

## A Flight of Fancy

Morning had died a glorious death as the full noon sun beat down upon the wooden thatch of the gnome's warehouse workshop. Ravens picked through the green patches of earth and rock that was the roof of the back half of the warehouse building. Beetles and a few slow grubs were their lunch fare. Meters below their earthen lunch line, the tinkering gnome blissfully orchestrated a cacophony of sounds as he hammered and drilled and clinked glasses of mixtures together. He was happiest when doing his labors of love – magic smithing and potion making. Inspired by his latest encounter a few mornings ago, he was focusing all his energy this morning on finishing an upgrade to his mithral armor and putting the last remaining touches on the lightning generator that he used to make his name famous.

Phixit's magical abilities had taken another leap in understanding since his aerial encounter and his growing passion of independent flight had him concerned for both longevity in the air and not being grounded to a flying magnetic rock. He took "Old Gus" apart and rebuilt every last piece of the weapon using non-ferrous materials. He used new access to powers of miniaturization spells to make himself smaller and more agile when making all the necessary soldering of wires and tubes. In doing so, he made some delightful discoveries about certain glass composition and strengthening all the other parts of Gus by magical means. This produced a slightly lighter weapon with a smaller footprint. No more worrying about dashing the lightning chamber glass and having it shatter. It was well encased now in a fine mithral mesh. The range of the weapon increased as well. Still, it was taboo to use such a device as a respected magic user. But, as a critical support member of his team, Phixit realized that there was no wrong way when survival was on the line.

With a final few wraps of leather around the stitching and some ironing of the collar, the celestial armor was now also complete. He donned the fine sparkling armor over his lucky "fast shirt", strapped on his boots, secured Old Gus in the sporran hanging on the front of his magical belt, grabbed one last swing of the morning's now long-cold fortified porridge, and headed out the small camouflaged door to the outside world.

It was a very bright day. Surprisingly, it was not very windy. Phixit smirked and chuckled a bit as he realized that. It was about to get a little windy; for him, anyway. He made his way to the somewhat secluded launching platform that was naturally formed on an escarpment that lead to Mother's edge. A quick check to make sure that all his accouterments were tied down – and he began his concentration. In working with his new magical skill, the three true elements of personal magic (blood, sweat, and tears), and a few powdered remains of flying creatures that he helped vanquish in his travels, Phixit found the possibility of a variation on the fly spell that he used to imbue his celestial armor. It takes more effort to summon the magical energy and doesn't allow for as much freedom of movement of the extremities. But if it works correctly...

The gnome's boots began to lift off the rocky platform. An invisible swirling energy encompassed the sorcerer, as if an elemental were encasing him in a supernatural grip. He ascended a bit faster with each passing second. After about ten seconds, he was about 50 feet off of the ground. He kept his body taut, arms and legs together, his feet arching downward to point his toes toward the ground below. He focused on the mithral chains protecting him and the freedom he had felt on the first time he had flown by himself. He focused his eyes on a far away sliver of wispy cloud and muttered a bit of incantation. The air began to flow past his face and blew his hair harshly against his scalp. He looked down towards his starting point. The ground was fading below him very fast; the vision of Mother shrinking. He looked back toward the sky and concentrated harder. Like a projectile from his fellow gnome's powder gun, he took off straight, upward and fast.

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At least a minute had passed before the gnome relaxed his body a bit. As he did, his momentum dropped a small amount. He wriggled his shoulders back and forth and cupped his hands while rotating his wrists. There was little “wiggle room” within this spell for some maneuvering, not nearly as much as the spell he learned from his scroll book. But, he was moving much farther and much faster than the usual spell’s power. Soon he reach a level of the stratosphere where almost all clouds were below him. The air was thin and hard to breath, and cold. It stung his nose when he inhaled. He began to concentrate on which way to go. Then he heard the familiar voice in his head.

“This way.”

He turned his head a bit and a glint of reflected sunlight caught his eye; something far off to the east among the nothingness of the blue background beyond. The gnome twisted his body and altered his trajectory toward the flash. Just as loosing the horizon against a constant sea of white clouds taxes the mind to keep track of direction, so, too, did the mental and physical constraint of this type of movement tax the gnome’s mind in relation to the passing of time. Being one with a nature for clockwork timing from the clicking of precision gears, Phixit’s ability to tell time was exquisite. But flight was new. The buffet of wind, after a while, fades into silence, leaving the mind to wander viciously on all manner of random thoughts.

“I can make it,” he told himself. But the distance was arduous. He had his trusty ring to ease his fall if necessary while he cast another spell. But he was willing to see his magical handiwork to its last excess of magical Willpower. He pushed forward. Up ahead, he could see a spherical object growing as he advanced upon it. At first, it seemed like something similar to the portal he dove into days earlier; a “water droplet” hanging in the air. As he grew closer he could discern a great structure within the sphere with many narrow but tall towers capped with tall pointy spires. As he narrowed his vision, even farther in the distance to the north and to the south, he realized there were other spheres containing roughly the same motif.

“Do not lose focus. Continue forward,” came the voice to the back of his mind. The gnome’s muscles were actually starting to ache now. The cold air had left the breath from his mouth and nose crystallized on his cheek and the lapel of his shirt. A small rivulet of blood had trailed off his face and onto the collar of his armor. His mind was aching now and even his vision began to blur a bit. His proximity to the bubble was such that that its circular edge could not be truly discerned. It was just a wave now, as a ripple of heat against the far off rocks on a hot day. Then, in a sudden burst of force, the wave was breeched.

