other went to report to Mobius. He walked up the stairs of the fortress to his master's study.

"Sir, the remaining wizards, of which there are very few, attempted a raid on one of our outposts. We followed them and they disappeared. We assume that they teleported away and are now searching the entire area."

"Do not bother," Mobius intoned.

"Why, sir?" the man stammered.

"The gnome is smart. He knows what he has to do is go back in time to make sure this doesn't happen."

"So?" he asked. Quickly he added, "My lord."

"They raided our outpost to get supplies to build a portal. They are going to Gnomer to find out how to operate our time portal. They will lead an assault on this fortress so that the gnome can go back in time."

"We go to Gnomer then. Right, sire?"

"Send the unfaithful ones. The ones that do not truly believe. Send them there to meet their deaths. The rest of us . . . the rest of us will wait for the gnome in the past when he's all alone. Leave enough of our renegades behind to keep the rest of the

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wizards occupied and unsuspecting.

“We kill the gnome then come back to kill the rest of the wizards. Then we sacrifice the life of this planet to gain ultimate power. Already the land is dying. We must wipe out the last of the wizards so that the land may truly die.”

“Yes sir.”

“You are to stay behind. I will hand pick those who will follow me into the past.”

“But I am your most loyal servant. I agreed to all of Arcanious’ plans to bring you back.”

“Indeed. I cannot risk my most loyal servant. You must stay here where no harm can befall you.” Mobius left the room.

His servant stood there biting his tongue to prevent himself from saying something he would regret. He heard the startled cries as Mobius began to throw his men around the room for slacking with his powerful magic. Finally, he said quietly, “Perhaps, it was a mistake to bring him here.”

“You see, men,” came Mobius’ voice. “That is how you determine who is truly faithful.”

“Master, nooo!” he cried, wishing he had held his tongue. “I beg you to forgive me!”

“Once I was forgiving, but that part of me was lost. I do not need fools standing in my way,” Mobius said as he completely paralyzed his once-loyal follower.

“You may wish to look away,” Mobius told the others as he slowly began to destroy the other man’s body painfully inch-by-

inch from his toes upward. When the others simply stared in horror, Mobius drowned out the man's agonized wailing by shouting, "You, you, and you find Mortimer.

"You. I want you to pick half of the renegades to lead an attack on Gnomer where the fugitives are hiding. The rest stay here to defend the fortress if they manage to come back."

Mobius laughed to himself as he left to go to his study. It amused him that his lackeys thought he actually trusted them.

He quickly entered the mind of the one he had picked as the chooser and chose the least faithful of his minions to go on the suicide charge.

After this was done, he played with the time device until he found the time that the gnome was sure to go back to.

"Perfect," he grinned.

"It is done, master," the leader of the squad assigned to attack Gnomer reported after being told to enter the room.

"Very well. Send a scout to determine the exact location of the gnome and his friends. Then lead your charge. Tell those staying behind that I will not be available to assist them," he said as he sat down to wait for the wizards to return.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN: GNOMER

Digorence was the first to appear in his home dimension of Gnomer. Hesitantly, the rest of the Skyhallians followed him.

The dimension they entered could be best described as a sort of technologically-advanced underground metropolis. The smallest of the houses was easily twice as big as any human house, but this was just so there could be enough kitchen space to make large enough meals, Digorence told them.

“If people stop and stare, it’s not because you’re not gnomes, it’s because you’re walking,” he added quickly, feeling he was not doing a very good job of being a tour guide.

Indeed, gnomes were stopping to stare at Digorence. Entire families hopped out of cars and off portable transportation devices to gawk at the walking gnome.

“Wow! If this is how lazy everyone else in your dimension

is, no wonder you're the way you are," Meilan said unable to come up with anything nastier.

Digorence said nothing but kept walking.

In the streets, several accidents nearly occurred because the drivers couldn't believe that a gnome was actually walking further than the distance to the nearest transportation vehicle.

"You're a disgrace to gnomes," a gnome child said as he stepped off his gnooter and kicked Digorence in the shins. The exertion left the child momentarily winded, and it took him several tries to stand up and get back on the gnooter.

"If the children of your dimension can barely take a few steps before having to sit down, how will you defend your dimension?" Meilan asked, forgetting about the genetically-enhanced warriors.

Digorence said nothing but pointed to a large building in the center of the underground city.

Much to the gnome's surprise, a shimmering light appeared on the terracotta-colored ceiling of the cavern as a group of renegades dropped down into the town. From the vast building Digorence had pointed out, massive cannon-like devices were pushed out of the main tower and aimed toward the hapless renegades.

Gnomes everywhere began to fumble around for their personal-shield devices as a warning message floated throughout the area.

"Wow! I didn't expect a demonstration," Meilan said to

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Digorence as he led them to a safety shelter built for gnomes who didn't have personal shields.

The wizards watched in amazement as the renegades were pelted with strange silver orbs. The orbs themselves didn't seem to harm the renegades but instead attached themselves to their targets and stopped them from being able to move or fly. One by one the renegades plopped to the ground covered in the silver orbs.

Three large vehicles swerved onto the scene. The doors burst open and several large muscular creatures in battle suits and dark sunglasses leaped out of the armored vehicles and onto the ground carrying large, deadly-looking firearms.

"What are those?" Meilan asked Digorence, who was trying his best to hide himself in the shadows.

"Well, as you know, gnomes are known for being lazy and being overweight. Those—those are the other gnomes."

"The other gnomes?"

"The ones that aren't lazy. They use their superior intellect to design extreme training devices to make themselves stronger, faster, and taller than the rest of the gnomes. The normal gnomes use their superior intellect to design devices to make life more comfortable and enjoyable. They keep the people safe, and we keep the people happy."

"And you're hiding from them why?"

"Did anyone listen to my story?" the gnome replied as the troopers tossed a small flying robot into the sky to warn

everyone to shield their eyes.

“Cover your eyes,” Digorence warned as the gnome troopers lifted their massive firearms and aimed them at the fallen renegades.

“Detonation in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6,” the probe emitted loudly.

The renegades began to scream and cry as the numbers drew closer to zero.

“Shut your eyes tightly and turn away from them,” Digorence warned one last time as the gnome troopers pulled the triggers.

Beams of light so intense and bright that they would fry the retinas of unprotected eyes hit the renegades and ended the threat.

“It will presently be safe to open your eyes,” the probe emitted.

“How come we never see these gnome troopers? They could be extremely useful at Skyhall,” Meilan said.

“It’s extremely rare for any gnome to want to turn out like that,” Digorence said with a pained expression.

“Digorence!” one of the gnome troopers exclaimed as he turned around and saw the reluctant gnome trying to squeeze deeper into the corner.

“Hello, brother,” Digorence said dejectedly.

“Decided to bring home some friends of yours?”

“These guys I meant to. Those guys,” Digorence pointed to the black holes in the cement, “were an accident.”

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“Well, it’s good to see you again. Perhaps now you have realized what you cheated yourself out of. Most of us knew what had happened.”

“I much prefer the life of a normal gnome, thank you,” Digorence replied in distress.

“Why is it that you are here, then? You don’t often come home to Gnomer.”

“I need some technical advice,” Digorence said quietly with his head down.

His brother burst out laughing and took several moments to get back to his feet. When he finally did stand up again he took one look at the expression on his brother’s face and fell back to the ground rolling in laughter.

“The Great Gnome Digorence needs advice. What happened to ‘I am the most genius gnome ever to come out of Gnomer’?”

“I see he shares your charm,” Meilan muttered dryly.

“Look, can you just show us to the technical terrace so we can get this over with? The fate of Skyhall and the known dimensions are at stake.”

“Forget it, brother. If any gnome is to save anything, it’s going to be me and my gnome squad.”

“We’ll just see about that,” Digorence replied boldly.

“Hah, I’ve missed bantering with you, brother, but we must be off. Come, lads, we go to Skyhall.”

“On the bright side, there’s no way that they could have seen them coming. On the negative side, his squad will

probably all die.”

“Your brother will probably die, too, you know,” Meilan added.

“You say that like that’s a bad thing,” Digorence said as he looked around for someone to ask about directions. The problem with Digorence’s plan, however, was that all the gnomes outside were either eating or riding around the city in high-speed transportation devices.

“Why don’t you ask one of the gnomes sitting around eating?”

Digorence sighed before remembering that Meilan had never been to Gnomer before.

“This is why,” he said after knocking a gnome child off his scooter and onto the ground.

“Hey! What was that for, you fat, lazy excuse for a gnome?” the gnome child shouted without a trace of respect.

“I’ll give you twenty bucks if you go and talk to the gnome sitting there eating.”

“Hey, that’s a high-risk operation, man. Make it a hundred. We have to think about my hospital bill here.”

Digorence groaned and handed the money over to the kid.

“Hospital bill?”

“Just watch,” Digorence said.

The gnome kid braced himself and walked up to the gnome currently devouring an entire turkey and a pot of mashed potatoes.

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“Hi, mister,” the kid said cautiously.

The gnome glared at him and placed his food under the table where it wouldn't get damaged. He charged at the young gnome and threw him across the plaza.

“Weren't you taught any manners?” he raged as he returned to his meal. The kid limped to his gnooter and drove off.

“And that is why you do not bother gnomes eating breakfast,” Digorence concluded.

Meilan laughed, “An entire turkey is breakfast?”

“Yes, I know it's not much. I'll make sure they give you two,” Digorence said sarcastically.

“What does this technical terrace look like?”

“It's a big blue building with artificial clouds with giant lightning bolts stuck in the middle surrounding it.”

