

## A Morning's Jaunt

The cold morning air was lightly buffeting the secluded outcropping of rock that served as a short test strip. The gyrocopter project that had been put aside for months was now ready for a test of its recent upgrades. The springs had been wound tight and the gears sharpened and polished, so they were finely fitted. The pilot strapped himself in and began the sequence of start-up. The gears slowly worked up to a clicking crescendo. The blades above and behind began throwing a whirlwind of air around the craft. A few more seconds and the sprocket reset the chain into a tighter gear. The craft lurched slightly. The skids cleared the smooth rock platform.

Lift off.

The craft performed flawlessly. The variable system of pitch on the blades allowed the craft to roll and spiral like a feather swirling on its way toward the ground. Another relocation of the sprocket levers, and the craft climbed in elevation without much more effort. The craft barrel rolled into a warm updraft, jarring the pilot. With a slight bit of maneuvering, the craft rolled back over and continued to ride a spiral of warm wind up into a huge, thick cirrus cloud. Mother soon faded from sight.

The gnomish pilot didn't usually have the time to get away from Mother or his cohorts, much less take the time to fulfill his passion for flight. When he first designed and built his gyrocopter, he had grand designs to start a small air force of machinery that would efficiently and effectively ward the city on Mother's surface from whatever trouble ensued. Then, he became more proficient in his tinkering with his lightning generator. With his growing skill in magic and his gnomish knack for engineering, it wasn't long before his mind temporarily turned from sorcerer extraordinaire to roguish warrior with a lightning rifle. Now, once again, the pull of magic and his innate proclivities of his elemental blood are tugging at him to take up flight once again and focus on using his natural-born passions rather than the mundane tinkering.

The craft lurched slightly, then began to shudder. The cyclical rhythm of the gears began to slow and sporadically change their whining pitch. The lodestone in the compass broke off from its arrow-shaped perch and seemed to lodge itself in the wall of the cylindrical wall of the gauge. Although there was nothing around at this moment to truly judge direction, the pilot could feel the craft turning. All the cirrus clouds above and below were a billowing white. The gigantic wall of the cloud behind that was quickly coming to bear on the failing craft was becoming grey very fast from within; turning almost black.

The sound of the air that had been systematically rushing by the aircraft had suddenly changed. There was a bizarre quiet that had overtaken the area followed by a series of distant screeches and rattles and, what the pilot could only quickly identify as, the sound of wood timbers scraping against rock. Then he saw it. From out of the wall of the darkening cloud emerged a large porous boulder with huge craggy outcroppings in which were jammed the remnants of wrecked crafts. Swarms of small grey creatures flew around the crags as well as circling the huge front perimeter of this slightly rotating orb of volcanic rock.

The small gyrocopter, grotesquely dwarfed by the size of the rock piercing the cloudbank, seemed to cease its semblance of fluid flight. It now felt as though the craft were careening directly toward the rock on a slightly less than horizontal path. It was as if the craft were above the rock and falling towards it, except that it was falling horizontally towards the front part of the oncoming rock.

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"It's a huge lodestone! Craggy!" thought the pilot. Fortunately for himself, he had not worn his usual mithral chainshirt. It was still on the table being worked daily into a suit of celestial armor. He had strapped himself into the craft well enough. The pull of the craft toward the rock had accelerated the craft to a bit more than terminal velocity. The pilot pulled a small dagger from his belt to cut himself free. It flew out of his hand blindingly fast and disappeared as it shot directly towards the surface of the impending rocky surface.

The pilot grabbed the leather restraints in both hands and began a series of incantations to heat the straps to the point of incinerating. It took all his mental focus as he closed his eyes and clinched all the muscles in his body, trying to put the thought of impending death out of his head. The leather began to get hot. Then it began to smoke; the pungent smell filling the sorcerer's nostrils. One more series of powerful magical incantation and, together with the might of his personal strength, the straps failed and broke apart. He was free. Now it was a matter of climbing out of the cage of the copter and to whatever part was going to become the "top" of the craft as it impacted the rock.

Mere seconds before the gyrocopter hit the surface, the gnome gained a foothold on the rear of the clockwork engine. He balanced himself upright, closed his eyes, and cast one more spell. From the palms of his hands pointed towards his feet, a huge torrent of water materialized and forced the craft slightly away from him. He jerked his body and launched himself off the rolling craft and focused his torrent of summoned liquid into one of the porous craters in the onrushing surface of the rock. He balled up his body and focused on his ring of feather falling. His eyes closed and his body tucked into a fetal position, he then heard only one thing – sploosh.

The horizontal impact into a small crater of the porous shell of this huge boulder had left the gnome without breath as he hit with some force into a pool of water too shallow to safely stop his trajectory. Still, it helped. Together with the property of the magical ring, the gnome was able to "land" as though he had only fallen about thirty feet. As the water quickly drained from this almost horizontal pool, it left a sopping wet and very disgruntled pilot gasping hard for breath to refill his lungs. As he regained full consciousness and awareness, his body slumped down in the crater towards the "bottom". He was able to extend his legs and would have stopped his descent further from had it not been for the pull on his ring finger against the face of the crater surface, its metallic ingredients being subject to magnetic fields.

