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CHAPTER ONE

ORACULAR SPECTACULAR

The year was 999, a Saturday, to be precise, although the days of the week had yet to be named and numbered and few who were alive at that time could agree on when one year ended and another began. Now known to us as the Dark Ages, a tumultuous period in the 10th and 11th centuries, the term bespeaks a time of darkness and decay, of unsurpassed ignorance and poverty, and was, for most, a generally rotten time to be alive.

That said, this story begins beneath a magical night sky above a storybook glade. The old moon lay cradled in the young moon's arms. Shooting stars showered and sparked. Constellations shaped a pantheon of mythical beasts and heroes. The Milky Way appeared as a hazy band of overarching light—a skunk's stripe painted against black fur. It was, if one were inclined to the then-popular belief that heavenly signs shed light on the sundry affairs of men, an oracular spectacular.

Yes, generally rotten to be sure, but certainly not *all* bad. Fortunately, there were festivals and fairs, the most popular being the annual May Day festival celebrating the end of another long, bleak winter; a time for gorging, drinking, dancing, and other forms of merry-making. Men competed in games of archery, wrestling, and tug-of-war. Women passed about baskets of sweets and wildflowers. Children played games of hoops and blind man's bluff and chased greased pigs across the forest meadows. Stilt walkers and jugglers amused and amazed. There

were horseshoe games and hammer throwing. Wandering minstrels played and sang for the party peasants. They were the kinds of scenes often painted by the Flemish artist Peter Brueghel the Elder, who made the lives and ways of medieval peasants the focus of his art.

Wary animal eyes pierced the dark: those of stag, boar, bear, and wolf, creatures who occupied the surrounding forest, but knew better than to encroach too close and kept their distance. Already several of their lesser kind: hares, squirrels, and muskrats, were being slow roasted over glimmering fires visible through the screens of foliage.

It was well past midnight when a flaming red comet plummeted toward the horizon and disappeared behind the proscenium of a puppet box. The box was a colorful walking stage worn over the puppeteer's upper body, enabling him to roam freely among the rowdy peasant revelers. A coin cup dangled beneath the box. Inside, an Old Man puppet spoke to a Young Man puppet.

"Did you bring my laxative, boy?" asked the Old Man.

"Yes, O Wise One," replied the Young Man puppet.

"I have mastered the mysteries of the heavens, but have yet to master the mysteries of my own digestion," moaned the Old Man.

"Yes, O Wise One. Yes, I know, I know," said the Young Man.

"I have spent many years teaching you the power, the common sense of willpower, instinct, and intuition, the wisdom

of ancient scrolls and creatures steeped in magic, the—and there he trailed off, seeming to have forgotten his train of thought. After a few moments, he began again. “But now I am old and you are the last and only hope.”

“What must I do?” asked the Young Man.

“Go forth and rid us of the evil that has darkened our lands,” answered the Old Man puppet. He coughed and made the sounds of someone not feeling well.

“Yes, O Wise One, yes. I will go,” said the Young Man puppet, full of bravado. “The evil will be met and destroyed.”

A small audience of besotted ruffians and bawdy wenches hooted and hawed while quenching their thirst on warm mead or wolfing down pastries and meat pies of questionable origin. Someone tossed a meager coin in the cup. So far, it was the only one. The evening’s take had not been going well.

The puppeteer assumed the voice of the story’s narrator. “And so the young hero departed on his dangerous journey,” he said. The Young Man puppet disappeared from the stage.

Unseen and unknown to his audience, there was mischief afoot. One of the puppeteer’s hands had emerged from beneath the box and slyly helped himself to a spectator’s purse.

A moment later the Young Man puppet reappeared onstage.

“But before departing, he stopped to say farewell to the beautiful damsel of his dreams.” It was the narrator speaking again.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are. I have come to say that I may never return,” this time spoken by the Young Man

puppet. “I have but one request—that I may steal a kiss before departing to battle the Evil One.” The puppet’s tongue wriggled in his mouth. The audience tittered and smirked at the crude display.

A lovely young damsel puppet appeared onstage. “Nay, nay. I cannot allow it, my lusty lad,” she admonished, wagging a finger. “First, you must bring me the head of the Evil One before I permit a kiss.”

The puppeteer surveyed the crowd and turned to a comely young wench munching a gooseberry pie. “However, until such time, you may cup the melon of your choice, right or left,” she teased.

The puppeteer’s hands slowly emerged from the box and brazenly cupped the wench’s ample orbs, matching the onstage action. Granted, it was lewd and crude behavior and under normal circumstances not to be encouraged, but the puppeteer understood his ill-bred audience, who would have been disappointed with anything less. As expected, they broke into raucous hoots and hollers.

“But you may *not* cup both,” again spoken by the damsel.

The wench began to squirm, providing the proper sound effects for the damsel. The crowd howled with laughter. The Young Man puppet moaned. The crowd moaned with him.

Finally, the wench became aware of the puppeteer’s hands. Shrieking, she slapped at his groping fingers and quickly backed away. He swiftly adjusted by making the monstrous sounds of the Evil One.

“It is the Evil One! I shall save you, fair damsel!” he shouted.

The puppeteer began to hop about, still making the sounds of the Evil One, causing a leather coin pouch to drop at his feet. He tried discreetly to grab it and failed. Then, a dozen more pouches spilled forth. The crowd froze and fell silent. Men and women quickly checked their purses and found them missing or empty. A hairy fist smashed the puppet stage. It exploded, for the first time exposing the young puppeteer.

There he stood, a smirk on his face, a rather run-of-the-mill medieval boy: scraggly, sun bleached hair, pitiful goatee, frayed leggings of boysenberry purple and a wool tunic of no color at all, his hands encased in his puppets, a half-dozen pouches still draped around his neck. One eye was gray, the other blue. To a few, it meant he was destined for wondrous things. To many more, it was proof of a bad seed and that nothing good would ever come of him. An unwashed lad left to his own devices, he had somehow survived fifteen dubious summers.

“And that concludes my show, folks,” he muttered, slowly backing away.

“Get him!”

“Catch him!”

“Snatch him!”

The mob piled on the puppeteer. Fists flew. Feet stomped. Noggins collided. Yet, somehow he stood outside the thrashing pile. Grinning, he winked at the wench. She winked back.

Someone noticed him.

“He’s getting away!”

Blowing a kiss, the puppeteer turned to make his escape—and bolted into the clutches of a burly Moose Man.

The mob untangled. A loutish blacksmith's son approached hauling a bucket of hot, bubbling tar. A poultry farmer approached with a sack of feathers. The struggling puppeteer paled. He knew what was coming.

They dragged the tarred and feathered, struggling lad to a nearby bridge with low walls on either side, spanning a lazy brook. His arms were bound. A mobster tied a rope around his feet. Upended, they heaved him overboard into the drink.

They dunked him once.

Up came the rope.

They dunked him twice.

Up came the rope.

They dunked him thrice.

The mob shared a laugh at the burbling, half-drowned puppeteer's expense.

Up came the rope.

The puppeteer was gone!

CHAPTER TWO

THE PEAK

The escapee sprawled on his back atop a drifting log, staring into the starry night while passing beneath a canopy of overarching trees. The tunnel of branches dissected and recombined the moon in endless variations. Most of the tar and feather coating had been scrubbed away, but he was still a fright to behold. It would take days, perhaps weeks, to remove every last stain. His throat tickled. Coughing, a flurry of small feathers blew from his mouth.

His name was Wirt. Just Wirt. No more. No less.

He wasn't much good as a puppeteer. He wasn't much good at anything. His solitary skill was survival, and more often than not, even that came calamitously close to eluding him.

The moon had disappeared behind thick clouds. Distant lightning flickered. Muted thunder rumbled. There were no dwellings in sight, nary a barn or woodcutter's shack. If the storm came his way, it would mean another miserable night exposed to the elements.

Life was simple in those days.

The common folk among whom Wirt numbered wore plain, mud-colored, sack-like tunics of hemp or linen, and if it was wintry cold, hooded woolen cloaks. It was a world without buttons, which had yet to be invented. Clothes were fastened with

thongs and rope and sometimes slivers of bone. Many folk went barefoot. Shoes were of thick leather and only for the very few who could afford them. Wirt's garments, being worse off than most, consisted only of a ragged pair of breeches, a yellowy, threadbare, flea-infested chemise (a long tunic-like shirt), shoddily made sandals, and a pitiful straw hat.

Day after day the boy traveled through a mostly silent world. The sounds he heard were mostly the sounds of nature. Collared doves, needle-tailed swifts, and golden pheasants went about their business among the hedgerows. Loons, black-necked swans, and double-breasted cormorants raised their families along the reedy banks of lakes and ponds. Bullfrogs croaked in the marshes. Lean cattle bellowed, pigs squealed, and lambs bleated in the pastures spaced between broad forests. Geese and chickens honked or clucked in barnyards. Dawn roosters crowed the arrival of a new day. Fish splashed in teeming stream and pond. The only mechanical sound one might hear came from the bell in a distant church tower, the creak and grumble of wagon wheels, the clang of hammer on horseshoe, and the wheeze of the blacksmith's bellows.

The world was mostly empty then, the sway of trees, grass, drifting clouds, and the dart of fox, polecat, hawk, the flit of butterflies, the leap of grasshoppers in the broad meadows the only movements. Most folk lived in or near isolated hamlets, or in small towns and villages, the distances between them great and rarely traveled. Wirt, restless by nature, traveled more than most. Quite often on his sojourns, not a single other person would be

seen for days at a time. The boy had never been in a town of more than three hundred souls, and when there, felt crowded and out of sorts.

Obtaining food and shelter were his primary concerns, the daily grind that occupied him dawn till dusk, and oftentimes far into the night, when a farmer's orchard or vegetable garden required patience and careful scouting before he was able to pinch a puny plum or stalk of celery, or help himself to a pear tart or pigeon pie left cooling on a windowsill. Mostly, it was feast or famine. The rare feast days, Christmas and Easter being the most important, served ducks, geese, pigeons, quail, and partridge. Poultry was an uncommon treat, but pottage soup made of peas, onions, and beans, served with a crusty loaf of bread, was also quite popular. Mutton was highly prized. Eels, frogs, and lampreys were considered quite tasty. Whole, spit-roasted sides of beef and boar were considered the best treat of all. Some men fished and hunted for their daily fare. Venison, meaning the meat of a deer and elk, was the most highly prized game of all. When there was nothing else to eat, commoners were reduced to foraging like animals in fields and forests for nuts, roots, berries, wild acorns, and mushrooms. Deserts included tarts, custards, fritters, and cakes, using strawberries, apples, and figs. When not drinking water or fresh milk, they slaked their thirst on mead, an alcoholic beverage of fermented honey and water, often mixed with fruits and spices.

The world was lit by fire: candles, blazing hearth, and campfire. Night was a time to batten doors and windows and stay

at home. It took great courage to venture forth after the sun had gone to bed. But Wirt was used to the dark. For a short period, when he was still at the orphanage, in order to pay his way, he'd hired himself out as a linkboy, someone who, for a small sum, carried a flaming torch to light the way for travelers at night. Often, he carried the flame in a hollowed-out turnip for protection against the wind and rain, and to ward off rude and bothersome spirits.

At that time, it was commonly held that evil and mischievous creatures—trolls, hobgoblins, ogres and their ilk, and legions of little people—elves, fairies, nixies, and their like—inhabited the land and took great delight in meddling in the affairs of men, and Wirt was no different in that belief. These were not mere figments of his imagination, but living, flesh and blood beings, every bit as real as you and I. Most were harmless, troublemakers seeking only to harass and annoy, to pinch and scratch, or scaring folk with their horrible noises and maniacal laughter. But others were truly dangerous, able to cause changes in the weather, or stealing children to raise among their own. Once, when bedded down in a haystack, the boy had been driven off by a troll in no mood to share the accommodation. The encounter may well have been a dream brought about by indigestion or eating the wrong kind of mushrooms, but no power on earth could convince him otherwise.

Drifting downstream, Wirt's mind cast back to the series of unfortunate events that had brought him to such a sorry state. His parents and siblings had perished in one of the many plagues that swept through Europe like clockwork. After their untimely death, his last many years had been spent in an impoverished orphanage where he was treated not unlike a farm animal. There, he was well liked among his fellow orphans, a natural leader, inquisitive and bright, but entirely ignorant. He was uncertain of the day of his birth, and unsure of his true age, but as a young teen he was booted back into the world so that a younger boy could take his place. Since then, he had assumed many roles, all in the service of living to see another day.

Before departing, he had been given the name of a puppeteer who had agreed to take the boy on as an apprentice. He knew that things could have been much worse. He could just as easily have been assigned to a swineherd, a rat catcher, a leech collector, or perhaps a gravedigger. The morning he left to take his place in the world, he was given a flea bath, a haircut, and a loaf of coarse bread.

Wirt's mentor disappeared after only a few weeks. The boy soon realized that the puppeteer was a slave to heavy drink. One day he ventured into a tavern and failed to return, so the boy had carried on without him.

The river meandered through the quiet countryside. Now, something caught the boy's eye. At first, he thought the moon had reappeared, but as he drifted closer, he realized it was

something else entirely—a patch of blue cloth snagged in the branches over an overarching willow. It appeared to faintly glow with a mysterious inner light. Wirt rolled off the log and swam to the bank. Moments later he had climbed the tree and was in possession of an elongated, glowing triangle of softest satin—a wizard’s peak festooned with luminous stars, pale moons, and fiery comets. Folding back the hem, he found a label.

PROPERTY
OF HELLSBOROUGH
WIZARD’S ACADEMY

The boy was unable to read or write, but easily recognized the well-known symbol created by wedging the first letter of the word Academy into the inverted W of the first letter of the word Wizard. Everyone in those parts knew the symbol. Wonder of wonders, he had found a peak belonging to the esteemed Hellsborough Wizard’s Academy. How it came to be there he had no earthly clue. Perhaps a gust of wind had snatched it from a dozing wizard’s head and blown it high over hill and dale, low over field and stream, until it snagged in the branches of the tree where he now perched. However it had come into his possession, it was a rare and wondrous find.

Wirt had once glimpsed a wizard when the wizened sorcerer passed though the village where he lived and toiled. After disposing of a minor ghoul, the old gent had passed about his calling card should his service be needed again.

They boy knew the Academy to be a training center for the best and brightest, the cream of the crop, the richest and slickest,

a place to learn the secrets of invisibility, levitation, spell casting, and how to master greater and lesser poltergeists, unruly spirits, malignant banshees, and their kind.

Finding the peak was too good to be true, yet entirely useless to the boy, who belonged to the vast majority who were condemned to lives of endless toil and drudgery.

Always alert for any advantage that might ease his daily grind, several ideas occurred to him. Perhaps he would keep the peak as a souvenir, a thing worth keeping because it was the kind of thing one kept. But would it keep him warm on winter nights? Would it fill his belly when the hunger pangs returned? Well, would it, would it, could it—? That idea was quickly dismissed and followed by another, the second far more practical than the first. Perhaps he would sell the peak for a tidy profit to someone who collected such things. He dared not consider a third possibility, and yet he did exactly that.

Placing the peak atop his head, he struck the mocking pose of a wizard casting a spell. And in that instant, a bolt of lightning struck his perch and spilled him back into the water. Insult to injury, the sky opened and it began to pour.

CHAPTER THREE

A GRAND CAVITY

Down, down, down, and down they went, ever down, though the angle of decent was not always clear, for sometimes there were hills and bluffs and rising ground, the honeycomb of mazes comprised of many parts; tunnels, to be sure, but also countless other avenues; burrows, shafts and tubes, crawlways and dead end passages, but it was always down, down, down, and down they went.

And who, you ask, was going down?

Goblins. Three goblins going down, down, down. Evil, loathsome, repellent creatures, they had spent their lives digging in the netherworld, as had their ancestors. Century after century, generation after generation, they had birthed and toiled and died in the flickering light of smoldering torches. Lack of exposure to sunlight had turned their skin a pinkish white. They could see quite well in the dark, but feared sunlight. Each had an extra hand at the end of their tails.

The three were related, a mother and her sons, members of an extended family, the von Goblins. Once aristocrats in the goblin world, they had long ago been reduced to a marginal life. Before the Great Fall they were somebody's, but now, they were nobody's. The Baroness Pyrite von Goblin was boss; a femme fatale who lorded it over her pair of undisciplined, though generally worshipful lackeys. It was an age-old story: Evil and

Stupid manipulated by Beauty, although here they were largely interchangeable.

Others of their ilk inquired what it was like up in the Academy, the accursed overworld; it must be frightful, and how were they able to tolerate their brief visits there? When asked, the Baroness Pyrite and her underlings often took to bragging, bending the truth, or telling flat out lies, claiming that the students were “featherweights,” “pansies,” or “cream puffs,” words often overheard in the good natured or heated exchanges between the young wizards in training. By far, the goblins greatest fabrication was that the names Pyrite, Quartz, and Feldspar were greatly feared among the faculty. All who heard their lies were greatly impressed, or pretended to be, since not everyone was foolish enough to believe such outlandish claims.

Now, after crossing a crumbling stone causeway bridging a river of fire-flecked, slow churning lava, their destination lay but a short distance beyond.

Signs of goblin life had begun to appear. Shadowy shapes in twos and threes lurked in the murky light. Eyes glowed in the dark. There were scaffolds, buckets, and shovels, a thousand ladders tall and short, and many piles of mounded rubble, all evidence of an archeological dig. Other shapes appeared in groups of five, and nine, and twenties, some numbering in the many hundreds: an underground resistance that had long lost its purpose and drive. What once was controlled chaos had been reduced to half-hearted bickering, snores, and family squabbles, only marginally organized by the Baroness Pyrite Von Goblin.

Clearly, the creatures were sorely in need of a leader.

And here, deep in the bowels of the Academy, what had been their purpose?

To find and unearth His Satanic Majesty!

For centuries they had dug, and dug, and dug. Then dug some more.

When they found Him, he would lead them into battle, seeking revenge and renewed domination over those who had dared to humble Him.

And found Him they had, buried beneath a mountain of slag, cinders, and scree. A hundred years passed before the spell that rendered Him helpless began to lose its grip, before He began to stir, yet another hundred before He opened his eyes. Even so, when fully revived, He remained powerless. A binding charm of chains, chains, and more chains had seen to that. Not of gold, or silver, or any precious metal, but coarse and common, the dull clang and whisper of the rusty links audible in the gloom. Try as they might, the goblins were unable to set Him free: pick, hammer, and chisel had no effect on enchanted chains.

Still, all was not lost.

And why, you wish to know?

The Hellsborough Wizard's Academy, of course.

Each year, one hundred boys were invited to attend the prestigious institute of magical learning—one hundred fresh and eager young minds, and countless opportunities to twist and bend them to nefarious ends. There was no need for eleven, no need for seven, five, three, or two—but only one—the One, the

Chosen. For surely there was one among them who could be lured, bribed, or tricked into betraying their smug and radiant tutors, the wizard faculty. Surely there was one among their young pupils foolish enough to barter his soul for the chance to practice the black arts and rule as equals in the underworld. Was that too much to ask?

It pained the goblins to know they would grovel before another alongside their Master, but it would not be for long, not long at all. What mattered was that the Archfiend be set free.

The centuries had come and gone, yet no such pupil had been found.

The winding passage gave way to a Grand Cavity.

The goblins cautiously entered.

Geysers of flame sputtered and died. The ground rumbled. Boulders tumbled into deep ravines. Smoke stung their eyes. Steamy steam seared their nostrils. For you and me, it would have been difficult to breathe, but the goblins were unaffected.

Left and right, Pyrite eyed her flunkies.

A glow fly buzzed near Feldspar. His tongue shot out and captured the tasty snack.

Pyrite slapped her despicable charge to pay attention.

Now, ash-speckled, orangey light reflected on their faces.

Quartz and Feldspar began to tremble.

At first, the superbly odious demon was difficult to see, obscured by billowing brimstone, but gradually He appeared before them. His Satanic Majesty!

Quartz, who was cross-eyed, saw three monsters where there was only one. He and Feldspar made to flee, but Pyrite corralled them to stay their ground.

The height of a three-story tower, the demon loomed astride a humbling throne of coal, obsidian, and sloe, bound all round and round in chains, chains, and more chains. His eyes, big as wagon wheels, shone like lanterns in a fog. His monstrous wings, bat-like and of a dull maroon hue, rippled and stirred. His pair of ivory tusks, easily the length of your arm, dripped rancid fluid which sizzled and hissed when it plop, plop, plopped into the liquid fire pooled around his cloven hooves. Of his ivory corkscrew horns, one was broken at the tip.

“Do not be afraid, my mangy pets!” He bellowed. “I will not strike you for your foolishness!” It was true, although not spoken due to any generosity of spirit. In bondage he was unable to do them harm, but the very thought—

Quartz and Feldspar trembled, taking no comfort in the demon’s promise.

“The time has come again—to journey upward to the Academy,” the behemoth rumbled in a deep baritone, the word Academy spoken, or rather, belched, as if it left a nasty taste in His mouth, “—to visit the good little boys! To find and identify my liberator!” When spoken, the word “good” tasted like poison.

Now, Pyrite, too, shuddered.

“If you fail—you will be banished from my domain!” the monster bellowed.

Under the present circumstances, it was an idle threat. Unable to free Himself, the demon depended on them to find His liberator. Still, Quartz and Feldspar cowered like chastised pups. Pyrite consoled them with solid raps to their skulls.

“Go now! Look and find, hide and seek, show and tell!” the demon boomed.

The three, greatly relieved to have been dismissed, quickly retraced their steps, winding their way back through the maze of tunnels. Up, up, and up they trekked. After a time, several times having lost their way, they cowered at the foot of a spiraling stone staircase hewn from solid rock, rising to the detested Academy.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALABASTER

If asked how he knew, Wirt would not have been able to explain, but it seemed that the peak tucked in his tunic was leading him to his destination. For three days and nights the boy had followed a deeply rutted track weaving through dense forests, moonlit meadows, and isolated hamlets. Experience had taught that somehow roads by night always seemed much longer and treacherous than they did by day.

Finally, nearing midnight of the third day, the Academy came into view. It loomed in the distance, its ramparts, chimneys, and towers black silhouettes perched on the side of a conical mountain. To reach it, the slowly ascending road first passed through the hamlet of Hellsborough.

Moonlight splayed the shadow of a great bronze statue across the Academy's cobblestone quad, which in architecture is a short word for a quadrangle, a courtyard surrounded on all sides by buildings. The imposing monument erected on a marble pediment depicted a wizard posed with one arm raised to the night sky, wielding a bronze staff.

The creak of wooden wheels disturbed the silence. A tall, spindly figure approached pushing a cart piled high with neatly folded gowns and mini wizard's peaks stacked like paper cups. He paused below the statue and polished the burnished plaque at

its base until he could see his reflection. The ornate lettering there said:

THE UNKNOWN WIZARD

The figure turned to a wooden gate set within thick stone walls. The great iron hinges squeaked as he opened it and stepped through. From his high vantage, a flight of wide stone steps descended to a road, and a short distance beyond, the few lights of Hellsborough twinkling in the dark. Producing a spyglass from the folds of his black, threadbare gown, he unfolded it, placed it to his eye, and studied the magnified view. As explained, it was nigh the hush of midnight, the witching hour, the hamlet streets and alleys dark and empty and not a soul to be seen. Had he continued to observe a little longer, he would have been the first to witness the arrival of a solitary drifter making his way up a narrow, winding lane, but he had chores to attend to and the instrument was returned to his robe.

Keeping vigil outside the Academy gate, he snapped his fingers, igniting a flame at the tip of his thumb, and lit an herbal cigar. The flickering light revealed the breadcrumbs peppering his gray, unkempt beard. Bird droppings freckled his shoulders. Having blown some colored smoke squares, a purple mushroom cloud and seven yellow stars, he returned to the quad.