They walked past section after section of houses with tiny specs of green that served as lawns.

“You call that a lawn?” Meilan asked.

“Well, you don't think a gnome child is actually going to play in it?” Digorence responded, horrified.

The terracotta-colored horizon made Meilan wonder why it seemed that natural daylight was streaming through. She was about to ask Digorence when she caught sight of a building that actually didn't look all the others.

“You mean that thing?” Meilan asked.

“Oh! Right! You guys stay here; Meilan, you come with me.”

“Digorence, the building's that way,” Meilan said when

Digorence started to walk west of the road leading to the terrace.

“We can’t go that way,” Digorence said with a pained expression.

“Why not?” Meilan asked curiously.

“Because my family’s house lies along that street.”

“Don’t you think it’s mean not to visit them?”

“I think it’s perfectly normal; besides, they won’t remember it anyway once I fix this and return everything to normal so why go through the pain?”

Meilan sighed and followed him down the second road to their destination.

“Can we pick up the pace?” Digorence asked her as he panted heavily.

“Let me get this straight: a gnome is asking to quicken the pace. I’m starting to think this is all some weird dream.”

“It would be nice if this was a dream. Then I could pinch myself and wake up from this nightmare.”

“So why are we picking up the pace?”

“Because that is my family coming after us,” Digorence said with an expression of horror.

Meilan laughed as the gnome tried to hurry as his family started up their transportation devices and came after him.

Desperately, he flung himself into an alleyway as his family zoomed past. He sat up and breathed a sigh of relief before standing up.

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Slowly he peered out into the street and was thankful they were gone. He turned around to tell Meilan to follow him when he saw his family looking sternly at him in the alleyway. Only his gnomish stubbornness kept him from fainting.

“I can’t talk now, gotta go,” he cried as he dashed out of the alley and towards the technical terrace. Meilan followed him, throwing his family an apologetic glance.

After they neared the entrance to the string of dull gray buildings, Digorence paused to whisper something to Meilan.

“These gnomes might have a bad reaction to a human coming to their tech labs.”

“I think I’m more than prepared for bad reactions from a gnome, Digorence,” Meilan replied.

“If you say so,” Digorence said as he walked toward the gate to the terrace. Meilan began to cough as strange smells wafted out as Digorence pulled the door open and bravely stepped inside. Meilan plugged her nose and followed the gnome in the door.

She took one step forward and suddenly found herself sprawled on the floor.

“Ouch!” she said as she pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Whoops! I forgot to warn you about the low ceilings,” Digorence said with an apologetic expression on his face.

“Whoops indeed,” she replied.

Together they made their way through the fog and toward the main lab of the gnomes.

“What do you want? Can’t you see we are busy here?”

“I’m sorry. What I’m here for is more important than your latest pie-in-a-can invention,” Digorence sneered back.

“So you really are back, Digorence,” the lab gnome said with a laugh.

“You seem to be well-known here, Digorence,” Meilan remarked as she leaned against a wall.

“As a failure,” the lab gnome sneered. “He gave up weapon design after being made the laughing stock of Gnomer and then artificially gave himself laziness in the hopes that it would help with non-weapon devices.”

“This is probably a good opportunity to point out to you that any one of my inventions is worth more than the sorry excuse for a gnome that is you.”

“And that is the reason of his coming here. He needs our advice because he can’t figure out the answer himself.”

“Just shut up and help me, you inferior scum,” Digorence raged.

“I’m beginning to see why you never come home, Digorence,” Meilan mused.

“If it’ll get you out of here, I would go without food for two hours,” the lab gnome said, nearly causing his lackeys to faint from imagining the horror of a whole two hours without at least a light snack of three courses of meat and a nut, cheese, and salad buffet. “What brought you here?”

“I need to know how to control and operate a time

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machine.”

“To do that,” the main gnome interrupted quickly, “we would need to test the machine itself.”

“And here’s where I prove that I’m more useful than this entire lab,” Digorence said after he placed a black square object on the table.

“After studying the time portal, I duplicated it in the virtual environment where you will be able to do virtual experiments on it. Oh, and there’s no food in there, so get it over quickly,” he said as he pressed the button in the center of the device.

The head of the lab motioned for his lackeys to step into the glowing circle on the floor. Once they had gone in and he had deemed it was safe, he, too, ventured into the virtual reality field.

“They’re helping you . . . Why?” Meilan asked.

“They can’t resist a good challenge, which is good for us.”

“What will we do in the meantime?”

“Wait,” Digorence said as he left to go look for the larder.

About an hour passed before Digorence returned. He slowly waddled back to the area where the virtual field had been established.

“That’s the first good meal I’ve had in ages,” he said as he plopped to the ground.

Meilan didn’t respond but stared at a corner in the ceiling while her mind wandered off. Suddenly her focus was brought back when a noise like a parade of elephants amongst fireworks

and a nuclear explosion assaulted her ears. The wizard turned her head to find that the noise was coming from Digorence, who had fallen asleep while waiting for the gnomes to return.

To Meilan, several hours seemed to pass as she waited for the return of the gnomes. She had almost fallen asleep when she saw them emerge out of the virtual field.

“Did you figure it out?”

“Of course we did,” they snapped. “The only reason we took so long was exhaustion caused by lack of food.”

Digorence awoke and looked at the gnomes.

“So how do we work it?” he asked groggily.

“Simply. All you do is type in the year, date, and location and the magic takes care of the rest, you dimwitted fool.”

“And the reason it took you so long to figure this out is, of course, that your brain functions just as well as a human car running on lemonade,” Digorence bit back.

“Please leave before your presence causes all of our tools to break into disrepair,” the head gnome said as Digorence sat back down.

“How can you be sure your faces didn’t do that already?” Digorence replied as he got up after wondering why he had sat down, and walked out of the door and slammed it shut.

“Now that that’s over, let’s get the rest of the wizards and head back to Xjoz,” Digorence said.

Meilan nodded and the two of them made their way down the street to meet up with the rest of the wizards. To their

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surprise, the wizards were missing when they returned to where they had left them.

After they looked around the surrounding area, Digorence found a note attached to a wall. “Brother,” the note read, “your precious wizards are going to take me and my squad to Xjoz. This is a job for heroes, not failures.”

Digorence read the note to Meilan and looked at her.

“This can only mean one thing,” he said.

“Which is?” she asked.

“We’re gonna have to do the impossible.” Digorence looked at Meilan again and took a deep breath.

“We have to visit my family,” he said with a wail of despair.

“Why?” Meilan asked.

“We need to use the family portal.”

“Your family has their own portal and you wasted all this time figuring out how to work yours?”

“It’s a new design. Apparently, they’re still testing it. And besides, if I had my own, it would be so much more useful.”

“So now we entrust the fate of the universe to a portal still in the test phase. Great,” Meilan said as she followed Digorence.

“Got any better ideas?” Digorence asked testily.

“No,” Meilan concluded.

Outside the door of his house Digorence paused for a moment to tell Meilan to stay out of sight since his family disliked wizards.

He knocked on the door and waited outside for someone to

answer.

The door opened just enough for the opener to get a good look at the visitor.

“Oh, it’s you,” the female gnome said.

“Good to see you, too,” Digorence said.

“I suppose you better come in.”

Digorence entered the house and looked around. His family was currently sitting at a table laden with so much food the legs were bending slightly.

“Hello, everyone,” Digorence said.

The family was silent.

“I suppose you’re still angry about the whole avoiding-you thing,” he said quietly.

“Let the Skyhallian in,” one of them said after no one said anything for a few minutes.

Digorence went outside and told Meilan to come in.

“We won’t be very long; we just need to use the new portal.”

“Whatever. Just don’t ruin third breakfast any more than you already have,” was the only reply Digorence got.

Digorence walked up the stairs with Meilan behind him. They saw the portal in the center of the room draped in an ancient cloth to protect it from dust.

The gnome flipped on the light switch and started to program the portal. Meilan tried not to think about what would happen if it didn’t work.

Light flared in the center of the portal and Digorence started

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to move towards it.

“Ready?” he asked Meilan. She said nothing but started to move towards the portal.

They each took deep breaths and stepped forward.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN: RESCUING THE PAST

Digorence groaned when he came out of the portal and walked around for a few seconds before he went to sit down. Once the dizziness went away, he stumbled over to sit on a rock to try to regain his eye sight.

If Digorence had ever been to a swamp, he might have described this place as such. Green was everywhere his eye cared to look, except of course the parts that were water or blood.

The sight of blood entered his thought process and kicked around a bit before finally wresting the gnome's attention.

By that time, however, he had looked around to find himself surrounded by several strange figures with faces like octopuses. Using all his self-control, he kept himself from screaming out loud.

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The creatures emitted a strange sound that chilled Digorence to the bone. The gnome quickly jumped to his feet and ran off toward where he suspected the portal was. The strange fish creatures hefted spears and chased him.

About thirty feet later, Digorence realized he was heading the wrong way when he felt icy-cold water on his legs. He started to back out of the murky swamp when a grotesque creature rose out of the depths and grabbed at his feet.

This time, the gnome did scream and attempted to run back to dry land. The monstrosity continued to pull Digorence into the water, but the gnome's weight was a fearsome foe.

His would-be captor let go of the gnome's legs, allowing the obese gnome to spring away. However, he turned around to sneer at the swamp monster and didn't see the fish creatures waiting to skewer him.

Fortunately, he tripped on a branch and fell to the ground before he ran right into their spears. Looking upward, he groaned and rolled to his side as their spears plummeted toward him.

He jumped to his feet and lunged at the fish creatures as they attempted to free their spears. Luckily, they weren't too stable on their feet and fell to the ground.