As the gnome clung to the concave crater on the surface of the huge boulder, he puzzled through in his mind of how to pull free from this rock leaving his ring intact, yet, escape in at least the manner of a feather's fall and find his way back to Mother; or any other stable or familiar environment. As he had also left his lightning generator in his workshop to be upgraded, he had the large pocket of his extra-dimensional sporran to get the ring into. It would be safe from the effects of this world and free him from the wall. Then, he was forced to solve another problem – survive the crag imps that were flying in to attack his position.

The screeching sounds of the grey flying beasts that, just a minute earlier, seemed as dots dancing around this huge intrusive rock were now only feet away from him and circling his position. Nothing he could quickly scavenge from the gyrocopter would be of much use save for the rattan propeller blades. If he COULD wield them with some efficiency as a weapon, they would only delay the inevitability of being overrun by these little grey chewing machines. The first wave of three flyby attacks began. He did his best to dodge them with tattered shirt and claw marks on his back. The claws stung. Luckily, it seemed, no poison followed. Cackles

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began as a multitude of the minor thuds of clawed feet hitting the surface bounced around the convex hole. As he looked up from on almost praying position, ring on finger still held fast to the rock, he easily counted a dozen grinning little winged imps moving in for a meal.

The gnome laid flat on his back with limbs splayed out like preparing for a crucifixion. The imps slowly crested the rim of the crater and slide down into its depth. Several claws grabbed at the gnome's legs and arms. He tried to keep his legs together at the knees to keep them from attacking his groin, but he was soon pulled to full extension as the largest of the imps came and plopped down right on his stomach. The gnome, who had exuded the qualities of one stricken with fear at the onset of his abductors, now began to twist his face into a bit of an evil grin. As the main imp upon his chest leaned towards the gnome's face as if to be choosing the nose or the throat as his first attack, the shift in weight was enough for the gnome to draw one last big breathe into his lungs. He held the breath, picked his head up from the surface just a bit and peered deep into the imps dead black, doll eyes.

"Not today," he whispered.

The gnome's body shuddered as he summoned the full supply of energy that coursed through his djinni blood. A crackle electricity rippled from his chest as he exhaled violently. Then, in one big expanding wave of electrical energy, a plume of electrical current overtook the crater and several feet beyond. Little screeches became loud screams. The instantaneous smell of burnt flesh and incinerated bone and sinew roiled out of the crater. The large imp that sit upon his chest dug claw into ribcage and tried to ride the wave of energy. Towards the last bit of breath that left the gnome's lungs, the eyes of the imp burst out and it involuntarily sprang backwards off the gnome's chest careening down the side of the huge rocks curving front face and out of sight from anything that may have been close enough to watch.

The gnome lay, again, in the crater, half standing, half being held to the wall by his ring finger. He looked around at the carnage he had been forced to employ. A very small part of him was impressed at the sight of what he had done; only in that he was knowledgeable of being capable of summoning all his power at once. Before this day, he had not done that. As smoldering bits of wing slide downward past him, he had a thought. With his free hand he gathered as many bits of fleshy wing as he could, then laid them flat at the base of the ring. With each subsequent layer of wing laid of the next, he rolled the ring around his finger and moved it up the stairway of imp wing until there was enough gap between the ring's surface and the crater face. In one swift and surprisingly dexterous maneuver, he wrapped the wings over his ring hand, cupped the smoldering, crispy ball with his free hand, jerked backwards, and jumped as high as he could. As he did so, he plunged both hands into his unclasped sporran.

He hit the ground flat on his back with a squishing noise on the spurting of ichor shooting out from his peripheral vision. It took a good matter of seconds to realize that he had fallen on the bodies of dozens of other imps and there dead but not so crispy bodies had cushioned his landing. For all his dealings this day, it was almost too much for him to envision. He worked hard on not retching up his breakfast. Still on a gross incline of rock, he quickly began sliding down the front surface of the huge boulder's face. For all it's size, the gnome thought, if this were to ever collide with Mother, it might break her into three or four pieces.

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With hands in his sporrán, he loosened the ring from his finger and let it drop to the bottom of the extra-dimensional space. He pulled his hands free, clasped the pouch and tried to use his hands and feet to right himself. Once done, he realized he was essentially running down the side of a mountain; only one that was moving towards him and keeping him from full-on falling. He knew that eventually he would reach the apex of the surface and couldn't fall fast enough to escape the jagged edges of this mountain from shredding his falling carcass. His heart beat faster and he breathed heavier as he tried to keep his momentum going. He was not built for running. If anything, he knew in his heart that his ancestral bloodline had really built him to...

"Fly!" came a voice from the back of the gnome's mind.

His feet were a blur. He could tell that the stitches in his boots were being picked away by the sharp volcanic pumice. After a few seconds it was all he could do to make long jumps as he would leap of the rock only for the rock to move closer to him.

"Phixeuas Orgontiam Zapponilium!" came the voice again.

"I said...FLY!"