Whether by accident or design, he had left the gate ajar.

His name was Alabaster, the Academy's mute janitor.

The trio of goblins—who had emerged from a fissure at the base of the statue—followed at a discreet distance as the janitor steered the wobbly cart across the cobblestones. Quartz tripped over Feldspar's tail, causing the janitor to freeze and slowly turn. The goblins scampered for cover behind the statue. Seeing nothing to arouse his interest, the janitor entered the Academy dormitory.

Unnoticed, the three goblins slipped in behind.

The dorm was doughnut shaped, housing a great ring of beds, one hundred, to be exact, like spokes on a giant's wheel. Ninety-nine sleeping students snuggled under their blankets, each monogrammed with a large white letter that signified their names: E for Elmo, D for Duffy, B for Bernard, and so forth. Alabaster rolled his cart past the sleeping students, stopping to drape a plain white cotton gown and mini peak at the foot of each and every bed.

The goblins silently paced him, paused when he did, and followed when he renewed his step.

Alabaster arrived at the only empty bed, a large letter W fancy stitched on the blanket. He shook his head and sighed. A single gown and peak remained on the cart as he turned and wheeled it out the door.

The goblins remained behind, peering at the Class of 999. Over the coming days, perhaps weeks or months, however long was necessary, they would keep a close eye on the student body before selecting the pupil who could most easily be tempted, under the delusion he would join forces with their Master and

rule side by side. But for now, the sleeping boys all looked far too innocent for the task required of the Chosen One.

Quartz sniffed a student's toes, while Feldspar noisily rummaged through a student's trunk. Pyrite cuffed her pair of nitwits and motioned that it was time to go. She was hungry and remembered that earlier she had spied a fat rat scurrying across the quad.

The three vile beings were almost to the door when the sound of a creaking bed caused them to freeze. Stealing back the way they had come, they observed a student sitting upright in his bed, leafing through the pages of a small, black, leather-bound book. The creatures flapped their stubby wings and flew into the rafters for a better view.

Below, the dark-haired student had cast off his blanket. Having found what he sought, he cast a whispered, mumbo-jumbo, wriggle-fingered spell on what appeared to be a jar of caterpillars tucked between his knees. Nothing happened. He returned to the book, flipping pages until he found another spell. Again, when whispered, it had no effect. His face knotted into a scowl. He tried another incantation, and another, each time without success. Then—abracadabra! The jar began to tremble and glow. The novice dabbler snickered and closed the book, revealing its cover:

BLACK MAGIC ALMANAC

The boy's name was Muttnaldo, or just plain Mutt to those who dared to call him so; a tall, thin lad of foul disposition, born to privilege and emboldened by a superiority complex. Slipping

out of bed, he silently crept around the great ring, placing a caterpillar under every blanket.

The goblins followed as he circled the dorm. Finally, he had come full orbit and returned to the empty bed beside his own. There he dumped the last caterpillar under the blanket bearing the letter W and could barely suppress a sinister laugh.

Pyrite turned to her inferiors, winked, and nodded.

Hmmm, thought the goblin, drumming the fingers of a clawed appendage against her chin—interesting, very, very interesting. The Academy year had only just begun, yet already here was a boy of some promise. She would keep her eye on him, but it was far too soon to know the depth of his ambition and raw ability. It was tempting to assume she had found the One, but first he must prove himself capable of more than childish pranks. She would bide her time, waiting to see if another boy showed even greater promise. Then, boys being boys, the two were bound to come into conflict. Only then would she know for certain which possessed the greater ability.

CHAPTER FIVE

MEN OF COLOR

Secluded in a rock-walled grotto, the pale, bearded, droopy-skinned, wrinkled old men appeared like phantoms in the silky steam wafting off the surface of the water. The eight-members of the Academy faculty lounged about inhaling and absorbing the soothing vapors of a gently bubbling hot spring. Perspiration dripped down their faces. Each was wrapped in a towel bearing the color of their names.

Head Wizard Cobalt, a health aficionado and eternal optimist, removed his uncommonly tall peak and held it upside down. The cone was festooned with bright yellow stars, glowing moons, iridescent comets, and others celestial bodies. His towel was a rich blue hue; the color of the heavens, distant hills, and hardened steel.

“May we now get back to business, Turf?” said Cobalt, raising and lowering a wooden dumbbell with one hand.

“I gazed into my crystal ball,” said Turf, a humorless, stiff-necked, disciplinary wizard. His gown and peak were a dark green; the color of moss, mint, and seaweed. “Know what I saw?”

“Is anyone interested in Turf’s findings?” asked Cobalt, sounding rather bored.

“Noooooo—”

“Not really—”

“Pass—”

—said the other wizards in their various ways.

“This year’s class stinks, that’s what,” Turf answered anyway.

“I’d say your crystal’s about as cracked as you are,” said Mulberry, an obese, constantly munching wizard, his towel dusted with cracker crumbs. The towel was a deep shade of purple: the color of jam, amethysts, and eggplant. The birthmark on his forehead was an even deeper shade, almost plum.

Everyone had a chuckle at Turf’s expense.

“Choke on it, pumpkin butt,” muttered Turf, indignant.

“Act your age,” admonished Cobalt. “Apologize.”

Turf and Mulberry reluctantly shook hands—wizard style, which included much brushing together of palms, bumping of elbows, kissing of fists, and other strange behavior which, I am sorry to say, would take far too long to describe in these pages.

“Your teaching assignments then, gentlemen,” Cobalt continued, passing around his peak now that order had been restored. “Turf—”

The Green Wizard reached deep into the peak, groped among the cards there and withdrew one.

“Wizard’s Law,” said Turf, elated. Being a by the book, no-nonsense kind of wizard, it was an appointment perfectly suited to his temperament.

He passed the peak to Crocus, a hypochondriac, who sat soaking his feet in a vat of bubbling mud, the word hypochondriac meaning someone overly anxious about their health. He sneezed, drew a card from the peak, and beamed a

broad smile. His towel was a deep, dramatic yellow; the color of woodland flowers, the cheeks of penguins, and ripening grain.

“Well—?” said Gingernob, curious to know what was written there.

“Demonology,” beamed Crocus, applauding his own good fortune, the teaching of demonology being a highly prized assignment.

Some of the others grumbled and groaned because they were envious.

Frith, Gingernob’s pet ferret, crawled into the peak and returned with a card in its mouth. “Why, thank you, Frith,” said Gingernob sweetly, accepting the card.

The others impatiently waited.

“Aviation,” said Gingernob, pleased as punch.

He passed the peak to Bittersweet, a modest, self-conscious wizard who seldom looked up. His towel was a vivid red hue; the color of hot anvils, the planet Mars, and valentines. After reaching into the peak, he read his card. “Invisibility.”

The peak then passed to Mulberry.

“Care to share?” asked Cobalt.

“Time travel,” said Mulberry sheepishly.

He passed the peak to Mocha, a hyper kinetic, rappin’ black wizard whose skin matched the color of his towel; a deep, rich chocolate; the color of almonds, saddles, and woodchucks.

“If I must choose without hesitatin’—” he said, picking a card and reading what was written there, “—this year’s class will be—levitatin.”

He tossed the peak in Turf's lap, who held it out for Rust, a sleepy, near-sighted, senile wizard whose towel was of an orange brown hue; the color of iron oxide, horses, and late autumn. Turf nudged him. Rust snapped awake and reached for the peak, missing as Turf tried to guide his aim.

"Shazam! Dink! Phumffft!" huffed Rust.

He plucked a card and immediately resumed snoozing. Turf scooted close and snuck a peek.

"Shame on you, Turf," said Cobalt.

The others glared at their fellow faculty member.

"Shame," they said all as one.

Turf merely shrugged and dropped the card in Rust's lap.

The moment was shattered by a voluble crash.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BURGLER

The door to a storage vault had been left ajar. Outside, muted footsteps approached. Glowing finger beams of blue, green, and purple stabbed through the crack. The door slowly swung wide, revealing a threesome of wizards. Cobalt, Mulberry, and Turf, attired in hastily donned dressing gowns, cautiously entered.

The three surveyed the cobwebbed vault lined with rows of dusty shelves, overflowing lockers, and jam-packed cabinets housing wizardly paraphernalia: rows of cracked crystal balls, jars filled with creature cadavers, a wide assortment of occult curiosities, whatnots, and miscellaneous thingamajigs.

Cobalt's blue beam settled upon a hastily discarded gunnysack. Rummaging inside, he found a crystal ball, several amulets, a book of spells, bottles containing magic potions, and other magical bric-a-brac—all tools of the wizard's trade. Mulberry trained his purple beam into the dark, revealing a trail of muddy footprints on the dusty floor. The prints vanished in the maze of narrow aisles.

The three sorcerers exchanged knowing looks. Clearly, they had foiled a burglary in progress. Turf silently motioned that they split up to investigate. Perhaps they would find the would-be-thief still on the premises. Alert for any sign of the intruder, they separated to explore the grid of knick-knack canyons.

The Blue Wizard stole down a cramped aisle, his beam leading the way. Something scurried beneath his feet. His beam suddenly swiveled, frying the rodent in its tracks.

While this was happening, the Purple Wizard crept down an adjoining aisle. Rounding a corner, he spied movement in the dark. Certain he had caught the intruder, his beam fixed on the trespasser's back.

"Reveal yourself or suffer," warned Mulberry.

The figure slowly turned. It was Cobalt, shielding his eyes against the beam. Annoyed, the Blue Wizard sighed and waved him off.

Any of the three might just as easily have uncovered the culprit, but to be fair, credit must be given to Turf who made the actual discovery, although he was often teased about it afterwards.

Tiptoeing down yet another aisle, the Green Wizard heard a wet splat from behind. He quickly turned, his green beam scanning the floor. The ray of light settled upon something lying in a pool of liquid. A closer look revealed it to be the head of a troll. The wizard puzzled out that there should have been broken glass, but there was none. He cautiously turned his beam to a row of nearby shelves, revealing a multitude of thick glass jars. Some were large, containing whole creatures, while others were much smaller, displaying only their heads and assorted appendages. Suspended in vari-colored liquids, the distorted faces of trolls, gnomes, ogres, and others of their ilk stared back at him. Now, something else puzzled him. If a jar containing the troll's head

had fallen (or perhaps been pushed) off a shelf, there should have been an empty space, but all were still aligned in neat rows. The wizard decided to move on. His beam swept past, then quickly returned, fixing upon a creature's smooshed, twisted features; eyes, nose, and mouth askew. Exceedingly odd, thought the Green Wizard, not because it was horrible to look upon, which he was accustomed to, but because it was the face of a creature not previously known to him.

Whatever it was, the thing suddenly broke cover from behind what proved to be an empty jar, toppled the row of shelves and bolted for the open door. The Green Wizard spun and uttered a single, mumbo-jumbo word, not one you and I are accustomed to hearing, causing the door to slam shut in the burglar's face. Trying to force it open proved useless. The would-be thief was trapped, caught in the act.

Turf trained his beam on the bandit.

As you likely have already guessed, it was only a boy, none other than Wirt, the former puppeteer, vagabond, and sometime pie thief, who slowly turned to face his captor. "Mind cuttin' the brights?" said he, shielding his eyes against the blinding light. "You're meltin' my orbs."

Turf intensified his beam.

The Purple Wizard stepped to his fellow member of the faculty, also aiming his beam.

The Blue Wizard joined them, the sack containing the purloined objects slung over his shoulder. He, too, leveled his beam.

“All right, all right, now I’m blind, you win,” said Wirt.
“Everybody happy?”

“Who are you, boy?” asked Turf in a grave tone.

Wirt carefully considered before answering, unsure how much it was safe to reveal.

“Name’s Wirt, orphan of the big, bad, cruel world,” he began, after removing his straw hat and placing it over his heart, “And I’ll tell you somethin’ else,” he continued, gaining confidence. “I’ve been tarred n’ feathered, shackled, branded, beaten, racked, and rolled. Been whipped, flogged, dunked, stocked, stretched, force-fed, and catapulted.” He paused for breath. “Even had the old noggin on the chopping block a time or two. Just want you prunes to know who you’re dealin’ with.”

The three beams suddenly cut off, casting the vault into gloom.

Now Turf withdrew a slender rod from the sleeve of his robe and pointed it menacingly at the boy, who correctly guessed it to be some kind of magic wand, capable of who knew what.

Wirt swallowed hard. “What are you doing to do?” he asked.
“Zap me into some strange but loveable life form?”

The Green Wizard adjusted his aim and mumbled a spell.

Wirt flinched and braced himself, having no idea what to expect. Perhaps he would awake to find himself transformed into a goat, a worm, a toad, or worse—obliterated altogether. He tried to cover himself.

Just as Turf was about to zap him, Cobalt removed a final item from the sack—a blue satin wizard’s peak.

Dumbfounded, the wizards stared at each other, then at the peak, puzzling something out. They gathered in a tight knot, conferring in whispered wizardese.

Wirt tried to listen in, but their language was unlike any he had ever heard. Turf adamantly shook his head ‘no,’ but Cobalt and Mulberry appeared to overrule him.

“Hey, if you’re wondering about that lid—I found it—,” meaning the peak, “I didn’t steal it,” said Wirt, still expecting to be turned into something entirely unpleasant. By then, several new possibilities, each of them equally extreme, had occurred to him.

The wizards turned to stare at him.

“Correction, young Wirt,” said Cobalt. “*You* did not find the peak.”

Wirt began to stammer.

“*It* found you.”

The boy was immediately suspicious. “What kinda’ scam you crawdaddy’s runnin’ here?” he asked.

“Congratulations,” said Mulberry. “You are a very lucky young man.”

“The world is full of young lads who would be happy to fill your shoes,” said Turf.

“All right. What’d I win?” asked Wirt.

“The chance to become a wizard,” said Cobalt, matter-of-factly.

Wirt knew they were joking and would shortly have their way with him, his life as a goat or toad about to begin. “You guys tickle me,” he said. “A good for nothin’ thief like me?”

Cobalt nodded.

Mulberry scratched his nose.

Turf raised his eyebrows.

Now Wirt was very interested.

“You mean—like learnin’ flyin,’ shrinkin,’ disappearin,’ chuckin’ fireballs, nailin’ monsters, stuff like that?”

Cobalt and Mulberry faintly smiled.

Turf was not amused.

Cobalt released the peak and it floated toward the boy.

Wirt stood dazed and amazed.

“Whooooaaaaa—”

The peak settled atop his head, nestled there, and began to glow. Lightheaded, he began to sway.

“Interested?” asked the Blue Wizard.

“What say you?” asked the Purple Wizard.

They turned to Turf, awaiting his say on the matter.

“Now or never,” said the Green Wizard, although he did not sound happy about it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A CANCER

Wirt silently padded past the sleeping students snug as bugs in their beds forming the great wheel.

“Was I dreaming, or am I really going to be a wizard?” he heard a small, young voice ask.

Turning, Wirt saw the student sitting up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. It was Duffy, one of the youngest and most enthusiastic of the new recruits.

“You’re gonna be the greatest wizard in the land,” Wirt assured him, which was odd because he had never before laid eyes on him.

“You think? The greatest?” asked Duffy, wide-eyed with wonder.

“You’ll see,” said Wirt. “Now go to sleep, magic man.”

Duffy snuggled back under his blanket and was soon asleep.

Wirt continued around the room until he found the only empty bed, next to Muttnaldo, although he didn’t yet know his name. He puzzled out the large white W on the brown blanket neatly folded at the foot of his bed. Unfolding it, he found the caterpillar and flung into onto Muttnaldo’s bed. There was no great malice behind the act; the boy was merely ridding himself of a pest, as you or I or anyone might do.

Wirt climbed under the covers, nestled down, tucked the blanket under his chin, and stared at the beamed ceiling. The bed was unlike any he had ever known: the mattress not stuffed with

straw and crawling with vermin, the sheet smooth as a baby's bottom, the pillow soft and fluffy, like resting his head on a cloud. After a moment, he tugged at his goatee, tossed the disguise, and smiled himself to sleep.

That night he dreamt as never before, not in his usual black and white, but in glorious color. Not of hairbreadth escapes, close shaves, and desperate fight-or-flight, but pleasant, restful dreams of rainbows, sunshine, flowing fur and velvet robes, and tables heaped with hunks of pork in rich sauce, funnel cakes, and fine wine, served in celebration at a high lord or magistrate's table, payment for services rendered, Grand Master Wirt the Magnificent the guest of honor.

Well into the night, he blinked awake to the muffled sounds of struggle. At first, he was unsure of where he was, and wondered whether he was truly awake and not in the grip of a nightmare. In the next bed over sat a moaning, ghostly figure struggling to escape a shroud of stringy white goo. Wirt assumed he *was* dreaming and closed his eyes, hoping to wander into a more pleasant dream, but the sounds continued. When he opened them again, nothing had changed; the writhing, moaning ghost was still present. This time he wondered if he was being hazed, one of the boys trying to frighten him as part of an initiation into their select society. Again, he paid the apparition no mind and buried his head under his pillow, but the disturbance continued. When he looked a third time, the ghost was standing beside his bed. One very human arm had poked through the gummy husk,

its owner clawing at his face, desperate to remove the blinding gluey glue.

The shrouded figure was *not* a ghost, but Muttnaldo, a victim of his own childish prank.

Looking about, Wirt now saw that every bed contained a cocooned student flailing to escape his sticky shell. Shrouded, gagging students tumbled from their beds, while others were already stumbling blindly about, bumping into each other.

Once he had cleared the muck from his eyes and was able to see, Muttnaldo wasted no time placing the blame for his humiliation on the late arrival, the only one unaffected by his prank. Drawing a wad of gunk into his throat, he spat, missed his intended target, and struck another boy on the cheek.

An inordinately tall, lanky, bespectacled youth approached the former puppeteer, and like the rest, was shrouded in glop. Removing his spectacles, he wiped them clean, but appeared not to be put out by the horseplay.

“You the guy responsible for this flagrant misuse of magic?” he asked.

“Who wants to know?” asked Wirt, reluctant to take the credit, lest there be some hidden trap in the question.

“Cause it was colossal, colleague,” said the lanky lad, extending his hand. “Elmostein’s the name. Call me Elmo. Gemini. Virgo rising. Venus in the Seventh House. Pleasure meeting you.”

“Wirt,” said Wirt, then added, “cancer.”

“Welcome to the competitive world of Wizard’s Academy,”
said Elmo, in a good-natured way.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GOBLIN GRIT AND PIXIE SPIT

Swirling pipe organ music filled the Grand Hall, drowning the low murmur of the student body, the great organ appearing to play itself, invisible fingers nimbly dancing across the ivory keys, the pedals pumped by invisible feet. Eight different colored doors representing the faculty were spaced across the rear of an elevated stage, and before each door there stood an ornately carved, throne-like chair.

Eight doors opened as one and eight wizards stepped through. No longer stooped old men, they had transformed themselves into magnificent magicians: long flowing robes of satin and silk, towering peaks festooned with signs of the zodiac and celestial bodies, their spangled beards dusted with glitter and bedecked with ribbons. Each carried a staff and wore the color of the door through which he entered. They paused in front of their thrones. The organ peaked, held a sustained note, and abruptly fell silent. The conjurers took their seats in a single motion.

Wirt, still attired in his rough tunic, stood and clapped. “Fandang-tastical entrance!” he shouted.

Ninety-nine students dressed in their academic garb—virgin white gowns and mini-peaks—filled rows of benches. The Academy students were never out of uniform, on or off campus.

Elmo tugged at Wirt’s sleeve, pulling him back onto their bench.

“Can’t wait to see their exits,” quipped Wirt.

Cobalt, the Blue Wizard, rose, stepped to a podium, and raised his arms for quiet. An expectant hush fell over the assembly.

“Young wizards! Virgins of the Power! Crystal ball-less, staff-less, spell-less wonders!” Cobalt began.

The student body shifted expectantly.

Elmo produced a quill and notepad from the folds of his gown and began to jot down every word.

Duffy sat mesmerized.

Muttnaldo furtively paged through his black magic almanac.

Wirt kicked back on his bench.

“Here, we perform miracles,” the Blue Wizard continued. “You come to us, skulls filled with poppycock and childish gawk, and leave us working the wonders of bat lung and worm dung, goblin grit and pixie spit!”

Goblin grit? Pixie spit? The students sat spellbound. Duffy scratched his head, peered at Elmo’s notes, slid off the bench they shared, and hit the floor.

Muttnaldo tucked away the black book, produced a speckled blue crow’s egg from under his peak, and muttered a dark charm.

“You will become respected professionals only by hard work and solid progress, not by dabbling in childish thrills, conjuring bare-breasted, bare-bottomed, lip-smacking fantasies!” Cobalt admonished.

Wirt raised his eyebrows and exchanged a naughty glance with Elmo.

“Here we follow but one rule!” the Blue Wizard continued. “Follow it and you will not go wrong! And it is this!” The student’s waited. “You must at all times abide by the wizard’s code!”

Muttnaldo scowled and stared out across the assembly. Later, if asked to recite a passage from the Blue Wizard’s sermon, he would have been clueless, for his mind had been elsewhere. His eyes had settled on Wirt. The boy, in turn, met his evil stare and eased into a taunting grin. After some moments, Muttnaldo sniggered and turned away.

“Should you willingly violate our sacred code, you fail as wizards—”

Now, applying pressure to the egg with pressed palms, Mutt stared intently at the back of a broad, hefty boy—B for Bernard—sitting directly in front of him. The egg cracked!

“—and bring disgrace upon yourself and this esteemed Academy!” declared Cobalt.

There came a loud cry from Bernard. Yolk dribbled from under his peak, oozed down his face and drip, drip, dripped onto his lap.

Laughter erupted among the students, swelled, and faded away.

Only the wizards were not amused.

After a brief pause, Cobalt resumed his oration.

Afterward, framed in the supply room window, Alabaster, an ever-present stogie jutting from his mouth, sized Wirt up like a painter—squinty-eyed and straight up thumb. He handed the boy the only remaining peak and gown. Wirt examined the gown front and back and tossed it back.

“Don’t suppose you got one with a couple of moons, a comet, maybe some stars on it?”

Alabaster returned a blank stare.

Wirt sighed and finger drew a star in the air. “A star. You-do-know-what-a-star-is, don’t you?”

Alabaster smiled and nodded, steadied the stogie with a long fingered hand, took a deep puff, and effortlessly blew out a yellow smoke star. It wavered, suspended between them, holding its shape long past its expiration date. Wirt, astounded, peered back at the custodian, like peering through a wavering cookie-cutter window. Master Blower of Fantabulous Smoke was a skill that might come in handy for a future occupation if things did not work out at the Academy.

“Way to blow, Al,” said the boy.

The custodian grinned, groped in his gown, found what he was seeking, and offered Wirt a stogie.

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Wirt.

Alabaster flicked his thumb, causing a flame to suddenly appear on the tip.

“I suppose being a janitor, you must pick up a lot of magical leftovers,” said Wirt.

Alabaster nodded and lit the boy's cigar. Wirt took a drag, sputtered, and nearly coughed his lungs out.

CHAPTER NINE

TONOOP VS SCHLOG

Class was in session, Wizard's Law, to be exact. One hundred students filled an amphitheatre of tiered benches. Turf stood behind a lectern down front, doing what he loved most: giving instruction in the finer points of charter and code, regulation and requirement, due process and decree, among others.

The classroom door rattled and opened. In walked Wirt, stogie lit, his gown open, his peak cocked back.

The Green Wizard stopped in mid-sentence.

"Proceed," said Wirt, waving him to continue. The boy exhaled a stream of third-rate smoke rings.

"You will douse that cheroot!" barked Turf.

Wirt tamped the stogie on the sole of his boot, tucked it behind his ear, and took a seat between Elmo and Duffy.

"Young Wirt, we were about to discuss the case of the Wizard of Shlog versus the People of Tonoop," said Turf.