Wishing he was still in top physical condition, Digorence ran through the jungle wondering how he had so much energy coursing through him. It was probably a side effect of the time machine, he reasoned.

The path was incredibly uneven, and Digorence hated to think about what could be crawling in the moss ready to bite at his feet. Overgrown trees made the path into a sort of obstacle course, and Digorence was ducking, jumping, and sliding.

Vines containing a multitude of creepy bugs that Digorence would rather not think about slapped him forcefully as the gnome ran stupidly in a circle. Even so, it saved him.

He caught sight of the portal shimmering in midair. He laughed in relief and then nearly fainted as he saw the light slowly begin to disappear.

The gnome knew it was highly unlikely that he could reach the portal in time; but in the stories Digorence had read, the heroes always made it through just in the nick of time, and so he kept running as fast as he could.

He made it to the portal just before it closed and jumped in with a joyous laugh.

Unfortunately for him, he was pulled back out by a scaled reptilian hand.

“Dinner,” the beast grunted and bared all of his teeth.

“No,” Digorence said as he rummaged around in his pockets and pulled out a small flower.

The beast laughed and pinned Digorence to a tree. He took the flower and crushed it in his reptilian palms.

“I wouldn’t have done that if I were you,” Digorence said as the flower exploded and charred his captor to a crisp.

The gnome wasn’t too worried about being pinned to a tree.

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Mere knives pinning his clothes to the bark couldn't hold the weight of a healthy gnome like him. In a few minutes he began to slide downward until he was completely free.

His foes, the fishmen, carefully laid down their spears and ran away when Digorence quickly pulled out another flower. The gnome laughed and sat down to look for the portal remote he suddenly remembered he had brought with him.

"Supposedly," Digorence said, "according to the note I found on the cloth, this button turns the portal back on." He pressed the button.

He sighed in relief as the portal flared back to life and he stepped through, hoping Meilan hadn't ended up where had. When the blinding light disappeared he found himself in Mobius' castle, with wounded renegades everywhere. Wondering whether one of his family had simply diverted him for a moment or whether he had gotten here by pure fate, Digorence plunged on.

"Another gnome runaway!" Screamed one.

"Relax. It's just one of the fat ones. Get him!" a smarter one said.

Sighting a suitable weapon lying next to one of the very few casualties on the gnome side, Digorence used his foot to flip the weapon up into his hands, where it could be put to much better use. He aimed it at the renegades. They screamed and ran away into different rooms.

"Don't be too proud, brother," came a voice from behind

Digorence.

The gnome turned around to discover the real reason the renegades had run away. The entire gnome trooper squad stood behind him ready to do some serious damage.

“You’ve done well,” Digorence said.

“What happened to the girl?” his brother asked.

Digorence stood there shocked. He couldn’t believe he had forgotten Meilan and had probably left her to die in the swamp.

“She’s fine,” another voice said.

The gnomes all swerved around to find Meilan stealthily making her way into the room.

“One of your family members stopped me from going in. They said you programmed it wrong,” she said with a laugh.

“Well, I got back,” Digorence retorted lamely.

“We’ve cleared out the castle. You’re free to restore things to the way they were.”

Digorence nodded and calmly walked up the stairs to the massive black double door at the center of the double staircase. He kicked the door open and threw a ball of light from his pocket to illuminate all the shadows.

Oddly, the time machine was unprotected and was even turned on.

“It’s a trap,” he breathed.

The gnome bent over to check the settings. It was even preset to his destination.

Digorence knew he had no choice but to beat Mobius at his

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own game and so stepped forward into the portal knowing the fate of the universe lay on his shoulders.

Digorence materialized in the past and saw himself standing there.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he warned himself.

“Since when do I do anything stupid?” his other self said.

“Wow! Is this really how I talk?” Digorence mumbled to himself as he looked around for Mobius. “All right, Mobius. Come out. I know you’re here waiting for me.”

Mobius dropped to the ground and landed with one knee down and a palm to the ground. His cape billowed behind him as he raised his head to look at the gnome. “Your servant obeys,” he said darkly.

“Very dramatic,” Digorence said, hefting his weapon.

“A blaster made by a gnome. Amazing. Do you really think you can beat me with that?” Mobius asked as he flourished a sword in one hand and a magical orb of blackness in another.

“Yes, I do,” Digorence said.

“Your confidence gives you worth. However, even if you beat me, it is too late. My planning was impeccable. My return inevitable. My coming back irreversible,” he said with a sneer.

“My, my! Such big words for someone who had just started wearing his big-boy pants. I bet you sat around for hours trying to think of something to say that sounded cool and sinister,” Digorence said as he fired his blaster. The warlock swept the ray aside with the dark orb and flung it at the gnome.

Digorence leapt to the side and pulled an invention off a table. “Whatever you do, make sure Harken is seen by the girl,” Digorence said as he shot the antigravity beam at Mobius.

Mobius screamed as he started to be sucked into the portal.

“Wherever you’re sending me, you’re going too!” he screamed as he grabbed Digorence with his magic.

Gnome and warlock materialized in Dementia and in five seconds they were surrounded by a sea of demonic creatures packed like sardines in the field.

Shadow ruled the land. The horizon was tinted blood red, and the moon had fangs protruding from it. Every so often, there would be a crunching noise and feathers would rain toward the ground.

Dementia was an ocean of black, and that wasn’t just because of the immense number of demons showing up for an easy meal.

“There is no escape for you, gnome. You will experience the most agonizing tortures while I return to destroy all that you hold dear.”

“Could you tell me who you are again, warlock?” Digorence asked with a sneer.

“I am the great Mobius,” he raged.

“Louder, please. Your face seems to have destroyed some of my brain functions.”

“I am the great Mobius!” he screamed loudly enough for everyone to hear.

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“He’s the one!”

“The double crosser!” hissed another.

“He promised us the downfall of Skyhall!”

“We died so he could fail!”

“Get him!”

“No! No! I am not he!” Mobius said as a magical dampening field was resurrected.

“He is a coward! If he had a speck of courage, I might have let him live. Kill him!”

Mobius’ eyes reddened as he drew his sword and lunged at the gnome.

“The gnome brought him to us. Let the gnome live,” one said as he slashed at Mobius.

The warlock went down under a pile of angry demons as they sought revenge against their hated foe.

“Do not expect mercy next time,” a demon spell-caster said as he teleported Digorence to Skyhall.

The gnome nodded, found the time portal, and then gasped as everything went black.



“Digorence, wake up! Digorence!”

“W-what?” the gnome said as he awoke.

“Why are you still asleep, you good-for-nothing gnome?”

“What do you mean good-for-nothing? I happened to have just saved the—” he stopped when he looked around and saw Arianna staring at him with a puzzled expression.

“Saved the what? The sandwich?”

Digorence glared, bit back his words for a moment, then said “Ha, ha very funny,” as he slowly got up. “Why are you two bothering me?”

“We have received word that the renegades are trying to restore some sort of cocoon to life. They have moved operations to another planet and are draining the life of its citizens to restore the entity in the cocoon.”

“It’s Mobius!” Digorence cried.

“How do you know?”

“Come on! We need to speak with Mortimer,” Digorence said as he hurried out of the room.

The two girls wordlessly followed Digorence as he waddled down the hall. They caught up to him and asked, “Who is Mortimer?”

“What do you mean, who’s M—?” Digorence stopped. He seemed to remember who the man was but couldn’t seem to visualize him. “Never mind. Let’s just go see Arcanious,” Digorence said.

The three of them walked down the hall toward Arcanious’ chambers. Arianna and Meilan were puzzled about why Digorence was so insistent about seeing Arcanious. What puzzled them more, however, was that Digorence was actually traveling without the aid of his gnooter.

They pinched themselves to see whether or not they were dreaming; and after they determined they were not, they stared

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at the gnome and tried to see if he was sick or hallucinating.

“What are you staring at me for? Never seen a gnome walk?” he yelled after he turned around to see the two girls staring at him.

“Actually, no,” Arianna said with a laugh.

Digorence sighed and grumbled to himself as he continued on toward Arcanious’ room.

Several minutes later, he was sitting in Arcanious’ room talking to the archwizard about plans to stop the renegades.

“It certainly is good to see you finally pulling your weight here, gnome,” Arcanious intoned.

“Don’t get used to it, old-timer,” Digorence shot back before thinking.

Luckily, Arcanious brushed aside the comment calmly and continued to strategize with the gnome.

Outside, the two girls were wondering what was going on since the doors were shut and they couldn’t “accidentally” overhear what was happening.

Normally, Digorence made his visits with Arcanious as short as possible, but today it seemed he was dragging it on.

“I think that Digorence was possessed with a good spirit,” Meilan mused after thinking about what could cause this change in the gnome.

“Don’t expect it to last too long,” Digorence sneered as he opened the door and left Arcanious’ room.

“So what’s going on?” Arianna asked.

“Well, you informed me that the renegades have moved their operations to another world right?”

“Yes.”

“And they are draining the life of the people of the planet to restore the person in the cocoon, right?”

“Yes,” Arianna repeated.

“The person in the cocoon is Mobius. I know because I went into the fut—. Oh, you’re not going to believe me anyway. I just know. Okay? So what we do is, we go to squad zero headquarters and head over to their planet and stop them.”

“This is Digorence, right? Not some weird clone or look-alike?” Arianna asked.

“If I said no, would you believe me?”

“Of course. Why?”

“Just wondering,” Digorence said as he tried to think of an excuse. “Arcanious says you guys are to come with me, so go to squad zero headquarters while I get something to eat.”