With the booming of the last command, it were as though someone behind the gnome had given him a flat-footed kick in the back as though one might kick in a door. The breathe left his lungs as he lurched forward. The momentum had launched him forward just enough so that he passed about a hundred feet of rock face. He felt a tingle in his torso that spread out to his legs and arms. He quickly moved his arms from a jogger's position to fully outstretched. His heels met as his legs extended out straight. The face of the rock moved away from his vision. He had cleared volcanic mound and was now in a full dive downward. He twisted his torso a bit and moved his arms and flattened out into a full horizontal glide.

"Yeaaaaaah!!!" he screamed with a large smile on his gnomish face; his white hair beating against his head. He did a barrel roll. And another. Then another back the other way. He was as truly free as a bird. To be riding on the air without the mechanical whirring of his clockwork ship was overwhelming. For a brief moment he was flush with an emotion of sadness as his inspiration to create another flying craft would dwindle away to nothing. Then he relived the last few moments above the rocks surface. He had only heard his full name one other time in his life, and it was not he who had said it. Nor had he thought about it in so long, having lived to embody the name that he now went by, that he could even have remembered his full name.

In a moment of clarity and curiosity, Phixit straightened his flight pattern and circled back to come along side the gigantic volcanic lodestone. He stayed many hundred feet away from its side and tried to match its velocity. He noticed that it was slightly rolling on its x-axis, much like a bullet would do out of a rifled barrel, though, nothing could have "shot" this thing. The rock was emerging fully from a large cumulonimbus cloud, much like the cloud it had emerged from when he was caught in its pull. This rock was truly enormous, easily a high a mile wide and maybe a full mile long. As the cloudy mist roiled from its sides, there were other features revealed.

It looked as though sailing vessels had been caught and slammed into the rock, which Phixit soon realized that its shaped resembled that of a giant potato. There were a series of very large pock marks, all of which were covered on a surface of small openings like that of volcanic stone. Some ships were very recognizable as ones

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similar to those he had seen moored in docks on Mother as well as some of the other floating islands that must be a few miles below him on a lower level of stratus. Other ships were similar in shape but so very huge in size that they must be from a different realm entirely. All the ships looked as though the metallic portions of the hull were keeping the rest of the cloth and wooden portions pressed against the surface. Thousands upon thousands of little grey imps flew in little cloudy formations scouring over the surface of the rock, probably feasting on whatever occupants sailed those ships and couldn't escape.

As he slowed his momentum so that the entirety of the flying potato could pass his inquisitive eyes, he heard the voice in the back of his head again.

"You should do well to put that ring back on, Phixeus. Your blood is not pure enough to fly you around forever."

Phixit stopped his momentum and came to stand in a hovering motion among a break in the clouds. For a brief minute he stopped to gaze at the wonder he had just achieved; "standing" motionless in the clouds. He could look in any direction and see for miles. The black depths of the great cloud covering the surface couldn't even be seen from this height. His hands fumbled at the toggle of his sporran as he spoke out with his voice.

"How..." "How do you know me?"

His mind got lost in his vision of the changing mist patterns of the clouds. He half expected to see some kind of being come into vision. Then, his mind snapped out of his trance and his hover gave out. It took him a few seconds to realize that he had gone from an almost effortless stance into a seated position with the wind rushing up from beneath him, and that he was, indeed, now falling. He quickly fumbled more focused on getting the toggle to his sporran open. He plunged in a hand and wriggled the silver band with a feather relief onto his finger. He then intoned the word contained thereon and his descent became that of a feather on a gentle breeze.

Laughter.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"Do you see below you a small dot of color different from the white clouds beyond?"

"Yes."

"Between the ring and the talents you nimbly performed today, you should reach it just fine."

"Are you there?"

"No. You will be." After a long pause, "Finish your latest works. Stand alone again on the launching stone as you did this morning. Follow your heart and your Will. You will find me."

"Please tell me who you are. I must know." There was no further reply to the gnome's ears. He looked back downward to the dot below. It was marble-sized now, looking like a drop of rain in mid fall. He intoned the ring to stop. His fall increased. He angled his body with arms at his side so he could glide down and over the top of

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the marble, now the size of a large melon. Once over by his best estimation, he intoned the ring to work again. With a few kicks and arm motions, he gently "swam" over the top of this aqueous orb. It was the size of the opening of a water well, with the vision beyond or within of a rocky outcropping. Phixit closed his eyes as he gently met with the surface of this "rain drop". There was a sound as if he were dunked in a pond of water. And then he heard the reverse of that sound as he fell through the other side.

He opened his eyes to find his feet just about to touch down on the very rock that he had left a few hours earlier in his flying machine. He looked back into the sky from which he fell. There, for a quick moment, was a circular portal shimmering as if made of liquid. Then, as if made of a soapy bubble, the ring burst in a slight popping sound, the mist of which fell down upon the gnome. He closed his eyes and let the mist hit his face. It was a moment of bliss that he thought might only be felt by those who worship deities and receive sacrament. He felt different now. Blessed. Not holy. But wise and willfull. He opened his eyes and the world was more vivid with color...and purpose. He quickly strode off of the rocky escarpment and back down the path to his semi-underground workshop hidden behind the fortified façade of an old deserted warehouse.

He had work to do.

And people to see.