"Pretty good story," said Wirt.

"Then I presume you have read the tale."

"Nope, mage, sir—I lived it."

"I see. A bystander then."

"An eyewitness, mage, sir."

"Were you now?" the Green Wizard scoffed. "Then why not enlighten us with your true life experience."

"If you insist, Mage Turf sir." Wirt stood and began: "Summer. Hot. Muggy. The time of the great eclipse, as I

remember. Tonoop was in the midst of a troll invasion. You know, those evil little buggers you only dream about. ‘Cept I actually saw ‘em. The people of Tonoop sent me to fetch the Wizard of Schlog. Nine days later I finally arrive in Schlog. It turns out the wizard’s on vacation—trout fishing.”

It was an outlandish claim, to be sure, but the Green Wizard wished to know the lengths to which the fabricator would go. “Trout fishing, you say?” he asked.

“That’s what I was told.”

“When were you born, Wirt?”

“Not relevant, mage, sir,” answered Wirt, dismissing the question because he was uncertain of the day, even the year of his birth.

“But this tale took place over eight hundred years ago.”

“That’s right. I’m relating events from one of my past lives.”

Turf began to pace. Highly agitated, it took great effort to restrain himself. He addressed the class.

“I expect each of you to read the assigned material. You are to keep three tales ahead each day. Is that understood?”

Wirt shrugged and reclaimed his seat. It should be noted that textbooks, because Wirt was unable to read or write, were of no use to the boy. However, he had already begun to devise a plan to aid in his book learning.

The Green Wizard scanned a seating chart of painted faces. “Muttnaldo. Enlighten us about the matter of Schlog-Tonoop.”

Muttnaldo stood and faced his classmates.

“The Wizard of Schlog receives payment to cure Tonoop of a mysterious plague. He arrives three days late. Everyone in Tonoop is D-E-A-D. Dead,” he said, savoring the word.

Turf scanned the seating chart again.

“Identify the issues, Elmostein.”

“Certainly.” Elmo stood. “Is the wizard the responsible party? Did he breach the trust of the good people of Tonoop? Are the deceased eligible for a full refund?”

“Excellent,” said Turf. He turned to the chart again. “The end result—Bernard?”

Bernard made a sound in his throat.

“Bernard?”

The boy remained seated, too terrified to move.

“Answer, Bernard.”

Bernard suddenly rose and dashed from the hall, gurgling sounds from his throat, his hands covering his mouth.

Turf scanned the chart yet again.

“The end result—Duffy?”

“Not to punish the wizard?” Duffy said, uncertainly.

“What is the wizard’s obligation, then, Wirt?”

Wirt stood again. “To raise the dead?” It was no better than a wild guess.

“Correct. To raise the dead,” the Green Wizard begrudgingly agreed.

Wirt was taken by surprise.

Duffy raised his hand. “How do you raise the dead, mage, sir?” he asked, all innocence and wide-eyed wonder.

“Something we shall explore that in days to come,” said Turf.

CHAPTER TEN
NUMBER NINETY-NINE

Wirt and Elmo strode across the quad. The rest of the student body had gathered around the statue of the Unknown Wizard. Alabaster perched high above on the statue's shoulder, buffing the wizard's outstretched wand.

"Someday, when I'm old and moldy, they're gonna erect a big ol' statue to me," said Wirt.

"You gotta do great things to rate a monument, pal," said Elmo. "Like *this* magical mercenary. The Unknown Wizard, the greatest spell caster of all time."

Wirt studied the statue. Alabaster nodded and climbed down.

Suddenly, all the students began pushing toward the burnished slab at the marble base.

"What's the big wa-hoo?" asked Wirt.

"Class rankings," said Elmo. "The higher your standing by graduation, the better the job offers."

Wirt and Elmo squeezed in for a better look. The names of the student body were being magically etched into the slab. The boys craned their necks, searching for their names.

"Number one. Not bad," said Elmo, having found his first.

Wirt looked near the top, but couldn't find his name.

Elmo looked near the bottom. "Found it," he said.

Wirt rushed over.

"Guess the wizards don't have much faith in you," said Elmo.

Wirt looked closer at his name.

“Ninety-nine?” said Wirt, his ego deflated.

“Out of one hundred,” said Elmo, not meaning to rub it in, but sounding like he was.

“It’s okay. I graduate, I’m still a wizard,” Wirt shrugged. “Job’s a job. No problem.”

Bernard, who stood nearby, suddenly burst into tears.

“What’s his problem?” asked Wirt.

“You’re in fine company,” said Elmo. “He’s one hundred.”

Muttnaldo burst out of the group, gyrating ecstatically. “Number thirteen! Thirteen! Number thirteen!” he screamed in Wirt’s face, then quickly spun away.

“Guy’s a regular quail dick,” said Wirt, an insult common to the time, but rarely heard these days.

Duffy stepped up to Wirt and Elmo. He was excited.

“Hey, Wirt, Elmo, I’m number forty-nine. Pretty good, huh?”

“Pretty great, Duff,” said Elmo. “Number one, forty-nine, and ninety-nine. Between the three of us, we form a perfect curve.”

The three friends headed off to their next class.

Bernard trailed not far behind, eavesdropping.

“If we’re gonna survive a full term at this charm school, we’ve got to help each other out,” said Wirt. “I’m thinking we should form a study group.”

“The three of us? Gosh, that sounds wise,” beamed Duffy.

“We divide the work three ways, exchange notes, have endless discussions—” said Wirt, draping an arm around Elmo’s shoulder, “—and totally rely on Elmo to pull us through.”

Before Elmo could speak, Bernard caught up to them.

“Hey, heard you guys were forming a study group. Mind if I join?” he asked.

Duffy was about to agree to Bernard’s proposal, when Wirt quickly clamped a hand over his mouth.

“What can you offer our small but selective group?” Wirt asked.

Bernard tried to respond but his words were muffled.

“Well, what about it? hea” Wirt asked, still not removing his hand.

Bernard thought for a moment, then withdrew a string of fat sausages from his gown.

“Pig weenies,” said Duffy, delighted.

“Weenies are unacceptable,” said Wirt.

Bernard thought some more. Groping in the small pouch he carried at his waist he poured three coins into his hand.

“Are you bribing us?” asked Elmo.

“Of course he is,” said Wirt, helping himself to the coins and weenies and heartily shaking Bernard’s hand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE AGE OF DINOSAURS

Mulberry stood atop a boulder addressing his pupils. They were gathered in a quarry on the far side of Hellsborough. “Welcome to shop,” said the Purple Wizard. “Here we fashion the tools of our trade.” The quarry was strewn with slabs and boulders of all shapes and sizes, configurations and magnitudes. The students wore goggles and held pick hammers.

Mulberry held up a chunk of rough, unshaped rock.

“Your first assignment. To mine this worthless stone—” he said, tossing the rock, “and transform it into—,” he proudly withdrew a highly polished crystal ball from the folds of his gown “—which I myself shaped when I first came to the Academy.” He chuckled, raised his arm, and spun the orb on his fingertips.

The eager tenderfoots bent to their task. It was hot, sweaty work. Students hammered at the boulders containing the crystals they would shape, polish, and make their own. Shattered rocks revealed trilobites, ammonites, platter-sized mollusks, and other marine fossils. Millennia before, what was now a dry gorge had once been the seabed of a vast ocean.

Throughout, Mulberry dozed amid the remains of a picnic beneath a cloud of wizard made shade.

Off by himself, Muttnaldo hammered away, every swing packed with hostility. Duffy could barely swing his pick. Elmo

looked awkward and out of place. Bernard huffed and puffed. Wirt, shirtless, swung his pick like a chain gang vet.

“Fellas need to toss your rags, soak up some rays,” said Wirt.

“No thanks,” said Elmo. “I’ve got this theory. Too many photons can turn your skin to bread crust.”

Bernard held up a puny rock.

“Hey, Wirt, how’s this one?”

“About the size of your brain, Bernie,” said Wirt. “Not much future in that rock, either. But don’t let that getcha down. Gotta use a little whack power.”

Crestfallen, Bernard nodded and continued to pick away. Duffy struggled, trying to dislodge his pick, which had become stuck. Wirt handed the boy his own instrument and then yanked Duffy’s free. He swung and loosened a big rock.

“When I finish my ball, I’m gonna look a million years into the future,” said Duffy.

“Think I’ll look into the past,” said Wirt, “See exactly just where I messed up.” He held up a beautiful chunk of raw crystal. The sun striking it refracted a prism of rainbow colors across the quarry. Elmo, Duffy, and some others stepped close to admire the wondrous find.

Muttnaldo’s jealousy was strained to the breaking point. Slamming down his pick in frustration, a good-sized chunk of rock broke apart, its cleaved halves exposing a fossilized skull from the Age of Dinosaurs, that of a fanged, amphibious reptile, to be precise, which, when alive and fully grown, would easily have equaled the length of a dozen of the boys laid end to end.

Muttnaldo grinned and whipped out his ever-present almanac. Doing so, he looked across at Wirt.

Moments later, Duffy's eyes widened in alarm. "Watch out!" he yelled.

The students turned and dove for cover as a pair of elongated, snapping jaws came flying at Wirt, as if swimming in a current of air. The boy dropped and hugged the boulder he'd been standing on. His crystal dropped to the ground and fractured. The snapping skull zoomed past, turned, and headed back. Wirt scooped up his gown and began to wave it, cocky as a medieval matador.

The fossil skull swept past again.

Wirt deftly stepped aside.

Muttnaldo laughed his head off.

Throughout, Mulberry remained sound asleep, oblivious to their shenanigans.

The airborne muzzle made another pass, and once again the boy, still waving the cape, stepped deftly aside. One by one, students emerged from cover and began to cheer.

Finally, on another pass, the ossified assailant managed to clamp onto the boy's gown, ripping it from his hands. Defenseless, Wirt froze. The creature spun and moved in for the kill. Panic-stricken, Wirt was about to be chomped in two. Whipping off his peak, he deftly bagged the fossil and immediately released his grip. The bagged skull wove blindly toward Muttnaldo, punching him in the gut. The momentum sent him reeling backward into the yawning Mulberry. All present

heard the tinkle of breaking glass, followed by a terrible silence. The Purple Wizard slowly lifted his robe, revealing the shattered fragments of his crystal orb. A tear dripped from the wizard's eye.

Duffy stepped forward. "Mage Mulberry, sir," he said, "when I finish making my crystal ball, it's yours. Okay?"

Mulberry dried his eyes on his gown and gave the boy a warm hug.

Duffy turned to his classmates and beamed with pride.

Mulberry leading the way, the students, hammers and gunnysacks slung over their shoulders, marched back through Hellsborough after their long day in the quarry. Hamlet folk were going about their business. Elderly residents cheerfully waved to Mulberry. Young men scowled and heckled the students.

"Best beware the local hooligans," Elmo advised Wirt and Duffy. "They don't have much use for scholars like us."

A buxom lass lounging in a doorway flirted with the young wizards, batting her eyes at them. Her boyfriend eyed them with distaste. A group of wenches crossed the street for a closer look. Wirt smiled and tipped his peak to his admirers.

"Don't let your yen interfere with destiny," Elmo warned. "These wenches are out for just one thing—"

"Which I can handsomely provide," said Wirt, exchanging winks with one of the lusty wenches.

“All they want is to bamboozle a potential wizard into matrimonial bliss, so they can escape the dregs of this rinky-dink town,” explained Elmo. “They’ll do anything to trap you.”

“Hey, no damsel’s gonna sabotage my career,” boasted Wirt.

“Wow! Look at that flooze bucket,” Duffy exclaimed, pointing to a voluptuous lass leaning out a second-story window.

“How’s about a kiss for a little magic?” she invited.

Duffy’s eyes bugged, thinking the offer was meant only for him.

Having progressed to the town square, Wirt made out a wholesome, beautiful maiden with dark brown tresses sweeping the steps in front of a thatched cottage where latticework supported a vertical bed of ivy and windows boxes bristled with spring flowers. She paused to observe the passing students. Her name was Petunia. While others of her sex showed some interest in the students, she was entirely cold toward these wannabe-wizards.

Seeing her, Muttnaldo’s face twisted into a crooked leer. Petunia turned her back and ignored him, but he continued to stare. She allowed herself a faint smile when Wirt suddenly broke rank and approached performing gymnastic flips. The boy made a final high flip and landed on his feet in front of her, although in truth, he staggered a bit. Reaching in his sack, he presented her with a crystal fragment. Petunia rolled her eyes, shook her head, entered the cottage, and shut the door.

Muttnaldo, murder in his eyes, stared at Wirt.

Further down the lane, a group of drunken townies standing outside a pub mocked the passing students. “Magic monkeys! Cone heads!” they jeered. “Keep away from our birds! Stay out of our town!” they threatened, spitting and shaking their fists.

Wirt boldly turned to face them. Raising his arms while beaming a dead stare, he assumed a finger wiggling, spell-casting pose. The townies quickly retreated into the pub. Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy chuckled, slapped palms, and continued on their way.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Faculty and pupils were gathered in the dining hall for their evening meal. The wizard's table was crowded with roast duck, succulent piglet, pheasant under glass, rice pudding, savory soufflés, and rich desserts. Alabaster poured phosphorescent nectar into their goblets. The eight wizards rose as one. "To miracles! May they never cease!" they said, raising their goblets.

A blazing hearth, high and wide and deep as the habitat of a cave bear, occupied an entire wall, casting flickering light across the assembly.

The student body glumly returned the toast: "To miracles, may they never cease," they muttered," lifting their mugs. The boys were drinking thin milk, and all wore white mustaches. In stark contrast to the wizard's rich fare, the students dined on barfo-looking grub: coarse bread to be dipped in tasteless turnip gruel.

Wirt ladled his meal with a wooden spoon, brought it to his nose and sniffed. Disgusted, he let it dribble back into the bowl.

Elmo and Duffy, quite content with their fare, sopped their bread and sucked the mush from it.

Bernard, wasting no time, held his bowl to his lips, and wolfed down his supper.

"I'm sick of eating like a fly," said Wirt, dropping his spoon with a splash and pushing his bowl away.

“Flies don’t eat food this nutritious,” said Elmo between mouthfuls.

Wirt stood and sauntered to the wizard’s table.

Bernard instantly grabbed the boy’s bowl and continued to stuff himself.

Unnoticed by wizards and pupils, the three goblins squeezed through a vent in the floor and scuttled for cover under the nearest table.

““Scuse me, mages, sirs—” said Wirt, now standing before the faculty.

Cobalt looked up from his pudding.

The student body looked up from their bowls and observed.

“Mage, sir,” said Wirt, having cleared his throat, “we’ve been eating the same delicious chow since I got here. I was wondering if it would be possible to sample a selection from your table?”

Cobalt eyeballed the boy, then turned to the other wizards and whispered to them. After a moment, each nodded in turn.

Wirt turned and winked at his pals.

The Blue Wizard handed the upstart a broad pewter platter. All the wizards piled on food until the boy was barely able to lift it.

“That should fill your belly nicely,” said Cobalt, crowning the feast with a leg of mutton.

“Thanks. I’ll bring back the leftovers,” said Wirt.

He struggled to carry the loaded tray back to his table. The other pupils gaped in awe. Muttnaldo stared at his bowl. Wirt

lifted and sniffed the leg of mutton. About to take a bite—it dissolved into the same grub he had been eating, dousing him in slop.

Muttnaldo chortled and slapped his knee in glee.

The dining hall erupted in jeers.

The wizards patted their full bellies, enjoying their prank. Mulberry emitted a satisfied belch.

Cobalt stood and raised his arms for silence. “As wizards, we possess the skill to dine on our illusions. But here at the Academy, we all dine from the same kettle,” he said, making a sweeping gesture with his hands. Suddenly, the grub in the student’s bowls began to take new shapes—mouthwatering cakes, pastries, and assorted pies.

The students went wild.

A smorgasbord of excellent deserts now crowded their tables.

The Baroness Pyrite poked her head from between Bernard’s knees and ogled the boy’s gooey butter cake. Unaware, the boy lifted a slice and was about to take a bite. Glancing down, he saw the goblin licking her chops. The boy froze, the slice suspended before his open mouth. Pyrite’s tongue shot out and swiped a lick. Bernard bolted from his bench, causing his cake to sail across the table. Splatting a student’s face, it turned back into common grub and slid down his gown.

There followed a moment of silence before a melee erupted. Pupils ducked, dodged, and took cover. Desserts sailed all over the place. Upon impact, they *too* turned back into tasteless grub.

Quartz and Feldspar darted about underfoot, greedily licking the floor.

Muttnaldo set his sights on Wirt, took aim with a custard pie, and let it fly. Wirt glanced over, saw the baked missile, and ducked just in time. Instead, the pie flew into Elmo's face, painting his spectacles. Wirt, in turn, hefted an apple dumpling, fired back at Muttnaldo, missed, and pelted Turf in the puss. Duffy, about to hurl a mouth-watering sweet potato tart, was bumped by another student. His aim misdirected, the gooey pastry instead plastered his own face.

Cobalt had seen quite enough. Rising to his feet and raising his arms, he muttered a verse of gibberish. No sooner spoken, and every bit as sudden as they had taken wing, the airborne deserts froze in mid-flight.

The wizards rose and quietly filed from the dining hall.

As soon as they were gone, the deserts resumed their flight.

The flinging of consumable goods carried on.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
DEMONOLOGY 101

The three goblins perched atop the statue of the Unknown Wizard, like crows on a scarecrow.

“Return to His Satanic Majesty,” Pyrite instructed her lackeys. “Say I have chosen His liberator.”

“Who?” asked Quartz and Feldspar.

She tossed them a blanket. Unfurling it revealed the monogrammed white letter M.

“Young Muttnaldo?” her sons asked.

Pyrite smacked them, snatched the blanket back, and turned it upside down, changing the M into a W.

“Young Wirt,” said Pyrite proudly. She flung the blanket back in their faces. “Go now. I will prepare him.”

The underlings climbed down and disappeared into the fissure at the statue’s base.

Pyrite remained on her perch, softly whistling a discordant tune, then suddenly froze and fell silent. Her eyes swiveled. Below, her favorite treat, a late-night snack in the form of a plump rat, scampered across the cobbled stones. Careful not to alert the creature, she soundlessly climbed down, stole after it, and was just about to pounce—when a shadow fell over her.

Fear suddenly clouded the goblin’s face.

Terror froze her limbs.

She made to flee, but it was too late.

A net suddenly dropped from above.

Stuffed and mounted demons sat on shelves around a spacious lecture hall. Demon evolution charts papered the walls. Demon cadavers soaked in jars of cloudy liquid. To the rear, behind a lectern, an entire wall, high and wide as the side of a barn, formed a chalkboard of dark gray slate. It too was covered in anatomical drawings; skeletal structures, digestive systems, muscle groups, means of locomotion and such, drawn with sticks of calcium sulfate, known, when used for this purpose, as chalk. Demonology 101 was in session.

“Who can tell me the level and sub-order of this creature?” asked Crocus, the Yellow Wizard, pointing to an anatomical chart. He blew his nose into his hands and wiped them on his gown. The students made grossed-out faces.

Only Elmo raised his hand.

“Elmostein,” said Crocus.

Elmo stood, eager to prove himself. “Judging by the juxtaposition of specific reproductive organs, and lack of any dominant coronary life force, it’s obviously a tri-dorked, spectral locomotive, more commonly known as a sub-level 2-B erectus.”

Wirt leaned to Duffy. “Exactly what I thought,” he said in a whisper. He returned to drawing a ridiculous looking four-headed creature devouring a yellow-robed wizard.

“Bravo, Elmostein, bravo,” said Crocus, clapping his hands. “Your knowledge of demon anatomy is unsurpassed.”

Elmo smiled broadly and took his seat.

The Yellow Wizard slipped on a pair of sanitary gloves.

“And now, for a special treat,” he said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

The door opened and Alabaster rolled in a wheeled cart with a cloth-covered, box-like object on it. Crocus removed the cloth, revealing Pyrite in a cramped birdcage. The dozing goblin stirred and squinted into the bright light.

“Last night, janitor Alabaster captured this varmint prowling about the Academy,” said Crocus.

Alabaster grinned and nodded.

Wirt stood and applauded. “Way to bag em, Al!”

Crocus threw the boy a withering look.

Wirt blanched and reclaimed his seat.

The students leaned forward for a closer look at the low creature in their midst. Muttnaldo stared intently. Duffy shuddered. Bernard shielded his eyes.

“Is there anyone other than Elmostein who can tell us the gender of this creature?” asked Crocus, looking around the room. His eyes settled on Bernard. “Bernard?”

Bernard rose. “A m—m—monster?” he stammered.

Crocus sighed and rolled his eyes.

The students tittered as the boy slumped back in his seat.

The Yellow Wizard scanned the room again.

“How about you, Wirt?”

Wirt stood and grinned at the critter. The goblin grinned back. Elmo “pssst’ed” for Wirt’s attention, then positioned a cheat note for him. Wirt glanced sideways and read from it. “I believe, mage, sir, that’s a sub-level 3-F common goblin.”

“Why a 3-F and not merely an F?” asked Crocus.

“Beats the heck outta me,” said Wirt.

Duffy raised his hand, lowered it, then raised it again.

“Young Duffy,” said Crocus.

Duffy stood. “A 3-F because of the size of its head, which tells me the creature has a puny brain and even punier—” Duffy’s voice trailed off, blushing with embarrassment.

“Good, good, very observant,” said Crocus, giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Pyrite bristled as the class howled with laughter. It irked her that she was often mistaken for a male of her species.

“Oh, please, ferocious, flea-brained beast, spare us,” Wirt taunted.

The Yellow Wizard had finally heard enough. Crossing to Wirt’s desk, he picked up the boy’s drawing, studied it, and sneezed on it. Wirt wiped his brow with his sleeve.

“Perhaps *you* would be willing to dominate this wart covered pile of dung?” said Crocus.

“Thought you’d never ask, mage Crocus, sir,” said Wirt.

Rising, he sauntered to the cage and began to circle it. Pyrite continued to grin, which confused the boy. Wirt snapped his fingers. “Sit!” he commanded.

The goblin dutifully sat.

“Roll over!”

The goblin rolled.

“Play dead!”

To the amazement of wizard and students alike—the goblin turned three times and curled into a ball.

“Hmmm,” said Crocus, stroking his beard, “Never before has a novice dominated so quickly.”

Wirt grinned, turned to his classmates, and took a bow.

Muttnaldo’s face clouded with envy.

Wirt and Pyrite stared at each other. The goblin uncurled and cast a flirtatious wink at the boy.

“Hey, don’t kiss my butt,” said Wirt, in a big-headed way.

Stepping to Alabaster and taking hold of his broom, the boy swatted the cage, rattling it. The goblin went wild with rage. Wirt was about to strike again when Crocus wrested the broom away. The goblin growled and spit a wad of foul glop in the boy’s face, sending the class into hysterics. Eyeballing him, she growled something in the goblin tongue.

“What’d you say?” asked Wirt, wiping away the glop and flicking his wrist.

“Something like—‘you had your chance. You messed up. You could’ve been somebody. But you’re a bum, like all the rest,’” ventured Elmo. It was no more than a hunch, but likely not far from the truth.

Pyrite gave Wirt a killer stare, then growled again.

“It appears you’ve made an enemy,” said Crocus, reluctant to admit he was somewhat amused.

“Won’t be my first, won’t be my last,” shrugged Wirt.

He returned to his seat.

Crocus returned to the lectern and faced the class.

“An important lesson,” he said. “When dealing with the denizens of the underworld, you may well become the stooge of the very creature you wish to dominate.”

Wirt pried a dried pea from his lunch that had stuck to his gown. Rolling up the sheet of drawing paper, forming a thin tube, he placed it to his lips, drew breath, blew hard, and fired the pellet at the goblin. Pyrite flew into a tizzy.