“Now, that sounds like Digorence,” Arianna said with a smile.

The two girls made their way toward squad zero headquarters while the gnome went off in search of something to eat.

Before he headed out the door of Skyhall’s castle, he decided to grab his gnooter so he wouldn’t be made a joke of by the townspeople.

He was back in about an hour and sat around in his room to

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steel himself for the trip to the alien planet.

When he was ready to take the journey, he traveled to squad zero headquarters to find Arianna and Meilan.

Both of them were half asleep on couches waiting for the gnome, and when he finally arrived they gratefully stood up and waited for him to start the portal.

“Is anyone from squad zero coming?”

“Yes. We are just waiting for Ranth to come,” Digorence said as he began to program the portal.

After he fiddled with the dials and controls for a moment, light flared in the portal as it began to establish a link with its target. The light began to swirl as it finished making the link, causing Digorence to pace around the room.

If Ranth didn't show up soon, he would have to reset the portal, which was something he didn't really want to do. Just before Digorence decided to start fiddling with the dials again, Ranth came into the room with a large grey bag over his shoulders.

“Sorry for the delay, but I figured that you guys would forget to pack supplies,” he said as he moved toward the portal.

“Now that everyone's here,” Digorence said a little nastily, “Let's all go.”

They all nodded and followed Digorence into the circle of swirling light.



The group materialized in a small square room with white

walls. As they moved toward the door, nozzles extended out of the walls, floor, and ceiling and pointed toward the group.

Arianna gasped and erected a magical barrier only to have Digorence yell at her to put it down.

“It’s perfectly safe. They just want to make sure we didn’t bring any hitchhikers,” Digorence said. “Now close your eyes and mouth until they’re done spraying us.”

After a red light swept through the room to ensure that they were all unshielded and had their eyes and mouths covered, the nozzles gently sprayed them with a strange liquid.

“Don’t open your eyes,” Digorence quickly warned once the nozzles had stopped spraying.

A gentle mist of water cleansed the possibly-toxic spray from the travelers before a wave of heat dried them clean.

“All germs and insect-like life forms erased. Please proceed,” a machine emitted as the heat wave ended.

As they walked into the next room, they could see that something was wrong. Arianna, floating in the air, yelled, “Digorence we’re floating!”

Suddenly, there was a loud beep and everyone fell to the ground with a thump.

“Gravity field established,” a machine announced.

“Gravity field? Where are we?”

“The reaches of outer space past Pluto,” Digorence said.

“Really?” Arianna, who was the only other person who knew what Pluto was, responded.

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“Wow!” Arianna said as they passed into a tunnel to the shuttle with glass walls that allowed them to take in the breathtaking view of space.

The view was full of stars and was one of the most breathtaking sights Arianna had ever seen. Here she was, standing in space, taking in sights that most people would never see. Come to think of it, she’d seen plenty of things most people would never see.

“Come, it’s not safe to stay here,” Digorence said as he led them to the main shuttle.

“Ah, Digorence,” a voice said.

“Wrinkles,” Digorence replied.

“Allow me to introduce myself to your companions. I am Doctor Truewing. I am the medical caretaker. Digorence, however, refers to me as Wrinkles, for reasons unknown,” he said with a cheerful smile.

“Actually, the reason is known,” Digorence said before he trailed off after seeing the expression on the doctor’s face.

“I was expecting you. Follow me,” Truewing said.

He led them all to a large screen with couches in a semicircle around it.

“This is the planet Frigolia,” he said as a picture of the planet popped into view. “The humans are millions of years away from developing technology even remotely capable of reaching this planet; and sadly and unbelievably, the Frigolians are billions of years behind them. Now for the important stuff. The

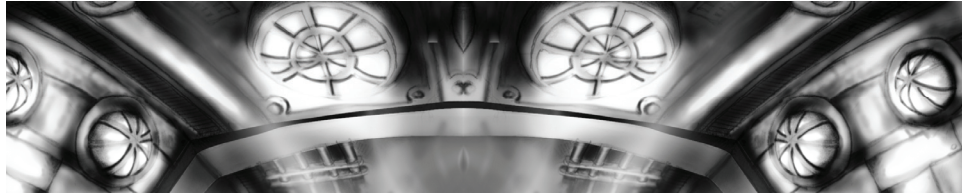
climate is very, very cold. Snow storms are extremely common. Hail the size of a large human can occur.

“The population is large but decreasing. The renegades have somehow resurrected the art of necromancy and are draining the lives of the people. What is left of most of them are towns full of zombies waiting to get their revenge on those still living. Those towns are to be avoided at all costs.

“The planet is under the control of a single king. Luckily he is wise and fair and so the planet hasn’t fallen into chaos and despair. However, he is the next likely target of the assassins hired by the renegades. His death would throw the whole planet into unbearable chaos.

“I suppose you understand what you are to do. To assist you, squad beta’s most famous hunter and tracker will accompany you. So,” he said as he looked at the three. “Are you ready to begin your journey?”

“Yes,” Digorence said. “Yes, we are.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: FRIGOLIA

Arianna and the others materialized in a circle of frozen earth. Around them snow was piled almost as high as they were tall, and that snow stretched on as far as her eyes could see. Only in this one circular area could she see the floor. Then she saw that the area around them was protected by a magical barrier that kept the snow from coming in.

“I have been awaiting you,” a hooded figure said as he looked up and saw them materialize.

“And you are?” Digorence asked.

“I am Deren, the best tracker and hunter for dimension-hopping villains,” he said.

“Yeah, their best ego, too,” Digorence sneered.

“But I bow before the almighty master of ego,” Deren retorted as he did a mocking bow. “However, getting back to

the subject. I am to lead you to talk to their king. We think that he may know where the renegades are hiding.”

They all nodded and followed him out of the magical dome.

Once they were all out, Deren dispelled the magic. “It’s a waste of power now,” he explained. Five minutes later Arianna turned around and was shocked to discover that the clean area was already completely covered in snow.

Trudging through the now waist-high snow proved to be an arduous ordeal. Every step they took felt like a thousand as they walked toward a distant town.

“Couldn’t we levitate above the snow?”

“The blizzard is too thick higher up to see through. Besides the towns folk might see us and think we are renegades. Right now, the only magical users they know of besides their own spell casters are the renegades, so don’t be too open about the fact that you can use magic too.”

The three wizards nodded and continued trudging in the snow. By the time they reached the small village, they were too tired to make the trip to the castle not far ahead.

Gratefully they took seats at a small inn and rested for a time while drinking warm stew as they sat close to the fire.

Arianna was on the verge of falling asleep when Digorence stood up from the table and said that they had better start heading toward the castle to speak with the king.

When everyone else agreed to this, Arianna sleepily stood up from the table and began to make her way toward the door.

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Just as she placed a hand on the door handle, a loud piercing shriek pierced the air.

Inside the inn a large gong was brought out. Someone quickly moved to strike the gong and alert the village.

“Get down,” Deren hissed as the man struck the gong twice and then quickly placed the instrument in the closet.

A man on the verge of hysterics crazily lunged at the man who had struck the gong and beat him down to the floor.

“What did you do that for? Now they’ll know to come here!” he raged as he pummeled the unfortunate man.

Suddenly the windows were bolted shut and all the lights and fires were doused.

Everything was completely silent until the deranged man started to bang his unconscious victim’s head on the floor. Ranth moved over to the violent man and threw him toward the door.

He landed with a loud angry crash that made everyone turn to glare at Ranth.

“Don’t make any noise!” hissed the innkeeper as Ranth knelt down to make sure the unconscious man was okay.

Arianna, who was near the door, began to hear voices mumbling. Silently, so she wouldn’t anger the townsfolk, she pressed an ear to the door to hear what they were saying.

“Those fools really think hiding will save them,” a voice cackled.

“Let’s show them how stupid they really are,” a second

suggested.

“Knock, knock!” the first voice shouted as he bashed at the door twice with a large war hammer.

Arianna scuttled away from the door in horror as the top half of the door crashed into splinters. She was only a few feet away from the renegades when the rest of the door crashed into splinters and the two robed figures entered.

“My, my! What do we have here?” one of them said as he saw Arianna trying to back away while keeping her eyes on them, since she had been told not to use any spells.

With a laugh, he strode over to where Arianna was on the ground and readied his hammer.

“I dare any of you scum to try and stop me!” he screamed as he swung his hammer down. Arianna braced herself for the pain as his hammer plummeted toward her.

Suddenly, the renegade made a gurgling sound as Ranth leaped down from the ceiling and slashed at him with his force blade.

“Duck!” Deren shouted as he pulled back his arm and threw a knife at the second renegade before he could react to what was happening.

“Come on; we’d better help the rest of the town,” Deren said as he readied another set of knives.

The rest of the people in the inn shrank as far as they could into the shadows as the wizards and gnome stepped out of the door and into the frigid afternoon.

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Out in the wide streets, the town militia was bravely trying to cut down the renegades and stop them from trying to drain the life force of the town's citizens.

"Feel free to use magic now," Deren said as he waved to a figure clad in red armor with a matching cape.

"He will tell the men you are not the enemy."

The red-armored man whirled his axe in a deadly whirlwind of cuts as he brought down several renegades before they could react.

"Those renegades are shielded. How is he hurting them?" Arianna asked Deren as they ran toward the battle.

"Their weapons are coated with a special antimagic dust. Here," he said as he handed Ranth a small pouch of the dust.

"I thought you said they weren't very technologically advanced?"

"They're doing pretty well in the magic field."

As they ran, Ranth applied the powder to his blade. He added the power of fire to the blade and was surprised that the antimagic dust didn't interfere with his force blade's magical properties.

Ranth brought his blade down in a sweeping blow as he neared a renegade and sent a volley of fiery arrows to strike at renegades ganging up on two militia men. He turned around to parry a strange armor-clad demon's spear and ran it through with a sword.

The red-armored man lunged at a clump of the armored

demons, throwing them aside as he charged through them to save the militia men being surrounded by them.

As the demons began to get up, Arianna and Meilan began to cast water and earth spells to bring them down. Arianna summoned a series of earthen spires to skewer the demons as they attempted to get back on their feet.

Deren rolled to his side and quickly lashed at a renegade several times before he could cast a spell and counter.

Ranth, Deren, and the red-armored man managed to corner the leader of the renegade squad after taking down his large armored guardians.

“Prepare to die!” the cornered renegade said as he raised a hand and disappeared.

Confused, the three turned around and saw the dead renegades rising from the ground. “Find him!” The red-armored man yelled. “Once he’s dead, they’ll stop!” he said as he dashed off.

Deren nodded and quickly climbed a wall to gain access to the tallest roof in the village. He looked around to try and find the renegade who was animating the corpses. Since the renegade would have to be close to do such a thing, Deren knew he would have to be on ground level.

Quickly he leaped off the roof and headed in the direction opposite the green-armored man. Ranth headed in a third, leaving Arianna and Meilan to take the last.

After searching the town for several minutes, Ranth decided

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that he must be hiding in a building somewhere. Ranth knew that the militia could only hold off the zombies for so long without becoming utterly exhausted and so he resolved to hurry and find the renegade.

He bashed down a door to find the terrified owners of the house staring at him with eyes pleading for mercy. He was just about to leave when he saw a shift in the shadows and a mysterious purple glint. The wizard moved in closer and lunged at the shadows.

An extremely powerful blast of purple magic caused him to fly out of the house, taking a large section of the house with him. Ranth lay on the floor groaning as the renegade moved in to finish the job.

However, both Deren and his red-clad companion had heard the explosion and came rushing to rescue him.

They both charged into the renegade at full speed. As he began to cast a spell while falling to the floor, Deren picked up Ranth's sword and finished the renegade before he could unleash another spell.

With their leader dead, the zombies fell back to the ground so they could rest their aching limbs. They leaned against a wall, took off their helmets, and dropped their weapons in relief.

Deren helped Ranth up after they had cleared the rubble that had fallen on top of him.

"Who are those demon creatures fighting with the renegades?"

“Those aren’t technically demons. They were once men like you and me who went berserk. They retreated into the mountains and prayed to their demon god to give them power and strength. Their price to pay for that strength was that they would have to go out the rest of their lives looking like demons.”

Digorence, who had stayed back with the militia, met up with the group and they all readied themselves for the journey to the castle after sweeping through the town and making sure the townspeople were safe and there weren’t any hiding renegades.

The green-armored man had disappeared, leaving Deren as the guide once more.

After he finished talking with another of his comrades, Deren led them to the caravan trail to the kingdom, which the king’s mages worked hard to keep clear of tremendous amounts of snow. This time, thanks to the reduction of waist high snow, the wizards and gnome were able to walk freely and not become so tired.

Digorence was especially grateful, since what was waist high to his companions was either over his head or up to his neck, and he felt that being carried by someone was highly embarrassing.

Soon they were at the entrance to the castle. Deren took a blade from his belt and quickly hit it three times, paused for five seconds, and then hit it twice more. A small slot opened in the

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gate and the gateman looked at them.

“Come on in,” he said after seeing Deren.

Deren took his companions to the inner courtyard where they were met by the king’s captain of the guard.

“I will warn you that any suspicious behavior will have you immediately put into custody while in the prescience of the king,” he said sternly as he inspected them for weapons. The man caught sight of Ranth’s force blade and made the wizard give it up.

Digorence, Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth all groaned as Deren took several minutes to fish out all of his hidden weaponry and place it on a table watched over by a balding man in rusty chain mail.

After they had given up all of their weaponry and had been inspected by magical devices, they were admitted into the castle area.

The castle rose before them, majestic against the backdrop of breathtaking mountains that reached into the heavens. Its battlements were well-manned with archers and foot soldiers and there were many guards on duty.

They entered the interior of the castle and were awed by the décor. Grand carpets and exquisite paintings and statues covered the grounds and walls. Beautiful chandeliers hung above them and enveloped the halls in light.

Moving quickly, the group made their way through the breathtaking interior of the castle to meet with the king.

“Come, this way,” a page said as he caught sight of the group.

“You are to meet the king in his war-council chambers, not his throne room. Come,” he said quickly. They said nothing but followed the page as he led them to a massive pair of double doors.

He placed his feet firmly on the ground and pulled back with all his might. After several moments of grunting and groaning, he had wrestled the door open, and Arianna and her companions stepped into the room. Seated straight ahead of them was a fair haired man Arianna judged to be the king.

To his right sat an elderly man in a priest’s robe. Arianna could see that the old man was wise as well as kind from his twinkling eyes, his merry smile, and the aura of intelligence around him.

To the king’s left was a man Arianna began to intensely distrust. His face was completely hidden in a green hood attached to his matching armor.

“Welcome, brave travelers from the dimension of Xjoz,” the green man said. He pulled back the hood and gazed at them from the interior of the mask hiding his face. His green hair was combed over one eye in a fashion similar to Ranth’s. Catching sight of Ranth, he raised a glass in the air toward him, looked at the wizard, and said, “Welcome, brave sir. Do you find our dimension to your liking?”

Ranth said nothing but kept staring at the masked figure.

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Something about him seemed hauntingly familiar.

The green man was about to say something more when the priest cleared his throat and looked up at the travelers.

“Spare them your cryptic talks. Please take a seat. You must all be tired from today’s events.”

The group took their seats and looked at the king.

“Please, sir,” Arianna said after no one said anything for several moments. “Tell us anything you deem is important.”

“Very well,” the seemingly youthful king said. “I will start from the beginning. The ones that you know of came to our planet because the desolate weather conditions would prevent a large force from coming to oppose them once they destroyed the food sources. Luckily, they still have not found the underground location of our food sources.

“However, they frequently go on raids to steal the life force of my dear planet’s citizens in order to revive some sort of creature living in a cocoon. After a person’s life force is drained, he becomes a mindless zombie, knowing only to attack any living thing he sees. We are both afraid and relieved that they seem to be nearing the amount of life force they need since their raids are becoming less frequent. Afraid because we do not know what sort of creature they will release from that cocoon, and relieved because it may mean the end of this horrid invasion.

“Luckily, we know the location of their hideout. They are based in a remote fortress some twenty or thirty miles from

here. We know this because," here he paused and stared off into space for a moment, "my dear uncle was the commander of the fortress before it fell to the renegade and their berserker pets. Those accursed renegades made a pact with the berserkers of the mountains to help them. The best course of action would be to use the underground passageway to my uncle's castle and destroy that cocoon before they can bring it to life."

"Sounds good to me," Digorence said.

"The passageway is no longer completely safe," the king interjected.

"Oh," Digorence said.

"Once you get near the mountains, you'll be in Xedna territory where there are extremely vicious creatures who love to eat human flesh. They are often raiding our underground food centers for sheep and other livestock. Be careful."

"They shouldn't be too big of a problem."

"Don't worry about them; I'll be there to take care of them," the green man said as he stood up. "I will show our guests to their rooms," he said. "Follow me."

The group bid the king farewell as they followed the green man to their chambers.

He led them to a well-furnished large room. Bidding them goodnight, he left and closed the door.

The weary wizards and gnome found the beds extremely comfortable and almost immediately fell asleep.

In the hallway, the green man picked up his lance from his

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room and headed to the practice chambers.

Once he was in the practice chambers, he quickly bolted the door and turned to face the figure hiding in the shadows.

“So are you prepared to do what you must?” the man’s silver eyes glared at him from the shadows.

“Yes, yes, I am,” the green-clad man said, thrusting the spear into the shadows and ending the other’s man’s life.

“My masters will not forgive you for this betrayal.”

“They will not be too overly angry for losing a terrible servant like you.”

The demon shuddered and fell to the floor. His body evaporated and the mist flew off toward the renegade fortress to inform its masters of its untimely death.

The green man balanced his lance on the wall and sat down with his back to the wall. Soon, he too fell asleep.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE XENDRA

Arianna heard a clash as she wandered around the castle waiting for her companions to wake up. Hurriedly she dashed into her room and saw the man she distrusted in conversation with a robed figure.

“I knew I shouldn’t trust you,” she screamed as she drew her force blade.

“Perhaps you should have taken a closer look, Arianna,” the robed figure said as he pulled back his hood and pointed to the ground.

Strewn around the floor were the bodies of many demons and renegades, and Arianna noticed that the green man was only able to stand with the support of his spear.

“You’re the ghost man,” she said as she stepped toward them. “My apologies,” she said. Suddenly she noticed a

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movement in the shadows and readied her magic.

“Relax. It’s just Junksmith,” the ghost man said, his robes swishing as he spoke. The gremlin stepped out of the shadows and nodded at the girl as he settled to wait for the two men to finish talking.

“So you’re convinced there’s no other way to get there to confront Mobius?”

“Without being detected, yes.”

The robed figure Arianna identified as the ghost man sighed and turned to his companion. “Reynau, you’re lucky our fates intertwine. I can guide you through all of the tricky parts of the tunnels but no farther.”

The green-clad man nodded in agreement and beckoned for the others to follow as he left the room. Silently, they all followed him down the hall.