“Now *that’s* domination,” gloated Wirt.

It was then and there that the goblin gave up on the boy and instead turned her attention to the one who had earlier cast the cocooning spell.

Muttnaldo, in turn, stared back with great interest.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PUNCH AND TRUDY

It was not all study and no play, far from it. The annual Academy sponsored social was underway, an opportunity for Hellsborough damsels, dressed in peasant finery, to meet an eligible young wizard in training. The gymnasium was bedecked in festive regalia. On a stage, a traveling band of troubadours well-practiced on lute, dulcimer, and harpsichord played and sang for the pupils and their guests. A handful of couples danced to the Dark Age funk, while some preferred to bop solo.

Bored and uncomfortable, Forwin and Milon, the class wimps, stood against a wall. Forwin nervously performed a third rate card trick.

“Now which card?” he asked.

“Check out the globes on that hussy,” said Milo, distracted as a winsome lass passed by.

“Come on, which hand, fool?” demanded Forwin, who could not be less interested in the lass.

Against the opposite wall stood the Hellsborough wallflowers.

“Can you imagine spending the rest of your life with one of those twerps?” asked one named Zelda, a pimply-faced swineherd’s daughter.

“Sure can,” said one named Marigold, a sour-faced potter’s daughter. *“You know how much they get for a routine exorcism?”*

“Yes—and twice that if it’s a house call,” said Zelda.

Elmo wandered through the party, a horseshoe magnet in his hand. He casually jammed it against the derriere of a dancing damsel. She flinched, turned sharply, and slapped him.

“Thank you for participating in my census,” said Elmo, jotting his finding on a notepad. Granted, it was an unusual method of determining which of the damsels were of reputable character and those who were not, but it could never be said the boy was not an innovator. A moment later Duffy joined him.

“Out of a random sampling of post-pubescent ‘birds’—not a single iron clad princess—interesting,” said Elmo, consulting his notes.

Closing his pad, he strolled to the refreshment table where Alabaster served double duty as bartender. Duffy joined him there.

“How are you this evening, Alabaster?” said Duffy.

Alabaster smiled, ladled strawberry punch into a pair of goblets, and handed one to each of the boys.

Duffy sipped his punch. He turned to Elmo. “So, what do you do at one of these parties—when you’re not annoying damsels with horseshoes, I mean?”

“In my case, I observe the festivities, help myself to the wizard’s wine, down some mind-altering fungus, sit in a corner and hallucinate. In your case, you check out the damsels, ask one to dance, she tells you to eat dirt, you come back here and we talk about how insensitive women are.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” said Duffy.

Nearby, Crocus and Mulberry, serving as chaperones, observed the proceedings.

“Ah, sweet heavenly bodies,” said Mulberry. “If only I were seventy-five again.”

“These peasant girls are all disease ridden,” said Cobalt, making a disgusted face, which may have been true for some, but certainly not for all.

“Who wants to live forever?” Mulberry shrugged.

A pair of Hellsborough damsels passed close by.

“What do I do if one of them tries—?” the nervous one was asking.

“Don’t be *too* easy. You’ve got to start out like a ballbuster with these boys. They respect that,” the cocky one replied, as if she spoke from experience.

Across the gymnasium, Muttnaldo gyrated with a tramp of low morals, clutching her tight. “I’ve got the roughest, toughest tongue in town,” she whispered, licking his ear.

“Kiss me, damsel—my tonsils itch,” Muttnaldo said coldly.

Duffy strolled past, stared at their embrace, bumped into another couple, composed himself, and made his way to the nervous lass.

“Hello, princess,” he said sweetly. “Care to dance?”

She slowly turned to him and smiled.

“Eat dirt, spud brain.”

Duffy’s face dropped.

Two late arrivals were Petunia and her plump friend Trudy. Petunia was by the far the prettiest there. She was also very uptight.

“Don’t be such a boob, Pet. This may be our lucky night,” said Trudy. “I smell romance in the air.”

“I don’t know why I let you talk me into coming to these things,” said Petunia. “They’re a total waste of time.”

“But Pet, you could have your pick of any boy here if only you’d—”

“These young wizards are nothing but a bunch of self-absorbed, ego-powered—” The loud clank of metal on metal interrupted her. Turning, she saw Elmo’s horseshoe stuck to her behind. She spied the boy genius making a note on his pad.

“Congratulations,” said Elmo, “you’re the only validated prude in my census. I compliment you.”

“I’m *not* honored,” said Petunia, highly embarrassed and annoyed.

Gabbing away the horseshoe, she threw it at him. She and Trudy stalked off. The horseshoe landed beside a pair of shiny, patent leather boots. They belonged to Wirt, attired as a 950s tough, a rebel without a cause; jellyroll hairdo dyed jet black, a black satin, torn sleeve gown, and well-practiced sneer. He drew on his stogie, dropped it, and rubbed it out with his foot.

Muttnaldo, still in the embrace of the tramp, had spotted Petunia at the refreshment table. Alabaster was about to hand the damsel a goblet, when Muttnaldo suddenly appeared and grabbed it away. A wave of his hand, a sudden puff of black

smoke, and the goblet transformed into a dozen long-stemmed black roses. “*This* is how you serve a lady,” he said, handing her the bouquet.

Again, Petunia was neither flattered nor honored. Her friend, however, was. “Oh, they’re beautiful,” beamed Trudy.

“Are you normally this rude?” said Muttnaldo, ignoring Trudy and addressing Petunia. “‘Cause it turns me on.”

“You are *really* weird,” said Petunia. Sighing, she turned to Trudy. “Let’s go.”

“Wait. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Muttnaldo. Mutt, if you prefer.”

“Muttnaldo?” Petunia said, and came close to laughing, but was able to contain herself. “Sounds like a dog’s name.”

He chose to ignore the comment. “You. Me. Alone. Tonight. Under the stars,” he said, rather nonchalantly.

This time Petunia laughed in his face. Handing Trudy the roses, she began to walk away, but he pursued and steered her onto the dance floor. She struggled, but the boy held her tight.

“Yo, Blackamoor!” yelled Wirt, passing near the stage where the troubadours were performing. He knew their dark-skinned singer from having met at a rowdy festival the previous summer where they’d shared a misadventure involving, but not limited to, a goat, two bags of sunflowers seeds, a sundial, and a deck of tarot cards, the details of which are better left unsaid.

The gold-toothed African acknowledged him with a loud yowl. Wirt yowled back, then strolled off, checking out the brooding wallflowers. He moved down the line, introducing himself. Having done so, he licked his fingers and dabbed back his hair. “For those interested in boppin’ with the wizard of boogaloo—all you gotta do is ask.” He smiled and sauntered away. The brooders exchanged “yuck” expressions.

Duffy twiddled his thumbs while Elmo lethargically jerked his head to the music. Wirt joined them.

“You dorkless donkeys gonna stand there and stagnate all night, or are you gonna bag a princess?”

“I think it’d be quite educational if you’d demonstrate what you have in mind,” said Elmo.

“No problem,” said Wirt. “Take your pick of any honey here. She’s mine.”

Elmo and Duffy scanned the room. “That one,” they said, both pointing in the same direction.

“Piece of cake,” said Wirt, following their point, and for the first time aware of Petunia, who still struggled in Muttnaldo’s arms. “Take notes.” He started to move off.

“We’re going to need some validation,” Elmo called after him.

Wirt turned. “How ‘bout my word?” Again he moved off.

“How ‘bout her bear trap?” said Elmo, holding up the magnet, but the boy was already out of earshot.

Wirt stepped onto the dance floor and moved in on the couple. He lightly tapped his rival on the shoulder.

“Beat it, pink boy,” said Wirt. “This bird’s taken.”

He quickly stepped between them and spun her away.

Muttnaldo’s eyes boiled.

“Gotta watch out for guys like that,” said Wirt.

“Rather bold, aren’t you?” asked Petunia, startled to find herself in another pair of arms.

“I’m a man of action. I see something I like, I take it.”

“You do? Just like that?”

Wirt gave her a twirl.

“Just like that!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WIRT WAS HERE

Away from the gaiety, Muttnaldo's footsteps echoed down an empty corridor. Stopping before a bare wall, he wiggled his poised fingers in the air. Magically, a bright red, spray painted graffiti slogan appeared on the wall. It boldly stated—

WIRT WAS HERE

The boy gave an evil, self-congratulatory chuckle.

Ascending a stone staircase, a red graffiti arrow on the wall moved with him. Turning a corner at the top of the stairs, he stopped before a group portrait of the eight wizards, the red arrow now pointing to them. The painting began to bubble and drip, droop and sag, distorting their faces. Muttnaldo stood back and admired his handiwork. Then—

“Muttnaldo—” It was a weird, muffled whisper.

The boy, certain he had been caught, turned in all directions, but there was no one in sight. He quickly ducked behind a stone column.

“Nice job, Muttnaldo,” said the weird voice. “Next to black, red is my favorite color.”

The boy pivoted to a door from behind which the voice seemed to be coming. He opened the door and cautiously entered the demonology classroom.

“Over here, naughty boy,” the voice whispered. It appeared to have come from beneath the shrouded cage. Bracing himself, the boy whipped away the cover and quickly assumed a spell-

casting stance. The Baroness Pyrite von Goblin sat picking her teeth with the clawed appendage at the end of her tail. “Evenin,’ Muttnaldo,” she said.

Flickering light illuminated a wall of demon charts. Deafening thunder rattled the cage. “A nice night to strike a bargain with the powers of darkness,” said the goblin.

Wirt and Petunia had exited the gym for some fresh air. Strolling across the empty quad, the boy, super cool, tossed a hand-rolled stogie in his mouth and rapidly snapped his fingers, expecting it to ignite. Nothing happened. He tried again, and again there was nothing.

Petunia struck a match on her teeth and lit Wirt’s stogie. He took a satisfying puff.

“Sometimes the magic works, sometimes it doesn’t. Is that how it goes?” she quipped, rather snidely to Wirt’s ear.

“Yeah, but not necessarily in that order,” he said.

“Guess you have damp fingers,” said Petunia, covering for him so as not to embarrass him.

Wirt rubbed his fingers together and dried them on his gown. Snapping his fingers again, this time his pinkie caught fire and he began to hop about. Petunia sighed, shook her head, and strolled off. Wirt shook out the flame and quickly caught up to her.

“There’s more potential in this pinkie than most of those wand-wanks have in their whole anatomy,” he said, holding up the singed, still smoking digit.

“According to who?” Petunia called over her shoulder, while skipping ahead.

“*This* dust buster,” said Wirt, indicating Alabaster at the base of the statue of the Unknown Wizard, where the janitor sat enjoying a smoke. He grinned vacantly as Wirt strode past.

“Hey, Al, check it out,” said Wirt.

The boy inhaled deeply and blew out a fuzzy yellow smoke star. Unable to contain herself, Petunia cracked a smile. Alabaster nodded his approval, filled his lungs, and blew out an entire galaxy of luminous smoke stars.

“Thanks a lot, Al,” said Wirt, his ego bruised, but knew it wasn’t done to overshadow his own accomplishment. A smoke star was nothing to sneeze at, even if it was a bit fuzzy around the edges and hadn’t lasted but a few seconds, but still, he *had* been thoroughly upstaged by the janitor.

Petunia was underwhelmed. “When you’ve lived around here as long as I have, you sort of get used to mindless magic,” she said.

Nearby in the classroom, Muttnaldo paced, while Pyrite looked bored. “Let me get this straight. I spring your boss—me and him rule side by side?” he asked.

“Correct,” said the goblin, for what seemed to her about the hundredth time.

“And we *are* talking about the whole shebang—not just this ghetto?”

“Trust me,” said the goblin, adding a used plough dealer’s grin.

“Okay, beast, then let’s go to hell.”

“Not so fast. We go when the time is right.”

“What’s the catch?”

“A small personal favor,” said the goblin, attempting her version of a smile, but failing miserably.

“Name it.”

“First, rid us of that other bad boy—Wirt.”

“Your wish is my desire,” said Muttnaldo, fire in his eyes.
“He’s toast.”

“Is that a promise?”

“A guarantee.”

“Then we have a deal,” said the goblin, extending a clawed appendage through the cage bars.

Muttnaldo studied the claw, wiped his brow, and reluctantly shook ‘hands.’

“Congratulations. You’ll never regret it,” said Pyrite.

“So, when *do* I meet this satanic kingpin?”

“When you wear the powers of the black robe.”

Booming thunder rattled the cage again.

Muttnaldo stared wickedly at the beast.

Away from the party din, Wirt and Petunia strolled down a corridor in the wizard's wing. There stood four neatly spaced doors on one side, four on the other, each a different color.

"So, this is where the mighty wizards live," said Petunia.
"Now what?"

"Pick a color, any color," said Wirt.

Petunia studied all the doors.

"This one."

The boy removed a feather from his gown and attempted to pick the lock, but was having a difficult time. "Got a second choice?"

Petunia lifted the handle and the door swung open effortlessly.

A faint green glow illuminated Turf's private quarters, washing over the couple. As expected, the walls, furnishings, and drapes were a thousand shades of green: avocado, sea foam, moss, and many more.

"What do you suppose he'll do if he catches us?" asked Petunia with pretend alarm.

"Probably turn us into something green," said Wirt.

Having said, he closed the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
SAVOR THIS PIDDLE

Muttnaldo tucked away the almanac, helped himself to a glass beaker, lowered it to the level of his privates, and began making water into it. The sound of trickling liquid accompanied his look of relief. Then, having given his winky a good shake, he raised the beaker to his eye and cast a black magic spell. The liquid began to boil, turning blood red.

“Savor this piddle and suffer a little,” muttered the boy.

Dipping a quill in the potion, he let it soak. Removing the quill, he jabbed it into a juicy red apple.

“Oh, great ball of wonders, help us determine tomorrow’s horoscope of mysteries—Sure you want to go through with this?” asked Wirt. “Could be nasty.”

“I’ll take that risk, Mr. Wizard,” said Petunia.

He and she sat side by side on the Green Wizard’s luxurious canopied bed. Turf’s crystal ball nestled in the boy’s lap. Wirt slowly rubbed his hand over the orb.

“Here it comes—I’m getting an image—”

Pale mist began to swirl inside the globe.

“A beautiful damsel—Alone—Yearning for her dream lover—Longing for his touch—”

The mist began to thicken.

“She opens the door—It’s him—”

The mist began to fade, replaced by an eerie glow.

“Her heart swells with desire—She retreats—Her head says no—But her heart says yes, yes, yes—They embrace—”

The glow began to intensify.

Petunia peered hard to see what the boy was seeing, or was pretending to, which she assumed to be the case, although at that moment she would not have sworn to it, but saw only their distorted reflections in the curvature of the crystal.

“A year later—They’re married, husband and wife. They still can’t get enough of each other,” Wirt continued. “But now he must go away on a journey. She may never see him again.” He placed the globe in Petunia’s lap.

“What do *you* see?” he asked.

“Ohhhhhh—I see a sexy young wizard who thinks he can use his magic to get anything he wants—But I also see a beautiful young damsel who doesn’t buy any of his whimsical nonsense,” said Petunia. She tossed him the ball. “The future’s in your hands, wand-wank.”

Dejected, *rejected*, Wirt shuffled across the dorm. Flopping onto his bed, he felt something beneath his pillow. Someone had left him a treat—a juicy red apple, how thoughtful. Carved into it was a heart, and inside the heart—a name—Petunia. Perhaps all was not lost. The boy brightened, took a big bite, savored it, and was about to take another—but something felt not quite right.

The party in the gym continued without him.

Elmo stood in a corner again consulting his notepad. Duffy ran up to him, breathless.

“Elmo—you’ve gotta come quick. Wirt can’t turn off his sprinkler.”

The boys rushed out past Alabaster sweeping the terrace. Nearby, a handful of students stood in line waiting to use the privies. Muttnaldo, also present, suppressed a snicker as Elmo and Duffy strode up.

“Which one?” Elmo asked Duffy, who nodded to one of the stalls. Pressing his ear to the door, Elmo heard a loud moan from inside.

“You okay in there, Wirt?” asked Elmo.

Inside, Wirt slumped against the wall, weak and rubber-kneed.

“My bladder’s gone spaz on me,” he moaned. “Can’t, can’t stop—”

Elmo considered. “Have you tried standing on your head?”

“Maybe we should get a wizard before he drowns,” said Duffy.

“No wizards!” shouted Wirt.

“I think this is going to require some heavy research,” said Elmo.

Wirt moaned again.

Muttnaldo snickered, entered an empty stall, and mocked an obnoxious moan.

Hours later, Alabaster swept into the lavatory. Elmo and Duffy sat slumped in a corner. All was silent but for the continuing sound of trickling liquid. The janitor determined the source and tapped the privy door with his broom. Inside, the stricken boy groaned. Moments later, the trickled turned to a drip, drip, drip, and then—stopped. Moments later, the door flew open and Wirt staggered out, exhausted, the hem of his gown soaked.

“Mornin,’ Al,” he said, sloshing off.

For the second time that night, Wirt, thoroughly defeated, returned to the dorm. This time, circling the great wheel, he squelched with every step, leaving a trail of soggy prints. Elmo and Duffy tagged behind. The student body had retired to their beds, but many were still awake, recounting inflated tales of encounters with the fairer sex: maidens met, damsels debauched, and wenches wooed.

The three friends flopped onto their beds.

Muttnaldo was waiting.

Producing a shiny red apple from his gown, he loudly chomped into it, making certain everyone was watching. “Warts and damsels don’t mix, limp wick,” he smirked. He turned to his bed, high fiving himself.

A moment later, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“It’s Wirt,” said Wirt, and—“presto!”

Muttnaldo spun around.

“—Chango!” said Wirt, delivering a one-two punch! Muttnaldo went flying over his bed. Wirt stalked him, belting him around the great wheel as other students egged them on. Suddenly, the combatants were separated and restrained. Turf had tight hold of Wirt. Cobalt yanked Muttnaldo to his feet. Each of the rivals sported bloody noses.

“Wizards fighting wizards! What is the meaning of this?” Cobalt demanded.

“*He attacked me!*” protested Muttnaldo.

Wirt struggled to break free, and so doing, his gown was torn. Something thumped to the floor. Muttnaldo chuckled as Turf picked up the black magic almanac. The Green Wizard and the Blue Wizard gave Wirt a cold stare. Knowing it was useless to protest his innocence, the boy merely shrugged.

“I must insist we rid ourselves of this bad seed before he does serious harm,” Turf said sternly.

“That book of childish pranks is hardly grounds for expulsion,” said Cobalt.

Wirt was greatly relieved.

Turf scowled.

“You, however, may decide his punishment,” said Cobalt.

Wirt winced.

Turf tightened his grip on the boy’s neck.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A GNARLY JOB

Come the next afternoon after classes, Turf ushered the mischief-maker into a glass-domed enclosure housing the Academy's indoor swimming pool. Seldom used, the water was a murky, foul smelling green, studded with patches of floating muck. A bullfrog leapt from a lilypad and disappeared beneath the surface. A speckled eel performed a lazy roll and splash. A family of terrapins scuttled for cover. The surrounding deck was a litter of dead leaves blown in through the skylight's shattered panes. Marble statues of the eight wizards lined the periphery. Half-shrouded in bog vegetation, a diving platform loomed on the far side.

The Green Wizard stepped to the rim, raised his staff, and made a circular motion. The surface began to swirl, a whirlpool of dingy water surging down the drain, until only a shallow puddle at the deep end remained. When properly cleaned, the intense colors and shimmering gold of the tiles combined to create a breathtaking effect, but now, after a period of neglect, the basin was stained and tarnished with layers of accumulated crud.

"Now, boy, show me how badly you wish to become a wizard," said Turf, handing the boy a long handled scrub brush.

"I'm used to gnarly jobs, mage Turf, sir," said Wirt. "I'll have this soup bowl sparkling in no time."

Turf sighed, muttered under his breath, and left the boy to his task.

Wirt descended the slimy steps on the shallow near side and began to scrub. Time passed and there was no evidence of progress. He renewed his effort. Another hour and still there was little headway. He returned to the door through which Turf and he had entered. Perhaps, he thought, accepting the wizards invite to study at the Academy had not been his best idea. He would slip away unnoticed and return to his former life. There was no denying he would miss his friends, Elmo and Duffy most of all, even the ridiculous Bernard, but however reluctant, it was a price he was willing to pay.

The door, however, was locked.

There was no choice but to return to his punishment.

By early evening, beneath the layered scum, the faint outline of a mosaic crab had begun to appear on the pool wall. The boy continued to scrub. By nightfall, the bristles of the brush had mostly worn away, making the assignment nearly impossible. He was exhausted, had missed his supper, and being a moonless night, it was nearly too dark to see. Still, there was no end in sight.

It was time for a break.

Dragging himself from the empty basin, he mounted the ladder to the diving platform. There, lying on his back, he gazed up at the heavens, the night sky beyond the skylight now aglow with celestial bodies. He stretched and yawned.

Soon, sleep overtook him.

Constellations twinkled. Meteors showered. Stars blinked. Far below, a great blue black sea shimmered from horizon to horizon. A fiery comet bearing two figures, its magnificent tail a blur of sparking light, curled from behind the moon (yes, by now there was a full moon). Riding behind, her arms wrapped around Wirt's middle, Petunia held on tight. The boy and the maiden dipped and soared across the night sky. A galactic cowboy, Wirt removed his peak and waved it in the air.

Now, Muttnaldo, laughing maniacally, astride a black meteor and wielding a wizard's staff, appeared from behind an asteroid.

Spying his rival, the boy on the comet looped and hooked, performing lazy figure eights that spelled out:

SURRENDER MUTT!!!

Jousting knights astride their celestial mounts, long-handled brush set against wizard's staff, the night riders bore down upon each other. Unseated when his brush shattered, the comet borne rider tumbled from the sky.

Still asleep on the platform, the dreaming boy shifted onto his side and was perilously close to spilling overboard.

Now he was on the seabed, astride a colossal crab. And again Muttnaldo threatened, this time astraddle an immense lobster. Pincer to pincer their mounts grappled and reared—

It was nearly dawn, evidenced by the rosy-fingered glow in the eastern sky, when Wirt suddenly awoke. Sometime in the night he had rolled off the platform into the puddle at the deep end of the pool. Now, half-drowned, he stood and could not

believe his eyes. Revealed in full splendor, the basin stood sparkling clean, its curvature adorned with mosaics of the twelve signs of the zodiac: Cancer the Crab, Sagittarius the Scorpion, and Aries the Ram, among others. A closer look revealed the dream lobster was *not* a lobster. It was, instead, a scorpion, but no matter, the creature had served its dream purpose.

But the boy was not alone. Nearby, a lone figure shuffled across the deck. It was *not* Turf, the Green Wizard, come to judge his progress. Rather, it was Alabaster, puffing a stogie and sweeping with his ever-present broom.

The drain belched and spewed a fountain of fresh water.

Wirt dragged himself to the deck as the pool slowly began to fill.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
ACADEMY BLUES

The four boys were kicked back in Alabaster's small room tucked away in a corner of the Academy. Gadgets, oddities, and crackpot inventions lay scattered all about. A mirrorball suspended from the ceiling cast slowly rotating moons, suns, and stars against the walls. Incense wafted from the mouth of a dragon-headed holder. A small fireplace burned brightly. An ornate, walk-in armoire stood prominently against a wall.

Alabaster, wearing a paisley nightshirt, sat in a rocker blowing a mouth harp, the boys peaks stacked on his head like paper cups. Nearby, Wirt stood atop a square wooden box, air-strumming the janitor's broom. Elmo, Duffy, and Bernard, also in their nightshirts, took turns nursing a water pipe.

"Oh, my P...P...P...Petunia left me—I'm in such misery—" crooned Wirt.

"Oh, yeah—" said Elmo, Duffy, and Bernard.

"Oh, my P...P...P... Petunia done left me—I'm in such ma—ma—ma—misery—"

"Sing it, brother Wirt, sing it—" urged Elmo.

"Come back to me li'l darlin'—cause you put a spell on me—"
"

Alabaster finished with a flourish on the harp as the song ended.

"Man's a hopeless lovechild," said Elmo

"He's in love," said Bernard, in an obnoxious way.

“Mellow out, Bernie,” said Duffy. “She doesn’t even know he exists.”

Wirt hopped off the cube. Depressed, he began to sweep.

“When you’re into the blues, you’re into some heavy stuff,” said Elmo, and returned to nursing the pipe.

“That chick really bones me out,” said Wirt, resting his chin on the broom handle. “How’d we get off on this trip, anyway?” he added, wanting to change the subject.

Soon the boys had the munchies. Alabaster offered them homemade brownies. Bernard scarfed down a half-dozen of the delicious squares. Duffy put on some prism specs. Elmo peered through the wrong end of a telescope. Wirt fiddled with the lock on the armoire. Alabaster slapped his hand away, waved a warning finger in his face, and offered him a brownie.

“Our generation of wizards is so upwardly uncool,” said Elmo.

“We’re not wizards yet,” said Duffy.

“When I get outta here, I’ll help the little people,” said Elmo.

“Righteous,” said Duffy.

“Not me. I help myself first, second, last,” said Bernard.

“Bum me out, Bernard,” said Elmo.

“When folks are feeling down, maybe I could use some magic to make em happy,” said Duffy. “I could join a traveling circus, put on shows—do my own thing.”

“Before I become a responsible miracle man, I’m gonna travel ‘round the world,” said Wirt.

Elmo, Duffy, and Bernard chuckled.

“Yeah, sure, right. ‘*Round* the world?” said Duffy, making a circle in the air with his finger while rolling his eyes.

“I got this theory—” said Wirt, picking up the box and handing it to Alabaster. “This is the world—” He pointed with the butt of the broom.

“That’s a box,” said Bernard.

“The world has six sides,” said Wirt.

“Whoa! Radical theory!” said Duffy, no longer scoffing.

“The top here is freezin’—so is the bottom—this side is the ocean—this side is hotter’n hades—this side is where we live—and this side—” said Wirt, winking and pointing the broom at the skeptics—,” I’ll tell you when I get back.”

Elmo, Duffy, and Bernard’s chairs toppled backwards, spilling them to the floor as if pushed by an invisible force.

“Whoahhh!” they said all together.

A fortnight later, a handful of students were gathered on the Academy firing range where wooden targets had been erected: dragons, gnomes, witches, and other demonic figures stood in a neat row. A sonic boom preceded a sizzling streak of bright light. A dragon exploded!

Spring and summer had fallen behind. A fine layer of hoarfrost lay upon the cold, hard ground. The trees were mostly bare, their last remaining leaves nudged loose and wafting in the chilly breeze.

A student wearing a thunder glove aimed at a target, braced, and fired. Again, bright light sizzled and streaked downfield. A gnome was blown to bits!

A wizard observed as another student fired.

Then another.

Alabaster frantically set up new targets while trying to avoid the sizzling bolts.

Wirt cockily drew his weapon, fired from under his leg, exploded a witch, and blew on his smoking glove. Elmo helped steady Duffy's aim. The boy fired. The kickback sent him reeling ten yards back. Muttnaldo trained his glove on Wirt, then quickly spun, also fired from under his raised leg, and exploded an entire row of targets.

Wirt had selected another target, a werewolf, and was about to discharge his weapon, but Bernard had wandered into his line of fire. The boy, who appeared catatonic and unaware of his surroundings, appeared to be clutching a letter.

The firing stopped.

Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy trotted over to their classmate. Elmo gently pried the letter from Bernard's grip and silently read what was written there.

"Spooky died," said Elmo, looking up.

"Who?" asked Wirt?

"Huh?" said Duffy.

"The Spooker," said Bernard, near tears.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SPOOKY

Four black-gowned, hooded figures sat on oaken kegs around a makeshift table. One of the four lit a candle. The faint, flickering light revealed the solemn faces of Wirt, Elmo, Duffy, and Bernard gathered in a cramped cellar somewhere in the bowels of the Academy. A brief flight of stone steps ascended to a door that was slightly ajar. A thin wedge of moonlight angled down the steps and stopped just short of the furthest reach of the candlelight.

“Dear friends, we are gathered on this solemn occasion to honor the memory of Spooky,” Wirt intoned in a mystery voice. “To summon his spirit to drop by for a final visit with his faithful and loving master Bernard.”

“He was the best pooch in the whole wide world,” wailed Bernard, sniffing and wiping his runny nose on his sleeve.

“Bernard, pay attention, we’re dealing with the unknown here,” Wirt cautioned. “We don’t want to invite some crazed ectoplasmic pooch to take Spooky’s place, now do we?”

“Oh, no, Spooky wouldn’t like that,” said Bernard, shaking his head vigorously.

Wirt nodded to Elmo and Duffy.

“I now call on the witnesses to answer but one question. If I am busted for tampering with the spirits, will you come to my rescue?”

“Danger is our sweet tooth,” said Elmo.

“We will save you,” said Duffy soberly.

“Then let us join hands so that my spirit may depart to fetch our classmate’s haunted pooch,” said Wirt.

The four boys joined hands.

Wirt closed his eyes and began to whisper chant.

“Carry my soul to purgatory so that I may guide Spooky back to his master for one last good-bye. Hear me, oh ruler of canine fates. Oh, hear me.” The speaker’s face slowly turned blank and remote.

“He’s left the world as we know it,” said Elmo, after a moment, then turned to Duffy and Bernard. “His mind is racing through the eternal void.”

“I sure hope he doesn’t get lost,” said Bernard.

Elmo said: “Bernard, the man knows his dimensions. Clam up.”

The table gave a small shudder and slowly began to levitate. Elmo and Duffy quickly scooted back. The table rose another foot. Leaning forward, they tried to hold it down, but it resisted their effort and continued to rise.

“Help out, Bernard,” said Elmo in an exaggerated way. “We lose this table, we lose everything!”

Gripping the sides, Bernard quickly flopped atop the table, adding his weight to it. The shaking slowly began to subside. The table began to descend, rocked gently, and stood still.

Now—the faint echo of a barking dog.

“I have entered the fields of ambrosia where little dead dogs run and play,” said Wirt in a low voice.

“He made it—” said Bernard, greatly relieved.

Elmo “shushed” him. “Maintain, Bernard, maintain.”

Wirt placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled to the imaginary pooch. “Here, Spooky. Here boy—Phew. Is that you?”

“It can’t be,” said Bernard, disappointed. “I bathed him every night. Well, almost.”

Far away in the fields of ambrosia, Wirt heard something. Cupping a palm to his ear, he strained to listen. “Spooky, is that you? Spooky—wait—come back. I’m a friend of your master. That’s right—he misses you a whole lot—you miss him, too? Then follow me—” Wirt began to bark. “Woof—Woof—Woof—”

A sudden gust of wind snuffed out the candle.

Cloaked in deep shadow, Wirt emerged from his trance. He opened his eyes.

“He’s back,” said Elmo, not meaning Wirt, but Spooky, and quite calm about it.

“Oh, boy. Where—?” asked Bernard, eagerly peering all about.

Wirt used the momentary distraction to reach for something concealed beneath the table, something the three connivers had earlier concealed for when it would be needed. Now was the time. The shifting shadow of a caged dog appeared on the wall. Bernard blanched. Elmo found it necessary to restrain him.

“Spooky, are you here?” asked Bernard.

The shadow became more vivid.

Bernard shook free and bolted to the wall, hugging and kissing the shadow dog. A growl from behind suddenly brought him to his senses. He slowly turned. “Spooky, is that you—?”

What he saw was the caged goblin, Pyrite, but in his delirium he failed to recognize the creature for what it was. Bernard lunged, hefted the cage, and tried to kiss the goblin through the bars. Pyrite snarled, lunged, and buried her fangs in the boy’s neck, drawing blood. Bernard screamed and crashed backwards, dropping the cage and knocking over the candle. The others, including Wirt, dove for cover behind their kegs.

Elmo retrieved the wax cylinder and placed it back on the table. Long moments passed before the candle flickered back to life.

Deeply shaken, Wirt and Duffy slowly emerged from their hiding places. Bernard lay sprawled on the floor.

Its door wide open, the goblin cage stood empty.

The three boys turned to Bernard. Even in the dim light, they could see the marks on his neck.

The others fumbled in the near dark, coming to his aid.

“You okay?” asked Duffy.

“I’ve seen my Spooky,” said Bernard, all teary smiles. “He’s gonna be fine.”

Turning, they saw the smirking goblin sitting at the foot of the stairs.

Wirt scooped up the candle and hurled it at the creature, but she dodged it and nimbly bounded up the stairs. Pausing there, she turned to the foursome. The boys leapt aside as an overturned

keg clattered down the stairs and flattened the table. Yowling in triumph, Pyrite vanished through the open door.

“Next time I see you—you’re sandwich meat!” yelled Wirt.

Bernard, finally realizing he had been duped, began to cry.

Later that day, between classes, Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy tried to repair some of the damage they had inflicted, but Bernard would have none of it. A thick, unsightly tuft of wool covered one side of his neck.

“Bernard, c’mon. It’s only a little demon hickey,” Wirt tried to assure him.

“You guys tricked me. Real pals wouldn’t do that,” huffed Bernard. His eyes were dull and empty. Behind them, something had gone missing, something waiting to be replaced.

“We were only trying to make you feel better,” said Duffy, sounding as if he meant it.

“I’m sorry for what we did when Mercury was in retrograde, Bernard,” said Elmo, also sounding truly sorry. He was referring to the fact that when they tried to trick him, the planet Mercury *had* been in retrograde, which is an astrological expression, the kind of detail the young genius was apt to have taken note of. He draped an arm across Bernard’s shoulder, but the wounded boy shook it off. “With friends like you, who needs friends?” he asked, which was not really a question, but an utterance of his deep hurt and disdain.

Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy shrugged and moved ahead without him. No sooner had they passed from view than Bernard was suddenly yanked into a classroom doorway. Tumbling over chairs and desks, he came to rest in front of the empty goblin cage.

“Don’t hurt me—don’t hurt me—I’ll be your friend,” Bernie cowered, peering all around, assuming the goblin was still somewhere nearby.

But it was Muttnaldo standing over him.

“You and those wiz-wusses let my lucky puppy escape,” Muttnaldo threatened, assuming a spell-casting stance. “And now you’re going to suffer for it.” He cast some torturous spells that spun the boy around, but otherwise had little effect. Quick as a flash, Bernard spun back and let forth a fierce, inhuman growl. The emptiness behind his eyes had been replaced with a dull glint. “You want to go to hell or not?” asked Bernard.

Muttnaldo froze in disbelief.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AWAKENINGS

Mocha, the Chocolate Wizard, drifted back and forth giving instruction in the fine art of levitation. He was floating six feet off the wooden floor.

“And now, for one last diddle—A floating man’s riddle—If the air is too thick on a dragonfly’s wings, and the sun too low when a bumblebee stings—Then how do you float with a fly in your throat—?”

A dozen students sat in their chairs suspended at various levels throughout the classroom. Wirt and Muttnaldo levitated at equal height near the rafters. Muttnaldo was the only one to raise his hand.

“Muttnaldo—” said Mocha.

“If one *does* float with a fly in one’s throat, one cannot descend till the bug’s bitter end,” rapped Muttnaldo.

“Correct once again, my brilliant young pupil,” beamed Mocha.

Muttnaldo smiled smugly.

“No more class for today, pupils,” said Mocha. “You may run out and play.”

The students looked down, uncertain of how to descend.

“Class dismissed!” said Mocha, clapping his hands.

Eleven students came crashing to the floor.

Wirt, dangling from a ceiling beam, released his grip, lightly dropped in front of Muttnaldo, dusted his hands, and took a bow.

On the Academy playing field, Wirt and Duffy wielded mallets, batting around a flameball, the ball exactly as it sounds, no more, no less, than a flaming ball. Elmo sat nearby beneath a tree studying. Bernard strolled between them.

“Hey, Bernie. Wanna play some flameball?” shouted Wirt.

Duffy batted the blazing ball toward Bernard. It ricocheted off his boot and sped toward Wirt. Bernard appeared not to notice.

“Having a weenie roast tonight, Bernie,” shouted Duffy.
“Sure be nice if you’d help us pig out.”

Bernard ignored him.

“I’m cooking,” said Elmo, not looking up from his book.

Bernard still did not respond.

“C’mon, Bernard,” said Muttnaldo, approaching across the field. “We’ve got a lot of studying to do.”

The trio looked on as the two walked off together.

Soon, they disappeared behind a hedge. Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy followed and peered through the shrubbery. The bad boy was yelling at the bulky boy. Muttnaldo slapped him. Bernard stood his ground and let forth a demented growl.

The trio of Peeping Toms glanced at each other and raised their eyebrows. And if the reader is not already familiar with the expression ‘Peeping Tom,’ which I assume to be the case, allow me to explain. The term, which had only recently come into use, refers to a tailor named Tom in the legend of the noblewoman

Lady Godiva, who watched the fair lady, covered only in her long hair, riding naked on her horse, in protest of the excessive taxes her husband imposed upon his tenants. Now you know.

Some leagues away to the south, moonlight shone upon a graveyard littered with crumbling tombstones, stone statuary, and cracked urns. The Baroness Pyrite squatted atop the handle of a gravediggers spade. Tilting her head to the moon, she began to howl. A vault door creaked on its hinges and slowly began to open. A moldering hand slowly poked through. Red-rimmed eyes peered from the pitch dark. Satisfied, the goblin smirked and flapped away into the night.

Back at the Academy, Elmo raced full-tilt toward a full-length mirror positioned in the middle of the gymnasium. About to smash into it, Rust, the senile wizard, tossed him a magic wand. Elmo caught it in mid-flight and, executing a perfect wand-wield, magically flew through the mirror and vanished.

Each of a dozen students performed the drill, likewise catching a wand and disappearing through the mirror.

Finally, it was Wirt's turn. A running start, arms pumping, he ran pell-mell toward the burnished glass. Rust groped in the folds of his robe, searching for another wand. Unfazed, the boy mimed catching an imaginary wand and improvised a perfect wand-wield. The mirror shattered, hurling him to the parquet floor! Rust scooped up the wand and tossed it to the stunned boy.

Four days travel from the Academy, if one happened to own a horse or a mule, much longer if on foot, Pyrite hunkered in the night rain pelting a ruined monastery, all crumbling walls and cloisters. Flapping her stubby leather wings, she craned her scrawny neck and croaked a summons. Moments later, pale vapor oozed from the chapel belfry, twice circled the bell tower, and took form as a hideous death's head apparition. The goblin howled with sinister joy when the phantom followed her point and wove away into the deluge, like a great fish swimming in a sea of night.

High on the edge of a promontory, the medieval landscape stretching away below, the Academy looming behind, Muttnaldo and Bernard sat cross-legged on a richly patterned carpet, one the Academy had obtained from the fabled lands far to the mysterious East: a place of mummies, "open sesame," humpbacked horses, and pyramids. Gingernob, teaching a class, nodded. Muttnaldo raised his arms skyward. The carpet slowly began to rise, first an inch, then a foot, then a yard. The outlaw lowered his arms and pointed directly ahead. The airborne carpet maneuvered graceful as a hawk and joined several other student piloted rugs.

Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy, each gripping the edge of a triangle shaped carpet, ran toward the cliff edge. Wirt hauled himself

aboard, followed by Elmo, while Duffy clung to the fringe. Wirt pulled him aboard a moment before they, too, were airborne.

Soaring above bright yellow quiltwork pastures, blue ribbons of brook and stream, and the deep green of old growth forests, the billowing carpets zigged and zagged, banked and veered, tacked and dipped. Below, toy ploughmen and teamed oxen worked the land, and pint-sized shepherds tended their flocks. Lilliputian orchards blossomed in the sun. The hamlet of Hellsborough played hide-and-seek as it appeared and vanished between and beneath frothy clouds. Peering over the sides, the three boys saw their miniature selves reflected in a farmer's pond, then a lake. A wedge of curious geese flapped alongside, honked and hissed, the sound not unlike that of closing a rusty door, and went about their business.

Muttnaldo's carpet suddenly emerged from a cloud and angled sharply toward the trio of young aviators. About to collide, he laughed maniacally, suddenly banked, and zoomed away. Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy veered hard and held on tight, but it was too late. Losing his grip, Elmo spilled overboard, landing in a patch of moldy pumpkins. Off-balance, Duffy also tumbled overboard, fortunate to have a haystack break his fall. Wirt held on until the bitter end. Flapping out of control, the capsized carpet spilled the boy into a farmer's pigsty.

Away to the west, behind a screen of bleak hills, a cauldron bubbled in a misty glade deep in a haunted forest: a rowdy

hobgoblin campout. Pyrite landed overhead in the branches of a gnarled and mossy oak. Of the hobgoblins, one of their number tossed her a meaty bone. Pyrite gnawed and grunted at her lesser cousins, speaking their frightful language. Soon, the ungainly creatures began to dance, faster and faster around the cauldron, their whirling bodies becoming a blur, until they disappeared in the swirling mist.

Once more at the Academy, Cobalt stood before a classroom of students bent over their exams. He turned over a large hourglass. The head wizard paused to scrutinize his pupils before leaving the classroom.

Wirt sat at his desk, squinting at a sheet of velum, a smooth sheet of thin animal skin used for writing on. He glanced furtively at Elmo's test and began to copy his answers. Sensing a presence over his shoulder, the cheater slowly turned. A pair of eyeballs hovered before his face. Caught in the act, the boy swallowed and pulled a face. The velum floated off the desk and hung suspended there. Slowly, Cobalt's face and limbs began to materialize. The Blue Wizard's disembodied hands ripped the boy's test in two.

At about the same time, Pyrite perched on a fence post beside a narrow, rutted lane. Away in the distance, a bone white orb of night shone over the unsuspecting hamlet of Hellsborough. The goblin craned her neck, stretched her jaws, and howled like a

werewolf as the Forces of Evil, those that were airborne, wove through the night sky. Others of their ilk, an apparitia-militia of the soulless and possessed, slogged and shambled up the muddy lane—long columns of ghouls, fiends, bogeymen, gremlins, succubus, banshees, poltergeists, wraiths, and nondescripts, including many that had never been named or seen before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DEAR WIZARDS

A perfect square, like a checkerboard: ten rows of ten, the student body had once again assembled in the quad, the statue of the Unknown Wizard towering behind them.

The class rankings had changed:

Muttnaldo had advanced to number 2, bested only by Elmo at number 1. Wirt now stood at number 66. Alabaster polished the marble slab at the base, buffing the boy's name to a high gloss. The faculty moved among them applying badges of merit to their gowns.

Elmo stood proud, his gown already bedecked with dozens of badges—moons, stars, suns, and other celestial bodies. Gingernob applied the boy's third comet and warmly congratulated him.

Muttnaldo stood erect, dozens of badges also adorning his gown. Turf awarded him a total eclipse.

Duffy beamed as Bittersweet awarded him a planetoid.

Bernard had earned only a single half moon. Crocus removed the badge and replaced it with a crescent. Bernard lightly growled.

Wirt, too, now displayed a respectable number of badges. Rust nodded his approval, searched his peak for a badge, but came up empty. The wizard tore an orb of night off his own robe and secured it to the boy's gown.

The first rays of the new day shone upon the Academy walls. Somewhere a rooster crowed. Away in the distance on the outskirts of Hellsborough, a lone figure halted on the trestle bridge. Adjusting the bulging sack slung across his shoulder, he proceeded. Soon he arrived at the wide stone steps below the great gate. Removing the sack, he bent and paused for breath. Somewhere else, a milk cow mooed. Hefting the sack, the citizen rapidly spun it round and round over his head and let it fly, sending it sailing over the gate.

On the other side, Alabaster absentmindedly swept autumn leaves from around the statue of the Unknown Wizard. Suddenly, something fell from the sky and was nabbed by the statue's outstretched hand. The janitor climbed the monument to retrieve the overstuffed sack. But doing so, it ripped open, spilling its contents—hundreds of envelopes of all shapes and sizes. A blast of wind began to scatter them. The mute janitor chased them down one by one.

Later that same day, the eight wizards sat in a great circle in the faculty lounge, each reading a letter from the great pile in front of them. Gingernob tossed his letter back onto the pile.

“Ask me, the entire community's overcome by some psycho-apparitional fantasy,” he said.

“Must say, I quite agree,” said Crocus, who then sneezed. “No doubt only another Hellsborough hallucination. No doubt whatsoever.” He sneezed again.

“If we rid them of their poltergeist, our service should be highly priced,” Mocha rapped, super fast.

“A direct violation of the wizard’s code!” Turf grimly stated.

“Could be a hoax,” said Bittersweet meekly.

Mulberry chuckled. “That it could, that it could. Remember the case of the farmhouse phantom? It turned out to be loony Joe, the miller’s son, dressing his moocow as a phantom hellephant. Tricked us pretty good he did.”

Rust snapped to attention. “That heifer was possessed!”

“This matter should not be taken lightly,” said Turf, upset. “We must investigate.”

“Minor nightmarish disturbances are not uncommon. I propose a drill,” said Cobalt. “We send our pupils for their first taste of community service. Hands-on experience.”

All but Turf muttered their agreement. “Nonsense. These powers may be more than they can handle,” he said.

“If they require assistance, we shall lend a hand,” said Cobalt. He turned to the other wizards. “All in favor—”

All but Turf raised their wands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LEVITATING PIES

That very evening, having passed through the Academy gate, its thick wood and heavy iron doors now bolted tight behind them, its towers looming behind, the student body strode down the winding road to the hamlet of Hellsborough. Away and below in the distance, shrouded in fog, the town appeared quite peaceful. Here and there, dotting the night, windows glimmered with warm rectangles of pale candlelight.

Wirt was among the few who had dared to question why they should test themselves on a black and moonless night, when the better course would be to wait until daylight to go about their dire business. The wizard's twofold answer was simple and direct: upon graduation, much of a student's work when entering the workaday world would be conducted under the cover of night, so it stood to reason that it was best to practice then. It was further reasoned that the vermin they were about to confront favored the dark and were seldom seen in the light of day. Had the young wizards ventured into the hamlet in broad daylight, there was little chance they would encounter the servants of the night.

Muttnaldo and Bernard led the way, while their classmates trailed behind. Muttnaldo champed at the bit, an expression meaning, then and now, anyone eager for action. Bernard's condition hadn't improved; if anything, it had gotten worse. He walked like a zombie, leaking drool, dripping snot, hair matted, eyes glazed.

The wrongdoer turned to his companion. “I don’t like *you*,” he sneered. “What makes you think I’m going to like your cronies?”

“You’re cut from the same tooth,” Bernard growled in a low, hellish voice.

“They mess with me, they’re dead,” Muttnaldo threatened.

“They’re *already* dead,” Bernard reminded him, although at this point it was becoming hard to understand him.

“Then they’ll be double-dead,” Muttnaldo gloated. “Hope I don’t confuse a spook for a classmate. Could get messy,” he sniggered.

Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy lagged behind the main body. Duffy had the shakes, nervously reading a letter he had taken from the folds of his gown.

“Dear Wizards—

My mommy and daddy are having horrible fights. They’ve never liked each other, but now it’s different because my daddy’s been dead for eight years.

Signed, Fatherless Child.”

“Dear Fatherless. What goes on between your mom and dad, regardless of his stiff status, is none of your business,” Wirt advised the troubled child. “If you can’t cope, relocate.”

“Sound advice, my friend,” said Elmo. “If you don’t make it as a wizard, you may just have a future as an advisor to the mentally discombobulated.”