Reynau banged on the door and hurriedly entered the room as a sleepy Deren answered it, asking Arianna, “Who are these people?”

“These are my friends. This is . . .”

“Let’s just keep my name to ourselves shall we?” the other said as he noticed Meilan and Digorence.

“Well, anyway, he will be guiding us on our journey to prevent the resurrection of Mobius.”

“Friend Reynau forgets that I will only be helping past the dangerous parts and then I must take my leave.”

“So when do we leave?” Arianna asked as she entered the

room.

“As soon as you all are ready. The king has already ridden to aid his armies from another attack.”

The wizards and gnome ate breakfast and readied themselves for the arduous journey ahead. When they finished, their guide led them to the throne room. On a table were their own weapons as well as a few others.

The guide quickly closed all of the windows and blinds and shut the heavy double doors. Gesturing towards the extravagantly-decorated weapons, he picked them up and handed them to Deren one by one.

“These are gifts from one great hunter to another. Since you don’t have a force blade with you, our king thought it would be prudent to give you this blade and dirk.” Almost as an afterthought, he pulled out his own blade and gave it a quick flourish before placing it back in its scabbard and moving toward the throne.

Absentmindedly, he moved a few pieces on the chessboard and then began to move the throne over. The assembled adventurers stood puzzled as the man kicked the empty wall savagely and then drew his sword.

They assumed he was crazy as he crouched low and stared at the wall for several minutes before back-flipping away onto a panel of the floor and then charging at the wall. A split second before he hit the wall, he pulled out his sword and slammed it through the wall to the hilt.

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Nothing happened, and then a slight crack was visible in the wall. Grunting, he placed his fingers in the crack and began to pull.

Unbelievably, a small wooden door stood where he had pulled apart the wall. He retrieved his blade and aimed a small beam of light from his fingertips at the right side of the door.

Silently, he beckoned them to follow him. They started to do so, but the walls shook and they heard an agonized scream from off in the distance.

“You must hurry. They mustn’t be allowed to find this place. Come on,” he said as he thrust the door open.

“Shouldn’t someone defend the castle?” Arianna asked. Reynau started to answer, but was thrown back towards the bolted double doors by an extremely strong and tough creature hefting a gigantic spear who had appeared swiftly from the other side of the bend in the tunnel.

Groaning, he stood up and froze as he heard footsteps outside and quickly ran back toward the creature. It began to emit a hoarse and cruel sound that could only be laughter as the man rapidly approached him. It groaned as it was hit by the man in full speed as he called for the others to hurry and follow him.

As the last of them made their way into the passageway, he pulled an ancient lever on the wall that would supposedly put everything back into place and then moved to finish off the savage.

“The Xendra are growing bold. Apparently they knew where to go to get to us if the need ever arose, but they did not know how. Come, we must hurry.”

Silently they moved down the twisting tunnels, their path illuminated by a magical light. The three young wizards were uncomfortable in the silence, but they knew its purpose was to avoid detection by the Xendra. What seemed like days of endless silent twisting and turning down long, dim passageways crawled by slowly for the group, even though their travel time so far had been only a matter of a few hours.

At last, their guide decided that they could stop and rest for a few minutes. As they all sat and stretched their tired limbs, Ranth began to unpack food and pass it around. As they were eating and drinking, the attack happened faster than any of them could have thought. One minute they were enjoying a swig of warm soup or a bite of salted meat and the next they were held at spear point by a band of savages.

“No talking!” barked one of them quickly. “No moving your fingers, no moving your mouths, nothing. I know of you magical types. Yes, I know of you very well.”

One of his lackeys made the mistake of dropping his spear from Arianna’s terrified face and was almost instantaneously skewered by the talker.

He grabbed the fallen warrior’s spear as it dropped from his cold, dead hands and shoved it in Arianna’s direction. “You had one more, a man. Where did he go?” he said as he inched the

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blade dangerously close to her face.

In shock, she looked around and caught no sight of the ghost man. “I don’t know,” she said fearlessly.

“You lie! Take them all away to be sacrificed. I was going to give them a warrior’s death, but now I know their treacherous ways. Take them away, I said!”

Remembering what had happened to their fallen comrade, the others quickly knocked each of the prisoners out with the butts of their spears.

Ranth, one of the last one to go, struggled to be free of his captors and then hit the floor, mumbling and cursing, until the darkness swallowed his vision.



Arianna groaned as she gradually awoke. Almost immediately, she looked around to make sure her friends had made it alive, too. “That scum Reynau and his friend, they must have deserted us too,” she said after sighting only Ranth, Meilan, and Digorence.

“Do you really detest me that much?” a voiced called from off in the distance. Impossibly far, he must have used some magic to both hear and answer back. Then Arianna realized that it didn’t come from Reynau but was the voice of their guide.

Frowning, Arianna moved to the steel bars of her cage, and found Reynau calmly standing in the middle of a small arena, placed there for grotesque entertainment.

“This one,” a voice called out from somewhere in the small

stadium-like structure surrounding the arena, “this one wouldn’t betray his friends and fought to the very last. He deserves a warrior’s death. Now, let the games begin!”

Arianna began to detest the voice of the apparent leader of the Xendra, both barbaric and senseless, as he released Reynau’s first opponents.

“It seems the ghost man and his gremlin friend couldn’t be trusted enough to rescue us,” she said as she sadly watched a gigantic brute with a massive studded club tower over an unarmed Reynau.

“So that’s how ye repay your rescuers,” another voice said from under the small cage on the wagon.

“Unfortunately, I must wait until T—, until he comes to create the diversion necessary to get us out of here with our lives. Friend Reynau will have to survive until then.”

“He has little chance then. Look at the size of some of those beasties,” Digorence said indifferently.

“I wouldn’t be saying that. Reynau’s a formidable fighter.”

“Hah! I’m sure even I could beat him,” Digorence said, failing to lighten the mood.

“Just watch and don’t act suspicious. There’s people watching you,” the gremlin said as he made himself comfortable in his hiding place.

“How did you slip away?” Digorence asked, but there was no answer. “Probably dumb luck,” he muttered to himself.

In the arena, the brute savagely swung his club at Reynau,

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who easily dodged to the side and feinted a blow. Knowing that he couldn't inflict much damage on this muscular barbarian of a foe with only his bare hands, he knew he would have to use his magic to aid him.

Despite not even having been to Skyhall, Reynau had inherited an innate ability to use magic from his parents. Using this power, he added an aura of magic to his fists and waited for an opportunity to strike.

Tossing aside the club, the savage launched clumsy punch after punch on Reynau, which, although Reynau easily evaded them, could easily knock him out or even kill him. Reynau ducked under a curving punch and quickly ran inside the savage's reach and assaulted the other with a series of magically enhanced punches and kicks that tossed his foe into the air.

He himself took to the air and kicked the brute savagely upwards, landing two heavy punches on the other's face before bunching his two fists together and then hammering down with all his might.

The brute shot toward the ground, and Reynau fell with him, savagely kicking and punching till the brute fell dead.

Panting heavily, Reynau eyed the club in despair as he realized it was too heavy for him to put to effective use.

This time, five armored warriors were released into the arena.

Reynau eyed their weapons and grinned. He readied himself in a defensive stance and waited for the first spearman to attack.

Clumsily came the thrust, and Reynau quickly sidestepped the blow and grabbed the spear, slamming the butt into the warrior's head, grabbing hold of the weapon, and swinging it around to knock the warrior to the ground.

He scanned the battlefield and finished his first foe before using his newly-found weapon to parry another blow. As he defeated another Xendra, he swapped the spear for a sword and quickly launched himself at the next foe.

His swordsmanship was flawless; he was surprised at the quality of the weapon in his hand. Almost without even thinking, he slew another warrior and looked at the mark on the hilt of the blade. The mark was the emblem of one of the royal houses of Frigolia. Perhaps they really are getting bold, he thought as he waited for his next set of foes to be released.

Momentarily, Reynau wondered what was stopping him from launching magic or himself at the thrilled spectators watching the bloodshed. As he threw his next puny opponent high into the air he received the answer to his question. In agony, his victim screamed as he was shocked by a magical force field that was sure to bounce back any magic cast at it.

Growing tired of this endless onslaught of enemies, Reynau hoped they would eventually give up trying to kill him.

Just as they were about to unleash another onslaught of enemies, he caught sight of a black-clad figure, which appeared from nowhere and impaled the leader of the Xendra. Reynau sensed that the shield above him had broken and flew into the

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air and into the bleachers. He knew that they would need a diversion to free the others, and so he proceeded to violently attack all the Xendra around him.

The barbarian creatures attempted to pile on top of Reynau, and he quickly blew them off with what magic he could do and started to hack at them once more. As he did this, he caught sight of the group's guide, who had assassinated the leader with ease. Angered Xendra around the slayer of their leader went into a savage frenzy, but the mysterious attacker disappeared once more.

Expertly, Junksmith released the captive wizards and gnome and led them to the passage upward to their freedom. As they made their way to the safety of the upper labyrinth, Reynau and his companion quickly joined them.

Arianna's legs felt like they were going to burst as they ran through the dim passageways, trying to get as far away from the Xendra as possible.

At last it seemed as though the Xendra had given up, and the companions could take a moment's rest. They stretched out their tired legs, wishing they had something to eat or drink.

As they were about to get up again, Arianna turned toward their guide and asked, "Who in the name of good are you?"

"Well, if you must know, I am T'rath," the man said with an odd look in his eyes.

"Don't even joke. T'rath died."