Duffy crumpled the letter and was about to toss it.

“I’d save that,” said Elmo. “Your first assignment, something to treasure. Someday you’ll want to show that to your kids.”

Duffy reconsidered, carefully refolded the letter, and tucked it inside his gown. “But what if I can’t handle the assignment?” he asked. “Heck, I’ve never even squashed a stink bug.”

“We’re not dealing with roaches, Duff. We’re dealing with paranormal trash,” Wirt reminded him.

But Duffy remained unconvinced. “Still, it’s going to be tough slaughtering lost souls,” he whined, and appeared he was about to turn back.

“It’s the stuff that makes wizardry such a happening profession,” Wirt declared.

“Feel better now?” asked Elmo, patting Duffy on the back.

But Duffy most certainly did not feel better.

Having crossed the spindly timber bridge spanning a blue-black river (as is often the case today, nearby a small town there was almost always a bridge, since most towns were built along a stream or river), the student body cautiously entered the hamlet. The narrow street snaking through the silent town appeared deserted. The air had become thick and clammy. The students broke up into twos and threes and spread out to investigate. Prowling the streets and alleys, they peered cautiously through windows and open doors, reluctant to take the plunge into the unknown.

Forwin and Milo followed close on the heels of Muttnaldo and Bernard. Muttnaldo was now wearing his thunder glove.

“Hey, mind if we tag along?” asked Forwin sheepishly.

Muttnaldo ignored him.

“We could act as decoys,” Milo offered timidly.

Muttnaldo quickly spun and assumed a firing position. The class wimps hit the ground as he opened fire on an overhanging shop sign and reduced it to splinters. Having blown on his smoking glove, he turned to the wimps.

“You’re crampin’ my style. Now get out of my face,” he sneered.

The wimps quickly scurried off and vanished in the dark.

Muttnaldo and Bernard exchanged a calculating glance.

Meanwhile, Wirt and Duffy guardedly moved down the main street. They pivoted right, left, and twice right again. Elmo walked backwards covering their rear.

“So, where do we start?” Duffy whispered, his voice quacking.

“Potluck,” Wirt whispered back. “The choice is ours.”

“That’s an adult decision,” said Elmo.

“How about that pie shop?” suggested Wirt, pointing to a sign over the door to a bakery.

The threesome turned to the bakery window where several pies hovered about like flying saucers.

“Seems as good a place as any,” said Elmo.

They slowly approached the window and peered inside.

“Hmmm, levitating assorted pies,” said Wirt.

Duffy pointed to a hovering pie and smacked his lips. “There goes a strawberry one,” he said.

“There goes a gooseberry,” said Wirt.

“And a blackberry,” said Elmo.

Testing the door and finding it unlocked, the three cautiously entered. No sooner three steps inside than they were under assault. The boys ducked and dodged as pies of different flavors zoomed past their heads, spun, and zoomed past again. Duffy dipped a finger into a pie as it whizzed by, licked it, and liked it. “Yum, yum, lemon, delicious,” he said, smacking his lips.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Wirt dared to coax.

But there was no sign of any being or non-being. The boys had just begun to lower their guard when a sudden jolt rocked the brick oven. Having taken a moment to recover from their fright, they approached. They peered at each other, uncertain of what would happen next.

Elmo nodded to Wirt who knocked, knocked, and knocked again on the oven door. “Better come out, ‘cause we’re not coming in,” said Wirt.

There was no answer.

“Chances are, if something’s in there it’s going to have a very bad temper,” Elmo cautioned.

Wirt had placed a hand on the heavy iron latch, but quickly withdrew it.

“Hot, too, I’ll bet,” Duffy added, a moment too late.

Quickly stepping back, they peered around the dim shop for something they might use to open the oven door. An iron poker with a hooked beak caught Wirt's eye. Wielding it like a sword, he stood back, unlatched the door, and slowly drew it open. The boys shuffled forward and peered inside. The wide, gaping mouth appeared empty. Wirt boldly jammed the poker around inside. Iron clanged and sparked against brick. He was about to take a final poke when a wrathful growl echoed from deep within. The brick walls suddenly began to shudder and break apart. A ball of fire bearing the face of a demon belched forth. The three made a mad dash for the door while custard pies—lemon, chocolate, and raspberry—pelted them from all directions. The oven exploded in their wake, shattering the window and showering the street with flaming bricks and custard filling, hurling the boys to the ground.

Staggering to their feet, they shook the smoking brick dust from their gowns. Duffy wiped a mask of lemon-flavored custard from his face, then sniffed and licked his fingers. A stray dog emerged from the dark and began to lap his face. Duffy giggled and nudged the critter away.

It was time to move on. The three warily followed the curve of the street. They paused beside a butcher's shop where sides of beef and strings of sausages swayed eerily in the window. This time, having learned their lesson, the boys kept their distance and moved past without pausing to investigate.

Several shops and houses further along, the hood began to take on a supernatural life; lights flickered, doors and windows

opened and creaked shut, some with a whisper, some with a bang. Shop signs tore from their hinges and crashed to the cobblestone street. Beams of pale, vaporous energy wove from structure to structure, leaving ghostly trails in their wake.

The boys stopped and stared at each other.

“About time to bag us some bogus beings,” Wirt boldly announced, after filling his lungs and slowly exhaling.

He slipped on his thunder glove and adjusted the fit, flexing his fingers, followed by Elmo and Duffy. The youngest member of their troupe felt something lick his hand and brushed it away. The stray had followed them to the butcher shop and beyond. “Scram, you blasted pooch,” Duffy ordered, without bothering to look. The dog paid the boy no mind and began to lick again. Annoyed, Duffy swatted it away, again without bothering to look. The good-natured lick was replaced with a soft snarl. The three boys froze, then looked, and instantly paled. The unholy sound coming from the beast’s throat was unlike that of any four-legged creature they had ever seen or heard. The lads bolted down the street, blasting at anything and everything that moved, the decomposing, fang-foaming, snapping hellhound lurching after them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

YOURS TO COMMAND

Two streets and an alley over, Muttaldo and Bernard stood outside a tavern from which, under better circumstances, one might have expected the sounds of drunken revelry, but instead it was deathly quiet. Bernard nodded to the door and led the way. Muttaldo followed. Once inside, he froze in his boots, gawking open-mouthed at what he saw.

“We have arrived,” Bernard spoke with a disembodied voice and a wave of his hand. No sooner spoken than they were met with a barrage of flasks and flagons.

Elsewhere in the hamlet, the fog had grown to a pea soup thickness. Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy crept down the street like young gunslingers. When they heard a wicked slurping sound, they spun, their gloves at the ready, but there was nothing to be seen.

“Remember what they taught us,” advised Elmo, greatly relieved that so far nothing had bitten his head off. “Every time we cast an anti-spell, it reduces our powers, virtually rendering us magically impotent.”

“When did we learn that?” asked Duffy, scratching his noggin.

“The man’s a genius. Don’t question him,” said Wirt. He turned to Elmo, shrugged, and spoke under his breath. “Must’ve missed that lecture.”

The fog had grown even thicker, if such a thing was possible.

“Let’s stick close till we pass through this muck,” said Wirt, peering up and down the street. The boys braced themselves and were soon swallowed by the swirling, grayish white. “Could be an ambush,” Wirt’s airy voice added. “Keep your wits and be ready to blow ‘em gutless.” Elmo and Duffy had already lost sight of him.

Soon, the earthbound cloud began to dissipate and Wirt found himself alone. He peered all around, but his companions were neither seen nor heard. “If you guys don’t move out, I work solo,” he called out bravely, though in truth, he had no intention of going on without them.

He called out again and again there was no response. He had decided to retrace his steps, to seek them out, when out of the smaze there appeared a monstrous, greenish, luminous, seven-toed footprint. A moment later it was followed by a second, the prints advancing straight toward him. Wirt moaned, took a stance, and pointed his glove at—nothing. “Freeze!” he shouted in a bold attempt at a commanding voice. He stood his ground as the prints advanced and passed directly through him, but there was no sensation of having just been walked through, although it would be hard to describe what that might feel like. Dumbfounded, he lowered his weapon, tilted back his peak, and scratched his chin. His eyes followed the seven-toed procession

as it tromped through the muck of a garden fronting a storybook cottage, squashing cabbages, cucumbers, and a solitary pumpkin, after which, again to his great wonder, they passed directly through the barred door. As to whether it really was barred was anyone's guess, but surely if someone were still inside it must be under lock and key.

No doubt you must be thinking that the sane and sensible thing would have been to turn his back and flee to the safety of the Academy as quickly as his legs could carry him, but the boy did no such thing. And why, you ask, knowing what we know of him, would he risk life and limb to remain in that forsaken place? The answer was rather simple: it had little to do with courage and duty. You may remember that when passing through the hamlet on his return from the quarry where he had found his crystal, he had briefly stirred the attention of a young damsel of unsurpassed beauty. He remembered the window boxes ripe with summer flowers and the trellis overgrown with ivy.

But now he wondered, had the damsel fled the hamlet like most everyone else, or was there some chance she had stayed behind to defend her property? Unlikely to be sure, but if so, then perhaps he could be of service. It was, after all, his duty as a young wizard in training, or so he tried to convince himself.

Wirt crossed to the cottage and banged the heavy copper clapper fashioned in the shape of a woodpecker. There was no response. He knocked again but still no one came. Turning the knob, he opened the door, just a smidge, and peered inside.

“Hello—? Anyone home—? Hello—?” he spoke, receiving no reply but not really expecting one.

The door creaked open further.

The view revealed little, only the glow of dying embers in an open hearth and a trail of luminous footprints leading to a brief flight of stairs where they ascended and disappeared through a square hole in the ceiling.

No sooner had he stepped inside, when he was stunned by a blow to his head. Wirt wobbled, turned, and briefly spied his attacker, after which he stupid-smiled and sank to the floor.

Elsewhere, in the tavern, shattered casks rolled slowly back and forth across the wooden floor flooded to a depth of several inches. The stench of spilled mead filled the air.

Arrogant and certain of himself as ever, Muttnaldo stood atop the bar where he paced, aiming and threatening with his glove. “They come any closer, they’re stains,” he mocked for Bernard’s amusement. The room was packed with a melting pot of drunken ghouls, apparitions, assorted fiends, and the generally undead, a truly disgusting lot. For the most part, the gross assembly made no sound, though a few were prone to the gnashing of teeth, a sound unpleasant enough when performed by humans, but doubly so when performed by an unruly troupe of the possessed. Some groped at the pompous boy, slipping, sliding, and tripping over one another, while he somehow managed to elude their fumbling grasp.

“Fear not, they will not harm you,” Bernard sniggered.

Muttnaldo took no chances and fired a warning shot into the air. A charred wooden beam fell at his feet but he sidestepped it easily.

“Foolish boy,” said Bernard. “Why destroy what is yours to command?”

Muttnaldo didn’t understand.

“They only want to obey. You need only say the word,” Bernard explained impatiently. The odious creatures had shown no interest whatsoever in the drooling, freaky, glassy-eyed Bernard. Somehow, they sensed he was already well on his way to becoming one of their own.

Muttnaldo thought for a moment, then barked a single word. “Dance!”

There was no music and no musicians present, but the ghouls obeyed and began to stumble dance and slosh about the tavern, heads lolling, arms flailing, legs tangling.

“Freeze!”

The dancing ghouls stopped, their limbs in frozen motion like mannequins Muttnaldo had once seen in the window of a millinery shop. All froze, that is, except one, and Muttnaldo, true to his threat, and without hesitation, blew it to smithereens.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WREEK THE MEEK

Wirt awoke supine on a narrow bunk. Except for the time spent in his Academy bed, he could not remember ever having slept so soundly. Once, long ago, he had burgled a wealthy magistrate's home while the man traveled to the city on business, and had decided to make himself comfortable until he returned. There were a number of beds from which to choose, each soft and freshly laundered, including a four-poster fit for a king, and he had tried them all, but had spent several wakeful nights wondering when the magistrate might return and catch him off his guard.

Gradually, he became aware of how badly his head was throbbing. Even in the dim candlelight, the first thing one was bound to notice was the egg-sized lump beneath the damp cloth covering his brow. Perhaps it *was* an egg, but if so, how did it get there? Had it been left by some short-sighted bird that had flown through the door and laid an egg while he slept? But if an egg, it was highly unlikely that the bird had also covered it with a damp cloth.

The boy bolted upright when he heard the sound of a cabinet crashing to the floor. Pewter plates and saucers rolled all about, one of them nearly as big as a knight's shield rolling as far as the bed where it clattered in descending circles until it came to rest.

The cloth fell away and revealed there was no egg, but rather, an egg-sized knot caused by the blow to his head.

The disturbance had been going on for some time, but Wirt had been unaware of it. It was only the crash of the cabinet that had brought him to his senses. Peering about he saw the room was a blight of broken chairs and benches, an overturned table, and a shattered vase that once held a bouquet of sunflowers, as if a great wind had passed through while he slept.

He drew back quickly as an airborne poltergeist in the shape of a mummified death's head streaked from the shadows, whooshed into the fireplace, and shot up the chimney.

Only then did a familiar figure, this time wielding a frying pan, which was not the case on their first and second meeting, step into the firelight. Petunia moved to the bed and gazed down on him.

"You're darn lucky I didn't bop you harder," she said. "You'd have been one dead wizard school candidate. And now, if you don't mind, I have another unwelcome hellion to deal with."

"Hey, no problem, that's what I'm here for. I'm your exterminator," Wirt boasted, his voice weak as he tried to rise, but instead sank back on the goose down mattress.

"Big wow," said Petunia. "I should've known when I sent for help they'd send me a 'wirtless' wizard."

Wirt flinched at the insult and moved his hands to cover his head as she raised the frying pan, the boy not realizing she had bigger fish to fry. Turning, she started for the stairs and was about to creep up them when the invisible thing that had made the luminous seven-toed prints began to descend. When they reached

the bottom, she swung with all her might, but since there was nothing solid to hit, the intended strike was a solid miss. The silent prints paid her no mind, tread back through the closed door, and disappeared into the night.

Petunia turned to Wirt. “Now, you too, get lost.”

Wirt shrugged as if her words had no effect, though in truth, they stung like a wasp. “Okay, fine, so you don’t need my help. But when that demonic slug takes possession of your bod, anything we had going is over.”

Petunia dragged him to his feet, none too gently, steered him to the door, and slammed it shut behind him. Above and behind, an unsettling sound came from the attic. Frying pan in hand, she slowly made her way up the stairs.

Outside, Wirt slouched away from the cottage. “Ungrateful wench, let her rot. I wouldn’t rescue her for nothin,” he consoled himself.

Nearby were Forwin and Milo who had only just recovered from a fearful encounter with what they took to be a hellcat of monstrous size, but was really nothing more than a common tomcat following the scent of a rat. Wirt approached and was about to ask how the two had fared when a horse and headless rider emerged from the dark and passed between them. The boy was not much surprised because such things, no matter how odd, peculiar, or unearthly, no longer surprised him. He snapped out of his wounded stupor when he heard Petunia begin to scream!

He spun and bolted to the cottage.

Once inside, there being no sign of Petunia, something warm and sticky landed on his head. He peered up. Another drop landed on his nose. Strands of thick, greenish mucous were drip, drip, dripping from between the rafters.

Wasting no time, he bounded up the stairs, taking them three at a time. Moments later, thundering rounds of glove fire erupted from overhead, meaning the attic.

And here we must leave him for a moment while we see what was happening to Muttnaldo and Bernard.

Outside the infected tavern, two figures emerged from the fog.

“You’re disgusting,” said Muttnaldo, for the pure and simple reason that he found Bernard disgusting. It also annoyed him that a buffoon should be his guide through the dark and mysterious temptations of the underworld. He took out his frustration by boxing the boy behind the ear. Bernard growled and displayed a mouthful of sticky fangs, but Muttnaldo, like Wirt, was no longer impressed. The two stopped and peered back to whence they’d just come.

Muttnaldo took a stance, his glove ready by his side.

The two bad boys waited.

Soon, a shuffling shape took form in the fog.

Muttnaldo held steady.

Bernard purred in anticipation.

Drawing closer, the shape revealed itself to be one of the tavern patrons: a former juggler who was now one of the undead.

He had only that evening arrived after being summoned from a graveyard away to the West. Only the day before, he had been struck by lightning while performing at an outdoor festival. When the crisped and blackened jester was almost upon them, Muttnaldo whipped the gloved hand from his side and incinerated him for the second time in as many days.

More of the blundering ghouls began to appear. Being such easy targets in no way persuaded the graceless company to retreat (as already mentioned, they showed no interest whatsoever in the devil boy, since he was well on the way to becoming one of their own) and soon a bunch of them lay scattered about like bowling pins on a village green. Muttnaldo made a game of it, enjoying the merriment of ducking and dodging their grasping arms, all the while laughing his crazed laugh while blasting them to kingdom come.

And still they staggered from the fog.

Muttnaldo made quick sport of one and all.

Only a few of the ghouls remained when Bernard pointed toward the nearby cottage.

“Wreck the meek,” he growled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SMOKE RINGS IN THE DARK

Petunia crouched behind an enormous wooden chest in a dim corner of the small, cramped attic, an untidy space piled with extra furnishings and bric-a-brac, all cloaked in layers of dust. She still clutched the frying pan, but whatever had caused her to scream was now gone.

Wirt, his glove still smoking, stood proud and confident in a pool of moonlight in the center of the room. There was barely room to stand without his peak brushing against the overhead beams. The ceiling was riddled with ragged, gaping holes.

Petunia emerged from her hiding place and sat on a cushion of plump flour sacks where Wirt joined her. It is not unusual to hear the Dark Ages also described as the Age of the Great Unwashed, the pleasures of perfume and aromatic dousing being unknown, but here, nothing could be further from the truth. The girl smelled like rose water, cloves, cinnamon, and freshly cut flowers, all combined.

Some time passed before Petunia spoke.

“Fine, then, you saved my life *and* destroyed my home. How can I ever thank you?” she said, but despite her caustic tone, she’d begun to view the young wizard with fresh, more welcoming eyes.

Wirt responded with an amorous wink.

To his great surprise, she returned a wink of her own.

“So, when you finally do become a wizard, where do you think you’ll set up your practice?” she asked.

“Hard to say,” answered Wirt. “However, some mellow, trouble-free, utopian suburb would be nifty. Why do you ask?”

Petunia snuggled close and smiled warmly. “Because, if you were the wizard in my town, I’d seriously consider moving,” she said, joking and without ill intent.

The smitten boy turned to the girl and gently brushed a mote of dust from her hair. A moment passed before the young wizard and the damsel slowly bent toward each other. The instant before their lips met, Petunia unleashed another scream.

Startled, Wirt’s eyes bugged.

Peering over the maiden’s shoulder, he saw the cause of her alarm—a ghoulish arm reaching through the pockmarked ceiling, attempting to snatch her. Oh, flummox, the fiends were on the roof!

Wirt shifted his gaze.

Another groping arm was reaching through to snatch him.

The ceiling was alive with writhing octopus arms and hands, many of them missing fingers, while others had been reduced to little more than rotting stumps. These were the animated corpses Bernard had spared from Muttnaldo’s glove, in order that they might “wreck the meek!” The mutants had put the trestles adorning the cottage walls to good use. Not all the undead and their ilk were able to pass through closed doors.

Clutching the damsel close, Wirt aimed his glove. Sparks dribbled and fizzed from his pointy finger and the glove grew

limp. He had used the last of his glove power. He tossed the weapon aside. Letting go of Petunia, he scrambled to the heavy trapdoor in the floor, and was about to raise it when it slammed shut, not unlike a hungry mouth. He tried many a casting spell to open it, but it was no use, none at all. His magical moxie had also been depleted.

He returned to the girl. Accepting their fate, the two huddled low and tight, barely able to elude those abominable, groping limbs. Soon it would all be over, all hope lost, the end drawn nigh. Straw thatching swirled in the moonlight shafting through the gaping holes.

“If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t be in this mess,” said Wirt, which was not entirely true, given that the odds against them were insurmountable, but still, the boy felt some responsibility for failing to rescue her. He was, after all, on his way to becoming a wizard, if only in training. Promising much, he had delivered nothing.

“Well, I suppose that’s true,” said Petunia, “but kiss me anyway.”

She moved to kiss him again but he placed a finger to her pouty lips.

“When our lips meet—the heat of our smoldering passion could be enough to grill those ghouls,” said Wirt, making light of what was surely about to be the end of them.

“Sounds like our last and only hope,” said Petunia, dryly.

“Yeah, one of ‘em,” said Wirt, entirely missing her tone.

And so, closing their eyes, their lips met, each certain it would be their first and only time. When they parted, after what seemed an eternity, cones of starlight puddled the dusty furniture and what little could be seen of the floor.

The ceiling holes were empty!

The flailing limbs had been replaced by a multitude of twinkling stars.

The two stared longingly at each other until they heard a sound coming from the stairs below. The trapdoor creaked as it began to rise. This time, something was straining against it.

Closing their eyes, they joined their lips again, hoping to repeat the miracle. The trapdoor groaned on its hinges, then suddenly flopped open with a loud bang!

Petunia clung to Wirt as their eyes snapped open.

A tall, thin figure rose through the square opening.

A tense moment followed.

It was Alabaster, puffing on a fat cigar.

“Al—? Al!” questioned Wirt, all the tension of the previous hours seeping out of him. “If you’d gotten here a minute sooner you’d have been ghoulish stew.”

Alabaster clutched his broom, smiled, and tipped his peak.

“I took those spooks on—saved a damsel,” Wirt boasted as he clutched Petunia even tighter. “Yep, it’s been one heck of a night.”

The janitor nodded and began to neatly stack the furniture and to sweep the floor. Dust swirled and stung their eyes. The teens gagged and coughed and were forced to poke their heads

through a pair of recently vacated ceiling holes where they peered into the starry night. Once their heads were free and clear they saw something else of interest. Wirt grinned and gave a little wave. “How you doin’, fellas?”

Muttnaldo and Bernard stood in the street beneath the cottage eaves. Looking up, Muttnaldo presented a mix of rage and shock. Bernard looked merely dumbfounded.

“Jealous wimps,” said Wirt to Petunia.

Petunia grinned and they ducked back into the attic.

Moments later they heard the trapdoor thumping shut. Looking about, the small room was in perfect order. The furniture and bric-a-brac had all been neatly arranged. The years of dust had vanished.

Alabaster was also gone, his footsteps growing faint down the steps.

“Hey, Al, not so fast,” Wirt called out, but it was too late. “Man’s a wizard with a broom,” he added, turning to Petunia.

“So, where were we?” she asked, gazing dreamily while batting her eyes.

“Pretty sure I remember,” he answered, a twinkle in his eye. And so their lips touched again.

It was nearly dawn when the scattered hamlet folk began to return. Word of what soon came to be known as the ‘Battle of Hellsborough’ spread quickly. One by one the town folk emerged

from their hiding places among the humps and hollows beyond the town.

Altogether, there was much to be sad and much to be glad about. Everyone knew the events of the previous night could have been much, much worse. Some had suffered great damage to their homes and shops, but for the better part, most were spared the trouble of having to rebuild their lives. Where there were fires, they had been doused with water drawn from the village well. Here and there in the narrow streets and alleys lingering strands of flaming soot fluttered and swirled in the early light, like dawn fireflies. Where there was damage to homes and shops, the sounds of hammer against nail soon filled the air.

Other than the ceiling holes, which could be easily patched, and the loss of the cabinet and some other furniture, which could be repaired or replaced, Petunia's cottage was one of the few that had escaped largely unscathed.

The first rays of the new day saw a celebration of the young wizards unexpected, but decisive victory.

A great bonfire had been built in the town square. There the bodies of the undead and their ilk, those who were not phantoms, were gathered and tossed on the flames. The smell of cooking flesh carried all the way to the walls and turrets of the Academy, where it crept into the beards and nostrils of the wizard faculty. It took the better part of a week for Cobalt to rinse the stink from the tangled strands dangling below his pointy chin.

Wirt and Petunia observed the festivities through her riddled roof.

After some time they withdrew and sat side by side.

“You’re not such a bad magician yourself,” said Petunia, adding to Wirt’s earlier remark about the remarkable janitor. She was wearing Wirt’s peak at a cockeyed angle.

Wirt snapped his fingers and made to light one of the cigars Alabaster had left behind. More than likely, it had simply fallen from one of the janitor’s many pockets. On the boy’s third try, a small flame burst to life, long enough to ignite the tightly rolled tube of tobacco.

He settled back to savor his stogie.

Inhaling deeply, he coughed and exhaled a stream of vivid red smoke. Swirling, it took on the unmistakable shape of a fuzzy red heart. Petunia placed her head on his shoulder as he then blew a glowing stream of blue smoke. This time, it formed an arrow, sailed toward the wavering heart, passed through it, and vanished through a ceiling hole. The arrow continued to hold its shape for some moments, long enough to be seen by Muttnaldo and Bernard peering down through the blasted roof from their perch high on the limb of an overarching oak.

The misguided young pupil and the bedeviled boy raised their eyebrows and exchanged a conspiratorial glance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SACKED

The following morning the Academy was abuzz with excitement, unlikely claims, and outright lies as students heading for their classes relived their hell-night adventures.

Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy were gathered at the base of the statue of the Unknown Wizard.

“Until last night, I didn’t realize I was such a pacifist,” Elmo was saying.

Duffy turned to Wirt. “Yeah, after you ditched us, Elmo totally bailed. I had to do all the massacring. I must’ve blown up a hundred of those mean spirits.”

“A slight exaggeration, friend,” said Elmo, “but close enough.”

“Well, at least three,” said Duffy proudly, despite the greatly reduced number. He turned to Wirt. “Of course, nothing like what *you* did,” he said in awe of his classmate.

“Call it luck, call it skill, call it—” said Wirt. He was about to pat himself on the back some more, but Elmo cut him off.

“More appropriately, call it hogwash,” said Elmo, but it wasn’t meant in a mean way.

“You got sour grapes up your butt, or what? I was touched with untapped powers,” said Wirt, momentarily offended, but quickly changed his tone because they were all good friends. “We’re gonna make three excellent wizards.”

“We have finals in three weeks,” Duffy reminded him.

“We’re just gonna have to cram some maximum knowledge into our skulls, aren’t we?” said Wirt, all gung-ho.

Elmo and Duffy were unaccustomed to such enthusiasm from their friend.

Elmo turned to Wirt. “All right, spill. What *really* happened last night?”

Overhead, Cobalt and Turf were observing from a balcony.

“They all have something to be proud of,” said Cobalt.

“They performed—satisfactorily,” said Turf, always reluctant to give praise.

“Whatever are we going to do with you?” asked Cobalt, annoyed at Turf’s lack of generosity.

Behind them in the wizard’s lounge there came a knock at the door. Crocus went to answer it. After a brief exchange, Muttnaldo was ushered into the chamber.

The two wizards and the boy spoke in low whispers, so it was not possible to hear what was being said, but judging from their expressions it was clear that a matter of great, even grave, import was being discussed. Other members of the faculty joined them and the discussion became even more intense. Turf became adamant, returned to the balcony and, nodding, singled Wirt out.

“We must investigate,” said Turf, in a grim, no-nonsense way.

True to his word and to everyone’s great surprise—both faculty and students—Wirt had immediately begun to apply himself.

The day following the great, soon to become legendary ‘Battle of Hellsborough,’ while Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy were engrossed in their studies, they heard a solid knock at the study hall door. Wirt, without taking his eyes off his book, stepped to see whom it might be.

It was Alabaster, a look of deep concern etched on his face.

“No time to shoot the breeze, Al—got a ton of studying to do,” Wirt informed him. He was about to shut the door and return to his studies when the solemn janitor handed him a note. Wirt, who with Elmo’s help had learned to read a bit, unfolded it and read what was written there. The boy, full of himself, turned to his study mates. “The wizards want to see me,” he said, his eyebrows raised in a knowing way. Perhaps the wizards would reward him with a special commemorative badge, or perhaps a trophy matching the statue in the quad.

Elmo and Duffy, uncertain, glanced at each other.

Wirt and Alabaster walked side by side down a marble corridor in the faculty building.

“So, Al, what kind of special merit badge you think they’re gonna tack on me?” asked Wirt, still certain that something extra good was about to happen, because really, how could it not?

Alabaster gave no word or sign in response.

They approached the wizard’s chamber door. The janitor opened it and stepped aside so Wirt could enter. Alabaster remained outside and shut the door.

Inside the wizard faculty were waiting.

Wirt stepped toward them, anticipating their praise, or perhaps some monetary reward for his heroic performance during the battle of the previous eve. What happened next was something else entirely. Without warning, his most prominent badge was magically ripped from his gown. There was no time to react. In a flash, his second badge was torn away. Just like that, his third and final badge was removed.

Wirt stood shell-shocked.

Early the next morning the student body stood gathered in a circle surrounding the great statue. Alabaster observed from the bell tower overlooking the quad. Wirt, his wand tucked into the sleeve of his gown, his nearly finished crystal ball tucked under his arm, stood before the seated faculty.

Cobalt rose from his chair and stepped close. “Young Wirt,” he began solemnly, “you stand before us charged with violating the sacred code of wizardry.”

Each of the wizards rose in turn.

“Conduct unbecoming,” said Turf, in a hot-tempered way.

“Dereliction of duty,” said Gingernob while idly stroking his pet ferret.

“Outlandish antics,” said Rust, although it was clear that his mind was elsewhere, perhaps not even certain of the gravity of the occasion.

“Magical malpractice,” said Crocus, after he sneezed, wiped his nose with the sleeve of his gown, and sneezed again.

“Unspeakable behavior,” said Mulberry, munching a cluster of purple grapes.

“Juvenile delinquent,” said Mocha, super fast.

“Felonious felony,” said Bittersweet, averting his gaze.

“How do you plead?” asked Cobalt.

“Not guilty, mage, sir,” answered Wirt, shifting the sack to his other shoulder.

“Guilty!” said the wizards in one voice.

“A thorough review of your misdeeds leaves us with but one choice,” said Cobalt, ignoring the boy’s plea. “Forthwith, you are banished from this Academy and stripped of all magical powers.”

He gave a slight nod, indicating Muttnaldo to break rank and approach his classmate.

“Was she worth it, lover boy? Well, was she?” Muttnaldo taunted in a whispered voice.

Cobalt nodded again.

On the wizard’s signal, the tattletale, beaming a grim smile, relieved the boy of his precious wand and broke it across his knee. The two halves clattered to the cobblestones. The Blue Wizard signaled again. Next, Wirt’s crystal was placed in a gunnysack. Swinging the sack over his head, around and around, Muttnaldo smashed it to the cobblestones. The crystal shattered into untold numbers of shards.

Wirt winced.

Elmo flinched.

Duffy shed a tear.

Muttnaldo crossed to Bernard and handed him the sack. Having followed Muttnaldo's example, he passed the sack to the next student. The sounds of smashing crystal echoed off the Academy walls. Again the sack was passed. Again and again, Wirt heard his crystal being smashed.

The sack had made its way around to Duffy. He hesitated, looked at Wirt, and passed the sack to Elmo. Without hesitation, Elmo passed the sack to Bernard. The sack had come full circle.

"Ahhh, you're such a loyal friend, Elmostein," hissed Bernard.

Elmo threw an elbow into the roly-poly boy's gut, causing him to double over and empty his breakfast on the cobblestones.

Wirt and Duffy stifled a chuckle.

But Wirt's humiliation was not yet complete.

Cobalt stepped forward and stripped the boy of his peak and gown. The rough tunic in which he had arrived at the Academy was returned to him. Now he was forced to don it in front of everyone. Only then was his humiliation complete. Disgraced, he had been reduced to an ordinary civilian. The faculty and students, all but Elmo and Duffy, turned their backs on him. The disgraced student looked to Alabaster and gave a little wave, but the janitor did not wave back.

There was nothing now but to return to his former life, a vagabond, ever the black sheep, his future bleak. Wirt turned to face the gate. Elmo and Duffy broke rank and stepped to his side.

"Promise you'll visit when I get located," said Duffy.

“Say the word and I’ll walk out with you,” said Elmo.

Wirt embraced his pals. Tears streamed down Duffy’s cheeks.

“I’ll see you guys around,” said Wirt. To hear him say it, one would think that being booted from the Academy meant nothing to him, but it was only a feeble attempt to cover up his true feelings.

Muttnaldo stood waiting at the gate. “Now you really *are* a crystal-balless, worthless wonder,” he sneered as he handed Wirt the clinking sack.

“I’ll see *you* on the outside,” said Wirt, meaning it as a threat, not a forecast of a future casual encounter. Having stepped through the open gate, he heard it bang shut behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHARM SCHOOL DROPOUT

Wirt approached the outskirts of Hellsborough, the tinkling sack slung over his shoulder. The sun beat down on his peak-less head. His rough tunic had begun to itch. He would have preferred to avoid the hamlet altogether, but bounded by thick forests, there was no other way around. He thought it a good bet that the locals had already heard about his expulsion, but by far, the hardest part was the possibility that he might cross paths into sweet Petunia. Having passed over the river, he entered the hamlet. Two days had passed since the great ‘Battle of Hellsborough,’ but still the smell of acrid smoke hung heavy in the air. Many of the townsfolk were still out and about repairing their damaged homes and shops. The air rang with the clamor of hammer on nail. A gang of young townies stopped their rough antics and began to stalk him. Wirt turned and assumed a spell-casting stance, but this time no one was much impressed. Instead, they tittered, mocked, and pelted him with rotting vegetables. Befouled and bedecked in watermelon rind, rotten peaches, and turnip pulp, the boy held his tongue and moved on.

Further ahead, he paused before the pie shop window where earlier Elmo, Duffy, and he had dodged levitating pies and narrowly escaped the wrath of an oven born demon. Now, delicious, fresh baked pies—strawberry, gooseberry, and blackberry, again stood in neat, tempting rows. The aroma of newly baked bread wafted through the open door. The boy had

missed his lunch and his stomach grumbled. The baker's wife emerged, raised her broom, and shooed the penniless vagrant on his way.

Nearing the edge of town, the boy strode past Petunia's ivy-shrouded cottage. Window boxes again stood gay and bright. The pockmarked roof had been patched. Mercifully, the winsome lass was nowhere to be seen. He wondered whether perhaps she was nearby, but avoiding him, peering from behind a curtained window or shrub. Clearly, as with Elmo and Duffy, he would never see or speak with her again.

Soon, the hamlet fell behind and the dusty road stretched ahead. Dark, boiling clouds threatened in the distance. He was relieved at not having run into Petunia, but even here, his luck had abandoned him. Sensing a presence, he stopped and turned to look behind. There she was, a solitary figure standing in the road at the edge of town, gazing after him. There was nothing to be said. On the plus side, she didn't hurl anything.

Crestfallen, the dishonored former pupil turned his back and continued on his way.

By nightfall of the third day, he had not traveled so far that he was unable to see the mass of the Academy, but away in the distance, above its mountain fastness, a magnificent display of fire flowers blossomed in the night sky, illuminating its ramparts and towers. It pained him to think that some of his classmates and faculty might be celebrating his expulsion. He had no way

of knowing of course that a careless student had accidentally ignited a barrel of fireworks intended for the following days graduation ceremony, the resulting display now visible for miles around. He only knew that he dearly missed his friends, and dearly wished he were back among them. In any case, three days had passed, so it was unlikely that the pupils and faculty were only now rejoicing over his dismissal.

He had lost everything—his new friends, his girl, and his friendship with Alabaster. But what grieved him most was that he had thrown away a promising future.

Wandering about without aim or purpose, he had spent the days since being booted from the Academy in a deep funk. It occurred to the footloose lad that nothing had changed since being forced to leave the orphanage three summers before. Untethered and friendless, he would again be forced to rely entirely on his wits, each day uncertain of where he would lay his head or obtain his next meal. Better that he had never known the joys and comfort of friendship and a feather bed, for now, in their absence, his loneliness pressed doubly hard upon him, unlike any he had ever felt before.

On the fourth day, encamped in an abandoned barn, he had begun to collect the materials he would need to build a contraption that would end his misery.

Now he stood beside a clever junk sculpture cobbled together from a sickle, a weathervane, a wooden trough, a milk can, a wagon wheel, ladle, bucket, chains, ropes and pulleys, and other assorted odds and ends. A jug of wine lifted when passing

through the hamlet lay empty at his feet. A Billy goat chewing its cud, its white beard rustled by the wind, stood close by watching.

Wirt tossed aside his mallet and picked up a wooden ball.

Climbing a ladder on unsteady legs and placing the ball in the trough, the ball began to roll, triggering its first kinetic effect, a chain reaction of slowly cascading effects—ladle to bucket, chain to pulley, rat trap to wagon wheel—each link setting off another and another. Descending the ladder, the boy staggered to a wooden barrel.

The contraption continued to trigger.

He eyed the rusty, curved blade of a sickle poised above the chopping block. Rubbing his neck, he removed a folded scrap of paper from his tunic and tacked it to the barrel.

Rattling and prattling, the device would take some moments to complete its course, time enough for the boy to change his mind, but he was determined to meet his end. On his knees, craning his neck, he placed his head atop the barrel.

“Head—say good-bye to body,” he slurred.

The contraption continued.

He began to yawn.

A final thought occurred to him: the pain of knowing that no stone would mark his resting place and none would mourn his passing.

Snagged in its progress, the triggering suddenly stopped.

The boy had passed out cold.

Nestled in a mound of vermin infested hay, Wirt stirred to the hoot of an owl perched in the rafters. His head ached terribly. Insult to injury, a kilo of owl poop suddenly splattered his face. When he looked, after wiping his face, the owl was gone, replaced by the Baroness Pyrite picking her teeth with a feather. She belched. “Yummm-yummm—plump and juicy. How do you like *your* birds?” she croaked.

Wirt sat up, speechless as the creature whipped out the note explaining why he had decided to end it all. “At least you’re an honest fool,” she taunted.

She began to read: “Good for nothing—unworthy—vagabond—black sheep—wastrel—scalawag—” The goblin crumpled the note and tossed it. “Yes—yes—yes—and let me add something—pathetic—couldn’t even finish yourself—loser.”

“What’s a scalawag?” asked Wirt.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said Pyrite.

“You’re dead,” said Wirt, all woozy and frustrated.

Leaving the mounded hay, he scooped up the mallet and hurled it at the loathsome creature, but she merely chortled, easily dodged, and flapped to another beam.

“Correction. *You’re* dead,” the freak fired back. “How about I pick up where you left off—rapscallion—ne’re-do-well—scalawag—”

“Already used that,” said Wirt. He had been called a great many things in his life and was familiar with many of the words she taunted with, but some were entirely new to him.

“So I did,” said Pyrite, sounding more eloquent than her usual manner. The goblin suddenly swooped, knocking the already unsteady boy off his feet and tumbling back into the hay. Wirt found his legs and stalked the creature as she returned to the rafters, flapping from beam to beam.

“Whatever you think we had, it’s over,” said Wirt.

“Before you die, would you like to hear a *dead-time* story?” the beast jeered in a snappy comeback.

Wirt hurled a rusted cowbell, but again missed.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” the beast chortled, and so she began. “Once upon a time, there was a deep, dark hole in a fiery mountain. With me so far? Good.”

The foul being dodged a cow pie, the disc hard as plaster.

“Once, this hole was the womb of all evil. For thousands of years His Satanic Majesty ruled from atop His fiery peak, crushing His enemies with the greatest of ease.”

Wirt lifted himself from the hay, mounted a ladder, and began to climb toward the goblin’s perch.

““Until one day,” the goblin belched and continued, “Eight Young Wizards arrived to challenge His power. A shrewd but motley crew of imbeciles they were. Surrounding the peak, they began to cast their feeble spells. Skirmish and strife, combat and clash, assault and retreat, three years, nine months, and fourteen

days the struggle raged. Finally, without success, they grew weak and were about to submit.”

Wirt lunged, misjudged the distance, and again tumbled into the hay.

“*Then*, one day a stranger arrived. *He* was brilliant,” the villain continued, unable to conceal her envy. “It happened in a blinding flash—when it was over, the hole was sealed, His Satanic Majesty condemned to life in the Underworld. Make no mistake, it was the greatest, best ever, most sensational spell ever cast. Unfortunately, it was also his last—”

Now Wirt ceased to climb and hung on every word.

“What happened to this whiz-bang?” he asked, already half suspecting the answer.

“You don’t know?”

The astounding feat revealing the roots of the Academy blew his mind. The Eight had built a monument to the magician’s memory.

“The Unknown Wizard?”

The curtain on a great mystery had just been lifted, but Wirt was still unsure.

“The Academy, knucklehead.” She belched again. “You want to finish the story?”

Wirt fired another cow pie. It bounced off a beam and slammed into the infernal machine, renewing the chain reaction; ladle to tilting pail, pulley to pitchfork, wagon wheel to weathervane.

“His Satanic Majesty chose *me* to find His liberator,” the deformity boasted, full of herself. “Year after year I prowled the Academy halls for a wannabe warlock: one whose aims were as evil as my Master’s. Year after year I returned to Him empty-handed.” The abnormality paused, stared intently down at Wirt, and resumed. “Until—at last—”

“Hey, not me, meat puppy,” Wirt protested, suddenly turning defensive.

The horror howled with laughter.

“You? You’re no wizard!”

Wirt spear-chucked the pitchfork and missed again, instead impaling a rafter.

“Multnaldo’s my bad boy!” crooned the mutant.

“Mutt’s no wizard, either,” Wirt protested.

“After tomorrow’s graduation, he sure as hades will be.”

“Maybe I’ll stop him.”

“You’ll already be dead.”

Descending the ladder, the boy backed into a post, causing it to shudder. Several rafters came crashing down, pinning him to the ground.

The goblin continued her rant. “The only wizard with the genius to defeat the powers of darkness was your pal with the broom—”

“Alabaster?”

“*He* was the greatest!”

The infernal device had begun to trigger its final seconds.

The miscreation pried the pitchfork from where it was embedded in the beam, flapped her stubby wings, and settled atop the barrel. “End of story,” sneered the goblin, cocking the fork. “Time to die,” she gloated, certain of victory.

A loud clank disrupted the moment.

The brute looked up. Fear suddenly clouded her face. There followed a demonic squeal as the sickle whooshed.

Wirt winced in revulsion.

After a moment, he crawled from beneath the collapsed rafters. Dusting himself off, he looked down at the headless goblin’s sorry remains.

“That’ll teach her to mess with a charm school dropout,” Wirt said to the goat.

The goat bleated in agreement.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

YOUNG WIZARDS

The Academy year was drawing to a close. Proud parents, townies, and even a few visiting nobles, members of the gentry, and other aristocrats (a duke and duchess, an earl and countess, a viscount and viscountess) packed the bleachers from where they watched the graduation ceremony unfolding in the quad. A row of posh carriages and other means of transport stood to one side.

Elmo's parents were present. His father, a yeoman, meaning someone who owned his own land and farmed it himself, his mother a yeoman's wife, clapped and hollered with the best of them. As did Duffy's parents, his father a barber, his mother a barber's wife. Muttnaldo's father, employed as a moneylender, and Bernard's mother, a squat, hefty woman employed as a ditcher, meaning someone who dug castle moats, were likewise in attendance, although *their* sons had gone to some pains to avoid them.

The Eight-Wizard faculty stood aligned in a neat row, eight queues of students facing a wizard one on one, each graduate awaiting his turn. Simultaneously, the wizards each lightly touched the shoulders of their freshly laundered gowns with their wands. The student's gowns and peaks magically took on the color of the awarding wizard.

Duffy stood before Mulberry. The wizard smiled and touched the boy's gown with his wand. The gown slowly began

to transform into a vivid mulberry hue. When the transformation was complete, the wizard handed the boy a tightly rolled, ribbon bound diploma. Duffy, last to receive his parchment, beamed and returned to take his place beside Elmo.

The spectators broke into unbridled applause.

Petunia was also present, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Having last seen Wirt on his way out the hamlet, she could not help but wonder what had become of her young suitor. Would she ever see him again? She knew it was unlikely. Her friend Trudy, however, cheered wildly.

Muttnaldo glanced at Bernard and gave a sinister nod.

Alabaster, clutching his trusty broom, watched the ceremony from beneath the risers.

Cobalt stepped forward. The applause faded to silence. After a moment he spoke. "And now, it is with the greatest pleasure that we, the faculty of the Hellsborough Academy, present the wizard's choice for Outstanding Student of the Class of 999." Having said, he nodded to Muttnaldo.

Muttnaldo stepped forward to receive his due.

The wizards formed a crescent around him.

Students and spectators gave the boy a standing ovation.

Only Elmo, already cloaked in a blue gown, remained seated. Duffy, lost in the moment, jumped to his feet and began to clap, but Elmo angrily yanked him back to their bench.

Cobalt raised his arm, requesting silence. The audience sat.

As one, the wizards extended their wands and lightly touched Muttnaldo's gown. It responded with a full palette of swirling, iridescent hues.

Invited guests and students went mad.

Bernard's eyes widened with demonic intensity. His features began to warp and contort. "The powers of the black robe—," he murmured in a spellbound tone.

Muttnaldo turned to his cohort, who sneered as the colors of the bad boy's gown slowly bled together, first turning a sickly gray, then pitch black. The boy stared at the transformation and eased into a chuckle, building to a crazed laugh.

Stunned, wide-eyed, the wizards turned to each other and slowly backed away from the black-gowned miscreant.

"All is lost!" cried Cobalt, no longer his optimistic self.

"Most unusual," muttered Rust.

"What have we done?" asked Turf, blaming himself.

"An abomination," raved Crocus.

"Unimaginable," wailed Mulberry.

"The horror!" jabbered Gingernob.

"I knew it!" croaked Bittersweet.

Mocha failed to speak, because for once he was unable to think of a rhyme.

By this time, Bernard had nearly transformed into a goblin boy. As if sprung from a catapult, he leapt from his bench. "We must go now!" he snarled. "His Satanic Majesty awaits!"

Turning to face the statue of the Unknown Wizard, Muttnaldo slowly extended his arms. An unseen energy

emanated from his wriggling fingertips. The statue shuddered almost imperceptibly. Adjusting his stance, the energy became visible, like undulating waves of searing heat, blasting the statue. It began to teeter.

Students and spectators stood agog. A duke and dutchess swooned. Someone lost their lunch.

Muttnaldo intensified his beam.

The statue began to rock on its base.

“Stop this demonic traitor!” shouted Cobalt, snapping to his senses.

Spectators panicked and began to stampede for their wagons and carriages, the townies to the gate.

The wizards stood their ground and extended their arms, bony fingers wriggling, and cast a barrage of spells at the traitor’s back. But the power of the black gown repelled every volley. Mortified, the wizards began to slowly back away.

The statue toppled and came crashing to the cobblestones where it shattered, a clattering avalanche of disembodied arms, legs, and other body parts bouncing across the quad, like bronze tumbleweeds. The head rolled beneath the bleachers and came to rest at Alabaster’s feet. A geyser of underworld pollution swirled from the gaping hole that now replaced the statue’s base.

Muttnaldo whirled to face the retreating faculty. “Powerless cowards,” he gloated, smug as could possibly be. Adjusting his stance, he cast another blast, forcing them back across the quad.

Alabaster took it all in, but there was no mistaking the deeply troubled glint in his eye. He slipped away unnoticed.

Elmo and Duffy were swept along in the tide of students and townies pouring through the Academy gate. An empty, horse-drawn carriage careened between them and disappeared in the surge.