"No, he didn't," T'rath said with a slight smile. "Mobius'

magic didn't not kill me fully, but I dared not return to Skyhall for all the sadness my foolishness has caused. I have taken care of my business, so I am free to guide you the rest of the way."

"And just how close are we?"

"Very close, we will be out in the open air in a matter of minutes."

Quickly, the group readied themselves for a battle as they walked onwards. Soon they could feel the faint touch of air as they grew nearer to their destination.

Arianna breathed a sigh of relief as they were engulfed by sweet fresh air as they emerged into the outside world. Coming out of the cave, they were on a narrow path on one of the mountains standing close to the fortress. The reason Arianna thought of it as a path was that the edges were piled high with snow, but there was level ground in front of them.

Off in the distance loomed the forlorn castle where they were sure to encounter the renegades furiously trying to recover Mobius. Hidden by the massive snow banks, the group waited as T'rath slipped off to scout ahead.

They took a much-needed rest but soon grew restless. Without asking the rest of the group, Arianna slipped off on her own to scout out the fortress.

Ancient and worn but well-manned was how she thought of it. Levitating just slightly and peering over the edge of the snow banks Arianna could see that there were many warlocks guarding the place.

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The wind started to pick up, slicing through like the frozen breath of a god. Arianna resisted an urge to shiver and tried to discern some sensible strategy they could use besides straightforwardly charging at the fortress. She preferred a strategy that wouldn't get everyone killed.

Thinking that there wasn't anything else that she could really do, Arianna returned to the camp.

"There you are. Look, we can't wait for T'rath all day; we've got to do this now, before night falls. We are extraordinarily ill-equipped for low temperatures, and you have no idea how cold it will be when the sun falls." With that, Reynau vaulted over the top of the snow bank and was now sliding his way down to the fortress.

"Don't kill them when they're this close to Mobius; their deaths will only feed his life," Deren shouted as he nimbly leaped over a snow bank and began sliding down on a Xendra shield.

The rest quickly followed him down the banks, trying to make their way into the fortress before the enemy had too much time to react.

Arianna deftly landed on her feet as she rolled off the snow bank and saw the fortress looming above her. Waves of sadness, fear, and pain crashed over her as she took in the sights of the forlorn castle looming in front of her. Never before had she believed that a simple structure could so easily convey such a melancholy emotion.

She was shaken from her thoughts as she stepped into something wet. Looking down, she saw the bodies of the guards that had once been proud defenders of this fortress. They had been brutally laid out in front of the castle as a warning of the power of Mobius; but instead of fear, the sight only brought fury to Arianna.

Heeding Deren's warning, the wizards quickly grabbed a club from the bodies of the guardsmen and readied themselves for the first wave of attackers, which was coming from the air. Warlocks were streaming through the battlements, some flying off the edges, others taking a less magical approach to getting down.

Keeping an eye on the warlock nearest her, Arianna prepared to hit the flying menace as if it were a baseball. She would have, too, except that just as the warlocks were close enough to stab them with their swords, knowing magic would be easily deflected, T'rath unleashed a huge magical barrier that knocked the warlocks out of the air and onto the snow.

Blue sparks flashed inside the swirling grey barrier as T'rath began to step forward, planting a foot firmly into the face of a groaning warlock. Little green tornados began to form inside the barrier, mixing in with the flashing blue sparks.

As the next wave of warlocks burst out of the fortress doors, Arianna's heart sank. She knew there was no way they could defend against such a large number of warlocks. Maybe it could happen in one of the stories she had read as a child, but it

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would be impossible for her.

But Arianna had forgotten how T'rath had managed to survive against all those golems. Even if she had, she would have not have understood fully the implications of what that meant. Therefore, she was greatly surprised as nearly a hundred warlocks crashed into the magical barrier held by an obviously strained T'rath and were repelled and then frozen by the tornados released by the impact.

No more warlocks came, and T'rath at last released the barrier but was ready to immediately bring it back up if warlocks decided to attack while it was down. As he fell to the ground, Arianna looked at the courtyard ahead of her and noted dryly that there were so many frozen warlocks on the ground she could have ice skated her way to the door if she had brought a pair of ice skates.

T'rath was deathly pale, exhausted from all the magic he had put into repelling the attackers. He slowly moved toward a wall to lean against. Wordlessly, Deren pressed on, knowing they had no time to waste.

The huge doors had been opened by the warlocks, but Arianna knew better than to think it was going to be easy from this part on. The grandeur that had once been the fortress was forever stained by Mobius.

Huge chandeliers and stained-glass windows lay shattered and broken. Tables and dishes cracked. Paintings were ripped crudely by blades, and the former occupants were everywhere.

Arianna was sick to her stomach and filled to the brink with rage. How anyone could bring himself to do something like this, she would never know.

Huge staircases spiraled off into what seemed to be the horizon. There was one in each corner and a huge one in the middle.

Without seeing it, Arianna knew what would happen. Mobius came floating down the hole in the middle of the central staircase, releasing a blast of wind at floor level that shattered the rest of the glass in the room.

“How wonderful. My murderers come to greet me to witness my most perfect moment of glory. Any moment now, and the pitiful king of this frozen wasteland will be brought to me. And I will have his soul. Just like the rest of the kings in this pathetic galaxy.”

“Enough of your crazed talk, Mobius. It seems your brain hasn’t survived your little reawakening.”

T’rath and Reynau groaned as they were blown to separate corners of the room as Mobius sprang back upwards, not even injured by Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth’s blasts of magic.

The battle seemed hopeless as Mobius, empowered by all of the life force he had drained, relentlessly assaulted them with his magic.

Suddenly, Digorence called out, “Arianna remember how you defeated him last time?”

Arianna tried her best to think back while still keeping an

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eye on her foe. As a golden orb appeared on Reynau's fingertips, she remembered the divine magic she had learned from one of the ancient gnome textbooks.

Reynau and T'rath leaped at Mobius once more to give Arianna the time she needed to prepare the spell. Orbs of magic floated in an odd formation above Mobius and relentlessly bombarded the two as they fought to reach him with their swords.

The golden sphere flared in Arianna's hand, its light engulfing all in the room, easing the pain of her comrades momentarily, until she launched it at Mobius.

Ranth then launched himself at Mobius. Snarling, the warlock stabbed Ranth as he attempted to do the same.



Meilan knew that they couldn't last forever against Mobius, and as much as she hated herself for doing so, she slipped away from the battle field. Running with a speed fueled by desperation, Meilan took a running start before clearing the section of the floor that had fallen away during some mishap years ago. She could have levitated across, but she was going to need all the magical energy she could spare later on.

Swiftly, she slid around a corner, picked up speed again, and brought her club above her head, slamming it down on the warlock sentry, whose back had been turned away from her. The added velocity from the run had made the blow too fast to be dodged, and the warlock went down without a struggle.

However, this alerted the other warlocks across the hall, and Meilan had to swiftly dodge their oncoming magical missiles.

Ignoring them, Meilan noted that she was now in the center of the castle, took a few steps back, and ran toward the warlocks assaulting her.

She reached the railing and vaulted over it, tucking in her legs to avoid the missiles aimed at head height. And then she was soaring.

Rising as fast as she could, Meilan shot through the center of the massive winding staircase. She reached the top, swung over to the last bit of stairs, and climbed up to the last floor of the fortress. There, unguarded, lay the portal. Next to it was a circular device made from bones and skulls. Meilan didn't need to be told this was powering Mobius' necromancy; and remembering the spell she and Arianna had first used to defeat Mobius, she unleashed it with a yell of fury.

The spell hit the horrible device and for a moment nothing happened. Then it disintegrated to nothingness, leaving the tortured souls trapped within to drift away.

Meilan slumped to the floor, the adrenaline draining out of her. She managed to raise a hand in triumph. Mobius would never again draw strength from souls.

Ranth was staggering from the wound he had received from Mobius' blade, but he quickly turned around and slashed at Mobius' shoulder.

Mobius started to laugh, but then the pain coursed through

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him as the blade bit down into the bone. His howl of pain brought hope to the wizards, who had previously been unable to inflict any pain upon the warlock.

Ranth brought his blade around to deal another blow, but then caught sight of two figures moving toward them from outside the fortress.

Arianna's heart sank as she recognized the battered body as the king of Frigolia. There was blood in his hair, his clothes, and all over his great sword. Mobius' smile made Arianna want to grab the black and poisonous organ that served as his heart and pull it out.

"Ah! It seems that the honorable wizards of Skyhall are too late to keep me from destroying one of the last guardians of the Yendril."

"The life guardians?"

Digorence frowned at this translation. He put it aside for later.

The warlock standing behind the king pushed him to his knees, and before Ranth could even blink, Mobius grabbed his sword and shot it toward the king with magic.

"And now everyone will know that he was killed by a Skyhallian blade." Mobius grinned as the king groaned.

And then the king reached up and grabbed the neck of the warlock who had stooped over to spit in his face, breaking the warlock's neck as he threw the warlock forward.

The warlock dropped the knife he had planned to use to

torture the king in his last few moments, which the king quickly snatched out of the air and threw at Mobius. The point landed straight in Mobius' gut, causing a shriek of pain that brought a cold sweat to Arianna's forehead.

Meilan heard the shriek and watched in horror as the floor beneath her started to crack and fall away.

T'rath grimly moved in to finish Mobius but was stopped as a huge chunk of ceiling fell on top of Mobius, crushing his last words.

"It's falling apart! Come on, we've got to hurry out of here!"

"Where's Meilan?" Arianna cried as she looked around the room.

"I'm sorry Arianna. I don't know . . ." Ranth replied.