“We’re gonners!” Elmo shouted.

“Hey, we’re wizards!” Duffy shouted back. “Don’t you think we should maybe stay and save the world?”

“Duff, we’re gonna have trouble just saving our own hides,” said Elmo as they fled through the gate.

Behind, Muttnaldo, intoxicated by his newly realized power, gyrated like a lunatic. Something caught his eye.

It was Petunia, fleeing along with everyone else. She suddenly found herself hoisted and slung over someone’s shoulder. It was Bernard, bearing her kicking and screaming to Muttnaldo.

“A gift,” said Bernard proudly.

“Ah, my young hellbride,” gloated Muttnaldo, smacking his lips, but entirely misunderstanding Bernard’s intent.

“For His Majesty,” Bernard spat back.

Muttnaldo appeared not to hear, or perhaps was merely pretending. He leaned to Petunia for a kiss. Their lips met. Yelping, he suddenly staggered back, one hand clamped to his bleeding lip.

“Kiss me again, you’re brain salad,” threatened Petunia.

Bernard snorted in disgust.

Muttnaldo scowled at him, then waved his arm in a malevolent gesture, casting a spell over the girl. Petunia instantly went limp.

The three were alone in the quad now.

“Find them. Destroy our enemies!” commanded Muttnaldo.

“I must return to His Majesty,” said Bernard, turning to the gaping hole.

Muttnaldo delivered a stinging slap across the boy’s hideous face. “You weren’t invited to our business meeting,” he snapped. Shifting the girl to his own shoulder, he first adjusted her weight, then vanished down the steps to the underworld. Bernard was about to follow, but a blast from Muttnaldo quickly changed his mind.

While all this was happening, Alabaster entered his humble quarters, quickly strode to his armoire, and sprung the lock.

Viewed from Hellsborough, a mushroom cloud of noxious fumes cast a deep shadow over the Academy. By this time, our young hero had returned to the hamlet. The town’s narrow lanes and alleys were deserted, but now, on the outskirts, the entire populace came streaming pell-mell in Wirt’s direction. Carriages, wagons, mounted riders, and barefoot townies bolted past. Rats fleeing a sinking ship was the image that flashed into his mind, although in truth, he had never been on a ship, only a leaky rowboat hastily “borrowed” in the aftermath of one of his

not infrequent misadventures. The flimsy craft had sunk halfway across the river he was attempting to cross. He did, however, have considerable experience with rats. A nobleman's coach had lost one of its wheels and lurched wildly down the road, dispersing those who were fleeing, but also trampling some underfoot. Many of those surging across the trestle bridge were pushed overboard by those pushing from behind. Never before had so many attempted to cross at the same time and with such stamping of feet. Others saved themselves the bother of being pushed, and leapt or waded across the river of their own accord. The supporting timbers began to shudder and sway beneath the unaccustomed weight. Wirt had only just crossed to the far side when the structure collapsed, spilling all still aboard into the water. Had the collapse occurred only moments earlier, and thereby delayed his return, the world, as we know it, would have been a far different place, far different indeed.

The ruined bridge at his back, Wirt fought his way upstream against the surging mob and soon collided smack dab with Turf. The two exchanged an intense look. If the wizards were on the run, the boy thought, then something must have gone terribly wrong, and had a good idea what that something might be. Brushing past, he soon encountered Elmo and Duffy. Fleeing, the boys had removed their peaks so as not to lose them. Still, somewhere along the way Duffy had lost his headwear.

"Turn around. You're going the wrong way," panted Elmo, who had lost his spectacles but somehow found them again. One lens cracked, the other missing, they wobbled askew on his nose.

“Huh? Slow your roll,” said Wirt, a thousand years before anyone else had used the expression, but his two friends understood what he meant.

As rapidly, but calmly as he could, Elmo described the dire situation.

“Mutt’s flipped! He’s got Petunia! He’s dangerous!” chuffed Duffy, who had also lost one of his sandals.

“We’ve got to find Alabaster! He’s no ordinary janitor,” gulped Wirt.

There was no time for him to explain. Pushing past the few stragglers still on their way down, he sprinted up the road to the Academy.

After a moment, Elmo took off after him.

After another moment, Duffy reluctantly did the same.

Muttnaldo, bearing Petunia, followed the curve of a dank passage winding down, down, down through the underworld. He had already begun to regret not allowing Bernard to accompany him. True, the bedeviled boy was also a stranger to the nether regions, but Muttnaldo had begun to wonder whether he had bitten off more than he could chew, and would have preferred some like-minded company to reverse his doubt. His second choice would have been the goblin Pyrite, but she had been neither seen nor heard since their momentous encounter on the night of the Academy social. Hearing a faint whoosh from behind, he stopped and spun, but saw nothing. Only a bat, he told

himself. Turning, he peered back down the passage. Now, rounding an elbow bend, he made out a faint silhouette wielding a staff, cloaked in a luminous aura.

Muttnaldo froze. “Bernard?” he asked, but knew that was impossible, how could the possessed boy possibly be ahead of him?

Another thought occurred. “Are you the badass I’m supposed to meet?” Muttnaldo asked, suspicious, but not overly impressed. His voice echoed down the tunnel and faded away. Looking forward to their meet and greet, he had anticipated a creature beyond even *his* fertile imagining; a monster, a dragon, a fiend, utterly frightening to behold. Until that moment, he had never stopped to wonder if this was truly happening, but now he began to have doubts. Had it all been wishful thinking, only a dream? Was he at that moment still above ground in the academy dorm, snug in his bed, a monogrammed blanket bearing the letter M tucked under his chin, only dreaming of dark power and glory?

The figure ahead in the dim passage slowly turned. Clearly it was *not* Bernard.

“How did *you* get down here?” asked Muttnaldo, even more perplexed, and even more convinced he *must* be dreaming.

It was, as you may already have guessed, none other than Alabaster, now attired in a frayed and tattered, rainbow hued wizard’s gown and crumpled peak. Slowly raising his broom, the janitor assumed the familiar pose of the Unknown Wizard.

Above ground in the quad, Bernard, crouched on hands and knees, peered down the dark hole.

“Lose something, Bernie?” asked an unwelcome voice.

Bernard craned his neck, saw Wirt standing over him, and growled. Without further ado, Wirt booted him down the steps.

“One butt down the hole,” chortled Wirt.

He quickly moved off, Elmo and Duffy at his heels.

Alabaster spun his broom, not unlike like a master baton twirler, which might have been impressive had this been a twirling competition, but it was nothing of the sort.

Needless to say, Muttnaldo still was not impressed.

Petunia began to revive, her moans turning to a scream, and struggled to tear away, pummeling her kidnapper’s head and shoulders with her fists, even attempting to bite his neck. Muttnaldo tightened his grip and held her fast, his spell-casting hand trained on her like a revolver.

“Drop it, or she’s Spam,” he warned the janitor.

Alabaster slowly lowered his broom. Muttnaldo spun and fired a blast. A sudden burst of bright light and the janitor was gone! The boy returned his aim to the struggling damsel and cast another spell. The lass went limp again. He stepped cautiously to the smoking heap where the janitor had been standing. All that remained were his gown, peak, and broom.

After a moment, the renegade proceeded down the tunnel.

Aboveground, Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy burst into Alabaster's quarters. "Alabaster!" the three shouted as they peered about. The room was a shambles and there was no sign of the janitor. Demonic X-rays hung askew on the walls. Others were scattered in disarray across the floor. The lid of a large leather trunk stood agape.

Wirt crossed to the open armoire and puzzled out the exposed mirror inside.

Elmo tore down an X-ray and marveled at it. Removing his peak, he ran his hand through his thinning hair. "Fantastic. An anatomical X-ray of His Satanic Majesty," he said, having replaced the peak. By this time, Wirt had revealed all he had learned from the Barroness Pyrite: Alabaster's relation to the Unknown Wizard, His Satanic Majesty, the Eight Wizard faculty, and the origins of the Academy.

Wirt looked knowingly at Elmo and Duffy and said, "We're going underground."

"Yessssss," said Duffy, pumping his fist.

Elmo did not entirely share his friend's enthusiasm. "Maybe we should look into the future; see if it's worth the trip," he said, hoping Wirt would give his suggestion some serious thought.

"There won't *be* a future if we don't bust some butt," Wirt responded.

Elmo sighed, shrugged, and stuffed a handful of X-rays into the folds of his gown. They were ready to move out. Now, suddenly, Bernard staggered through the door. Elmo and Duffy

whipped out their wands, like musketeers. Wirt, of course, was wand-less, having been stripped of it during his expulsion. Duffy cautiously stepped to Bernard, waved his wand in the boy's face, and muttered an incantation. Bernard was not persuaded. Duffy tried again, again without effect. Duffy swallowed hard and backed away, but too late. Scooping him up, Bernard spun twice and hurled him into the armoire. The boy instantly vanished through the mirror, like a rock through the glassy surface of a still pond.

Wirt and Elmo exchanged puzzled glances and slowly withdrew toward the armoire. Bernard's behavior was beastly, to say the least, tearing up the room as if he'd taken leave of his mind. Elmo took charge. Snapping his wand across his knee, he tossed one-half to Wirt. Turning to the armoire, the class brainiac dove headfirst through the polished glass and instantly vanished, just as Duffy had. Wirt was about to follow. Bernard snarled, lunged, and knocked the wand from his hand. Again wand-less, the would-be hero climbed into the armoire and tried to follow Elmo's example, slamming his shoulder against his reflection, but it was hopeless. Try as he might, he could not pass through the mirror. Bernard snarled again and moved in for the kill. In the instant that he lunged, Elmo's arm shot through the solid glass, grabbed Wirt, and yanked him through. Bernard wasted no time leaping after him, smashed into the mirror, shattered it, and likewise vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
HIS SATANIC MAJESTY

Wirt tumbled head over heels down a flight of stone steps into the fetid underworld. Elmo and Duffy, adjusting their robes and peaks, were waiting at the bottom. Together the three set forth down the stone passageway, alert for any sound or movement.

Some distance ahead, Muttnaldo lugged Petunia further and deeper into the ever-descending maze of tunnels. Rounding a bend, he came upon Feldspar and Quartz waiting to escort him to the Grand Cavity.

Some distance behind, Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy came upon Alabaster's remains, and could only assume the worst. Elmo scooped up the still smoking gown. Duffy picked up the charred peak and shed a tear. Wirt bent to the singed, still smoking broom.

"Al. You old fool," he lamented.

Finally, Muttnaldo stood before His Satanic Majesty in the Grand Cavity. *Now* the boy was impressed. Quartz and Feldspar kept their distance, twittering and croaking in the shadows. Petunia lay nearby, senseless on a rough plank of scaffolding.

Muttnaldo eyeballed the ultimate beast through a fog of clogging smoke—seven stories tall, part human, part rodent, part

vulture, part reptile. He sat atop his magnificent throne, shackled by untold numbers of massive chains.

His Satanic Majesty peered down, his would-be liberator but a speck on the cavity floor. “You have done well!!!” he bellowed. “Now, boy, perform the task for which you were chosen!” The chains clanked in the gloom. Rocks trickled from the cavern ceiling, forcing Mutt to step aside.

“Not until we talk business,” Muttnaldo boldly stated. “Think we need to renegotiate. I need some guarantees.”

Not believing their ears, Quartz and Feldspar snickered.

“We will talk when I am free!” brayed the monster.

“We’ll talk *now*.”

His Satanic Majesty growled his displeasure.

Unseen by Muttnaldo and the goblins, Wirt, Elmo, and Duffy had arrived at the entrance to the Grand Cavity. They peered out from behind a mound of rubble, wide-eyed with fear and wonder. Wirt now wore the janitor’s gown and peak and clutched his broom.

“Totally un-natural,” whispered Wirt.

“Totally,” whispered Elmo and Duffy in one voice.

Ahead in the gloom, Muttnaldo dared to advance closer to the chained demon. The two continued to argue.

“First, I take out Mutt,” said Wirt. “Then I go after the big mother.”

Elmo removed the sheaf of demonic X-rays from his gown and studied them.

“Mutt’ll blow your bean off,” Duffy opined.

“Not so fast,” Elmo said, responding to Wirt’s bold claim.

“Duff’s right. That gown makes him unstoppable,” Elmo agreed.

“But as long as the big guy’s chained, he’s easy prey. Destroy him and Mutt goes lame.”

“Okay, general, what’s the plan?” asked Wirt.

Elmo studied the X-rays again and drew his conclusion.

“Knock out his cardio life force,” he said, as if he knew whereof he spoke.

Wirt was more than ready. “Good as done,” he said.

“Big problem, though,” cautioned Elmo. “You don’t have the firepower to penetrate his armor.”

“We can *all* blast it,” Duffy pitched in.

“All the wizards in the world don’t have enough firepower to blow a hole through that leather,” said Elmo.

Wirt gave the issue some thought, then said, “There’s one way.”

Elmo and Duffy looked at him expectantly.

“There’re two sides to everything. If I can’t do it from the outside, I’ll have to do it from the inside.”

“That’s insane,” scoffed Elmo.

“What he said,” said Duffy, nudging Elmo.

Wirt chose to ignore their comments on his mental health.

“How do I get in?” he said, instead.

Elmo shook his head, studied the X-rays again, and selected one he thought might provide the answer. “Through the dorsal duct below the cranial pod, or maybe—”

Wirt grabbed the X-ray and studied it from every angle.

“I’m going in through the mouth, save some time.”

He stuffed the X-ray into his gown.

“If that beast is unleashed, your chances of succeeding are zip,” said Elmo.

“I wonder if my parents will miss me,” said Duffy. Clearly his mind was elsewhere.

Okay, so, the bottom line—?” said Wirt.

“Wipe out the cardio life force and get out fast. Fail and you’re demon dung,” said Elmo.

“Demon dung,” repeated Duffy.

A lengthy silence passed, only the voices of His Satanic Majesty and Muttnaldo still audible.

Then, mumbling a spell, Wirt slowly became invisible, only his eyes suspended in mid-air.

Throughout all this, His Satanic Majesty and Muttnaldo continued to argue. Muttnaldo had grown even bolder. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” he taunted. “*I’m* the one in control.”

His Satanic Majesty writhed and thrashed, but the spell that bound him was far too powerful and held him fast.

Muttnaldo chuckled recklessly, savoring his power over the struggling beast.

Quartz and Feldspar began to sniff and growl. Sensing an unwelcome presence, they stole away to investigate.

Wirt, too, had noticed something in the dull light. Gliding to the scaffold, his eyeballs hovered over the comatose Petunia, and moved in for a kiss. Her eyes suddenly snapped open. Recognizing the mismatched eyes, one gray, the other blue, she smiled at the young wizard slowly becoming visible again. It was not something he had willed to happen; the simple fact being that he had never fully mastered the art of dissolving into thin air.

Quartz and Feldspar, having spied movement at the scaffold, gnarred and gnashed their teeth. Muttnaldo spun about. He, too, was now aware of his rival and reared back to fire a blast.

“Be right back—” said Wirt to his three companions, who had joined him as he straddled the broom.

“For Al,” said Wirt gravely.

“For Alabaster,” said Elmo and Duffy.

“For victory,” they said all together.

His Satanic Majesty continued to struggle. When he finally took notice, the boy was already airborne, a mere fleck in the cheerless light.

“Incompetent buffoon! Stop him!” roared His Satanic Majesty.

“Cream him!” shouted Muttnaldo.

“You’re devil’s food!” shouted Wirt, pointing as he circled the great beast. Quartz and Feldspar tried to snatch him as he dove and zipped between them, but he was much too fast and nimble.

His Satanic Majesty swung his monstrous head back and forth. His throne rocked. Three times at full throttle Wirt circle-

zoomed the thrashing beast, a horsefly buzzing around a thrashing mule, and each time he managed to avoid the great snapping, chomping jaws. As explained to Elmo and Duffy, it was entry through the mouth the boy sought, but the angle would have to be just right, otherwise, disaster; skewered on a fanged tooth, or entering through the wrong orifice; a flared nostril or a cauliflower ear.

Muttnaldo released blast after blast, but the boy on the broom proved an elusive target. On the fourth pass, the broom's tightly bundled straw caught fire, causing it to corkscrew, making it hard to control. His Satanic Majesty howled and stretched his jaws impossibly wide, and for the first time in his long existence, the demon was truly afraid.

"Release me or all is lost!" he rumbled at his young zealot.

Muttnaldo finally took heed and directed his fire at the demon's chains.

At last, on the fifth pass, an opportunity! Wirt flew into the gaping maw a second before the jaws snapped shut, resulting in a nasty spill at the back of the demon's throat. The boy's eyes stung as he studied the X-ray he would use as a map. Sliding down the food pipe, he landed in the creature's digestive tract. Blood-red icicles dangled from above, broke free, and speared down on the would-be demon killer, nearly impaling him.

Wielding the broom like a rifle, he waded ankle-deep through a pool of bubbling muck, much like slogging through a swamp at midnight. A wizard commando, he was ready for anything, or so he hoped.

Outside in the Grand Cavity, Muttaldo continued to blast away at the massive chains. One by one, they began to burst and fell away.

Inside the beast, the disgraced young wizard made his way down a bone staircase. All the while he was tossed and bounced by the creature's wild gyrations. A sudden gust of foul vapor ripped the X-ray from his hand. Losing his footing on the slippery vertebrae, he tumbled to the lower digestive pit, another swamp of fetid tissue. There, vile, writhing parasites attached themselves to his arms, legs, and neck.

Mired in gore and firing wildly, Wirt slogged toward the dull throb of the creature's cardio life force. Inching along, something caught his eye. Scooping up that something, whipping it flat, he discovered it to be his blanket, defiled with dripping glop, the large white letter W still visible against the dark fabric.

The demon continued to writhe and buck.

Now only a single chain remained.

Wirt proceeded toward his goal, but with each step he sank deeper and deeper into digestive quicksand.

Finally, the cardio life force was in plain view: a pulsing, tumorous mass glowing in the near dark.

His Satanic Majesty twisted free as the final chain snapped. The beast stood and flexed his massive wings, atrophied by centuries on non-use.

Deep inside the simmering gut, Wirt stood buried nearly to his neck.

By then, having abandoned all hope, Elmo, Duffy, and Petunia had returned up the maze of tunnels, twice lost their way, found it again, and now crawled out of the jagged hole where once stood a magnificent monument. Behind, an unearthly howl emanated from the hole and echoed throughout the Academy. They ran for their lives.

Moments later, His Satanic Majesty catapulted from the hole, greatly enlarging it and buckling much of the surrounding stonework, and shot straight up into the sky.

Elmo, Duffy, and Petunia dodged the flying cobblestones—then looked to each other with consolatory expressions. Try and imagine, if you can, their hopelessness and despair, knowing it was the beginning of the end.

The mutant slowed his ascent, reached his apex, and unfurled his enormous, bat-like, leather wings. Eclipsing the sun, the beast's fluttering shadow cloaked the width and breadth of the Academy, and extended to the outskirts of Hellsborough, to Petunia's very doorstep, although, of course, she was not there to see it. The creature hovered, eased into a slow tilt, and began his swooping descent.

When all was assumed lost—and surely there was no reason to think otherwise—a tilting bat wing having already sheared one of the Academy's towers, and who knew what else the creature was capable of—the demon convulsed—and was suddenly rent asunder—EXPLODED being perhaps a better word. Clumps of wet flesh, splintered bone, and scale-covered tissue rained down upon the Academy and its environs. A whirling femur shattered

the glass dome of the swimming pool. A razor sharp tooth, deadly as a guillotine, cleaved off the tip of Elmo's peak; inches lower and it would have been his neck. A mile away in Hellsborough, a shorn horn shattered the window of the bakery where five days earlier the three boys had been pelted by levitating pies, among them strawberry, blackberry, and gooseberry.

Teary-eyed, Elmo, Duffy, and Petunia, their faces peppered with sticky ichor, black as crude oil, gazed into the sky.

What they saw there simply could not be—a patch of gently wafting brown cloth bearing an unmistakable white letter W. It was Wirt, drifting back to earth, his monogrammed blanket serving as a parachute.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE CLASS OF 999

The Academy bleachers were once again crammed to overflowing with parents, townies, and notables, standing room only. Brightly colored flags, banners, and pendants fluttered from every turret, pinnacle, and spire. Burnished bells pealed in the Academy and down in Hellsborough.

There was, of course, great cause for celebration, but also a terrible sense of loss; Alabaster had not been seen again and was presumed forever lost. Where once stood a magnificent statue erected in his memory, there now yawned a jagged crater leading to the underworld.

The Young Wizards of the Class of 999 stood in formation, ready to resume their graduation ceremony. All eyes were turned to the Academy faculty standing on a low balcony overlooking the scene.

Cobalt stepped forward, surveyed the gathering, and motioned Wirt to approach. The young hero strode from the ranks and mounted a marble staircase as a red velvet carpet unfurled beneath his feet. Moments later he had mounted the balcony and stood before the faculty.

The Blue Wizard stepped forward and lightly touched the boy's virgin gown with his wand, causing it to slowly turn a vibrant hue of blue. Bending toward the boy, he then draped a golden medallion around his neck. On it, a burnished sun stood in high relief. The Blue Wizard stepped back.

Next was Crocus, extending his wand and lightly touching the boy's gown. It immediately began to take on a deep yellow color. The Yellow Wizard stepped back.

Now each wizard in turn advanced and lightly touched Wirt with his wand. Soon, the boy's humble gown had transformed into a shimmering, radiantly hued, splendiferous, rainbow garment.

Turf was last to approach. The young wizard and the old wizard exchanged a knowing look. The Green Wizard eased into a faint smile, the most he would allow himself. Extending his wand, he touched the boy's gown, holding it there until it began to dominate with the wizard's preferred color. Cobalt cleared his throat and hissed in annoyance. Embarrassed, Turf reluctantly stepped back, allowing the gown to return to its spectacular polychromatic hue.

The wizards stepped back, allowing Wirt the limelight. He turned to face the crowd, who erupted into thunderous applause. The boy grinned and bowed, first turning to the faculty, then again to the quad assembly. Descending the staircase, he returned to his place between Elmo and Duffy.

Bernard, no longer under a hellish influence, stood alone to one side, thoroughly dejected. Wirt went over, patted him on the back, bygones be bygones, water under the bridge, bury the hatchet, and pulled him into the group.

Now Cobalt stepped to the balcony rail and addressed the assembly. "Ladies and gentlemen—I give you—the Class of 999!"

The crowd burst into a deafening cheer.

The Young Wizards tore off their peaks and tossed them in the air. It should come as no surprise that somehow, defying gravity, the peaks, appearing not unlike a cluster of brightly colored balloons, began to float, higher and higher into the cloudless sky. All present gazed up as the peaks grew smaller and smaller. Duffy, teary-eyed, waved good-bye. Elmo gave a small salute. Petunia took her place beside Wirt.

A sudden disturbance returned their attention to the quad. All peered long and hard and could not believe their eyes. Climbing from the hole was Alabaster, followed by Muttnaldo, the janitor gripping the boy by the scruff of the neck. Muttnaldo, kicking and yelping, had been stripped to his underwear.

The graduates broke rank, ran to Alabaster, and mobbed him. In all the commotion, no one noticed Muttnaldo tumbling back into the hole.

Overhead, one by one, the airborne peaks began to disperse. After a time, there was great distance between them. Borne on a balmy breeze, they sailed high over hill and dale, high over field and stream. Soon they were no longer visible.

Far from the Academy, behind a spine of mountains, three rivers, and a haunted wood, a shepherd lad sat under a tree munching a loaf of stale bread while tending his flock. Sipping from a jug, something caught his eye as it tumbled past across the meadow.

He chased after it.

It proved to be a red satin wizard's peak.

He tried it on for size.

It proved, to no great surprise, to be a perfect fit.

The End