The wizards hurriedly ran out of the crumbling fortress, unaware that Mobius had linked his device to the fortress itself, so that if it was destroyed then the fortress itself would fall with him.

Despite the fact that he had to stagger, Ranth helped Deren pick up the terribly-wounded king who hadn't moved since throwing the knife. T'rath, too, was quickly on his feet although it clearly pained him to move so quickly.

As they made their way out to the snowfield ahead of them, they threw themselves forwards as the last of the castle fell on itself, burying those within it forever.

Arianna, seeing that Meilan wasn't with them, started to sob. The others, too, started to feel tears coming, but then Ranth

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caught sight of a figure on one of mountain passes that had been near the top of the fortress. "It's Meilan!"



CHAPTER NINETEEN: FULL CIRCLE

Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth sat around in Digorence's office, unsure of where they were supposed to be. They had received word that Arcanious wanted to see them, but there were no further instructions as to the time and place.

Digorence's room had been the closest place to sit and talk, and luckily, the gnome wasn't around to ruin their peace.

Or at least that's what it looked like. To avoid appearing to be rude or prying but at the same time to make sure the course of history was back on track, Digorence listened to their conversation through a zombietised janitor making random sweeps up and down the hall. He had already made sure that Mortimer was back, and now it was time to make sure nothing major had changed.

Ranth laughed and then tried to find some words to comfort

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the two girls, who were worried that they were going to be in major trouble after their meeting with the archwizard. “Besides,” he finally said, “You guys have done so much to help. They won’t do anything serious.”

“I hope so,” Arianna said.

“So how far ahead of me are you two in intermediate training? What with this kidnapping and all I didn’t get a chance to learn anything. And how is it?” Ranth said, trying to change the subject to something that was hopefully more cheerful.

“Well, we had the oddest initiation ceremony. It was almost like yours, except fake.” Meilan said with a laugh as she explained to Ranth why no one had noticed he was missing until it was too late.

“Yeah, and we learned a lot about renegade magic.”

“Great! It sounds like I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me.”

“Well, you didn’t think you could be as good as we are, did you?” Arianna asked teasingly.

“No, but I can always dream.” Ranth laughed.

“So what happened to you?”

“Well, I was captured by warlocks; you know that part. Then they used Mortimer to convince me that the school they dumped all us wizards into wasn’t a fake. The classes were unbelievable. All we did was cast spell after spell until we were lucky enough to have energy to breathe. Eventually, I figured out that they were using us to power their time machine, and

we ended up in Subterranea.”

“I still don’t know how you managed to survive there,” Meilan said.

“Well, I had the other wizards. We gave each other something to fight for.” Ranth stopped to stretch for a moment and said, “I wish we could just rest for once. All this fighting evil stuff is extremely tiring.”

“I wonder what Arcanious is planning,” Arianna mused to herself.

“I suppose we’ll find out soon,” Meilan answered with a sigh.

“Yeah, too soon,” Ranth said.

“You should get some rest if you’re that tired,” Meilan said, changing the subject once more.

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep without knowing what Arcanious is going to do. Besides, I need to find out if all that stuff Digorence said he did was true.”

“Most of it is probably lies.”

“Well, to be fair, he has done an awful lot lately.”

“Yeah, for the food bill.”

Digorence hoped that his snort of rage, coming from just around the corner, wasn’t heard.



Arianna, Meilan, and Ranth stood outside of Arcanious’ chambers, still wondering why they had been summoned.

“I wonder what he wants us for?”

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“Well, we did get Ranth and the others back.”

“Yes, but we also defied Arcanious to do so.”

As if on cue, the archwizard’s voice boomed for them to enter.

Taking deep breaths, the two pushed open the door to face their punishment. Arianna’s spirits sank as she noticed the presence of the tri-wizards, but her eyes danced with curiosity at the sight of the other figure sitting with them—a man not used to the warmth of Skyhall: The Frigolian King.

With a stern look in his eyes, Arcanious waited for the two to get closer to him so he would not have to speak too loudly.

“Now, girls, you two directly defied my orders.”

Arianna considered raising the point that he never specifically said that they couldn’t go and that he only said the time issue needed to be dealt with first, but then wisely decided he would only see it as backtalk.

“Have a seat,” Brozax intoned. “Ranth must leave, however.”

Ranth gave a thumbs-up signal as he left, leaving Arianna and Meilan alone with their despair.

“As I was saying earlier, you defied my orders to go off on this rescue mission.” Seeing that they were about to say something, Arcanious gave them a stern look and continued, “And I’m sure you’re very sorry. But you don’t have to be. In fact, I am glad you defied my orders. You saw through the foolishness of that order and did something about it.”

Arianna and Meilan stood there flabbergasted. This was something they never expected.

“There are some things that we can’t teach in our wizard training that are, nevertheless, extremely important traits, traits that we are constantly searching for: leadership, resourcefulness, common sense, and bravery.”

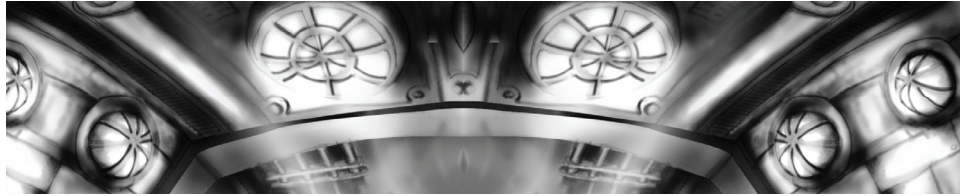
“Ranth, you may come in now,” Brozax ordered as Arcanious lapsed into silence.

“We wish to commend you greatly for actions that we could never expect from students so young. You three show great promise. Because of your actions, we have something of the utmost importance to tell you.”

Intrigued, the three moved in closer.

“You see—,”

And, at that moment, with impeccable timing, Digorence burst into the room. “Mortimer’s back. He’s in Skyhall, and I had everything 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.

Frigolia

A frigid ice world.

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

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every major city.

Gnomer

The dimension in which gnomes live. One of the best-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 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

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work.

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.

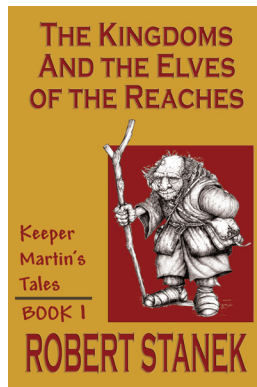
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T'rath	A member of squad zero and the acting commander of squad alpha.
Tri-Wizard Council	An independent council that sets the rules of conduct and oversees the activities of the wizards of Skyhall.
Trolls, Forest	The weaker and more easily defeated 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...

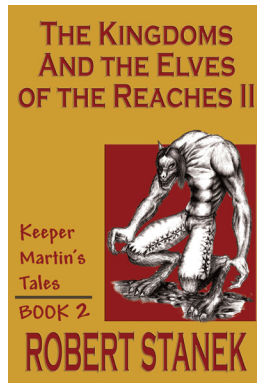
Wizards of Skyhall, Book 3

Visit www.wizardsofskyhall.com to print free trading cards and play the game of wizards and warlocks.



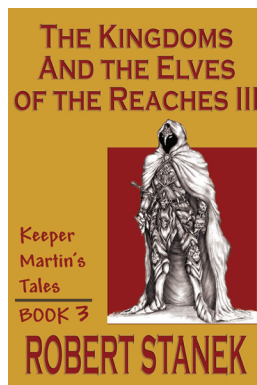
The Kingdoms & the Elves of the Reaches

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.



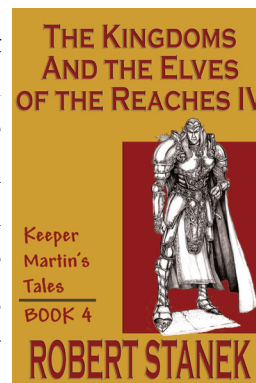
The Kingdoms & the Elves of the Reaches 2

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.



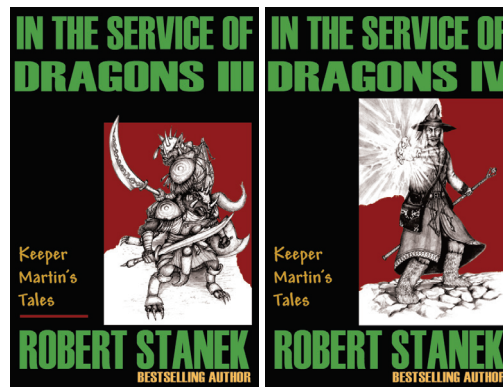
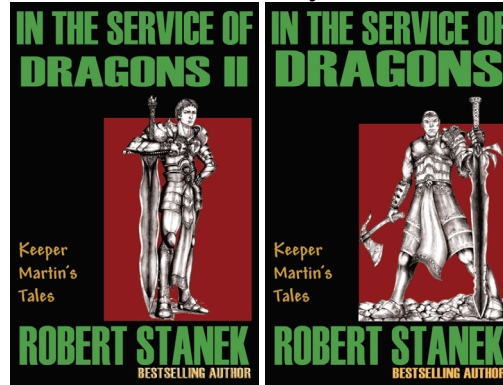
The Kingdoms & the Elves of the Reaches 3 & 4

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.

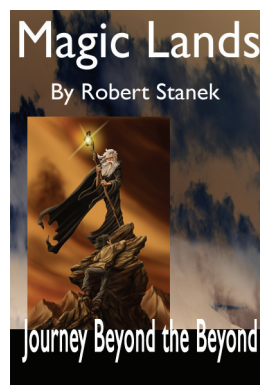


IN THE SERVICE OF DRAGONS

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."