A rush of rather warm air hit the sorcerer’s face. Dry, sweet air filled his nose and throat; the sharp contrast of air to what was in his lungs already caused his chest to convulse. For a moment, despite his location, he was – breathless. His mind went blank. His vision went dark; his sense, numb. There was a softened thud, as if a rock had impacted sand. Then, nothing.

The gnome awoke in a large, shallow convex basket. Cushions of deep purple and white were beneath him. He could see the iron chains of the basket’s rim rise far above to a large shackle imbedded in the stone ceiling. A myriad of aromas washed over him, some familiar, some foreign. He could make out the certain smell of an opium urn mixed with the aroma of lavender and lotus. And perfume. Within his squinting vision, a series of

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small feminine hands pressed wet cloth on his forehead, rubbing his checks and chin. There was a faint set of giggles that gave way to an even fainter sound of mandolin and harp.

“Ah. You have come back to us, young sorcerer. Good. Take your time in gaining wits. You are safe here and among friendly cohorts.” The voice, familiar to his mind, now echoing through his ears, as from one actually in the room. His anxiousness got the better of him. He had to see his benefactor.

The bath girls parted way as the gnome scrambled slowly over cushion after cushion; their scant coverings leaving very little to the imagination. Though he did not acknowledge them per se, he did note their...supple qualities. The room he was in was more of a large hall, perhaps a hundred feet high and a hundred feet long in every direction. Large archways enabled views of a lush environment beyond. Gardens of large palms and date trees and several pools and fountains filled the landscape. Warm air blew through the archways and filled the chamber with even more sweeter aromas.

Closer to the basket, which more resembled a swinging chair, a small retinue of servants stood in semi-circular fashion, some holding towels and robes, others pitchers of drink. To one side, a large but low table sat holding an abundance of food; steaming meats, mounds of fruits, an assortment of breads and pastries. A rather large figure of slightly blue tint picked himself up from the cushion on which he sat on the other side of the table from the swing chair. He grinned dashingly as he picked up a polished silver glass and made an arcing path past one of the servants. Gracefully and effortlessly, the servant tilted his pitcher and filled the constantly moving glass, not spilling a single drop. With another fluid movement, the figure moved forward to the edge of the swing chair, bowed low and long, and presented the silver flute to the gnome.

“Please drink, my friend. Your health depends on it,” said the host.

The mostly naked gnome put his feet over the edge of the chair edge and supported himself with his arms so as not to fall forward. One of the servant girls moved forward to accept the glass and put it to the gnome’s lips. He drank. He choked slightly, coughed, then drank some more, draining the glass.

“You should be more careful when trying new spell variations, my friend,” said the host. He seemed to cross one leg over another and float to the ground as two man servants brought a cushion to immediately intercept his body from touching the floor. Just as fast and quiet as they had advanced, they fluidly retreated back to their stations in the semi-circular retinue.

“I’m guessing that you took some part of the half dragon that you vanquished and used its powdered essence in the longevity and intensity of the flying spell you worked into your armor, hmmm?” the host gently questioned. The gnome nodded as if partially defeated. The host continued.

“Because you did such a personal working inclusive of your body’s essences, you added a slight mix of the evil nature of that creature. In this case, that essence translated into self-preservation at any cost. Due to the frosty nature of the air before crossing over into this plane, you didn’t realize that your nose was dripping blood. That blood fell back onto the collar of your armor and fed it’s thirst. In doing so, you were quelling the desire for the magical effect to prolong itself. You actually flew ten minutes longer than you should have been able to.

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"Of course," the host continued, "it almost killed you."

"How do you know this?" questioned the gnome, his voice slightly graveled.

"First, I should introduce myself...seeing as how you did ask repeatedly on your last excursion. I am Sahlahmadhi al-K'lam, Kalipha of K'Lam." All the servants bowed upon hearing his name and responded in kind with a low but exhuberant "Hail Kalipha K'Lam!" He continued.

"To you, I am... of a distant relation. You may think of me as... an uncle. Yes. You may call me... Uncle Sahlah." The large blue man grinned as he puzzled it out.

"So, you are my father's brother, then?" asked the gnome.

"Well, not exactly. It is a very long story. Perhaps one for another day. But, I assure you, we do share a similar blood ancestry. There is history in the elemental planes and their convergences with one another as well as your own realm. It would be wiser to consult a chronicler to tell you more of this. But, for the time being, let us just talk about you and our current relations. Hmm?" For the first time, the gnome's host looked the slightest bit uneasy.

"Very well." Phixit reached behind him for a shirt. The servant girls were all too willing to help. He made his way to the table, sat, and started picking at the plates of meat and fruit. The Kalipha continued.

"Phixeuas, you are part of a deep heritage of a race of this realm known as the Djinn. We rule this realm that you would call the 'Plane of Air'. There are many kaliphates in our realm. Each one with its own history. Together, we keep a peaceful realm in conjunction with the other three elemental realms. However, just as the men of different race on your realm, we get... restless, or power-hungry, or jealous. You name it. Some Kaliphus have made pacts with others on the other realms; some even with royalty on your realm. We do this in a peaceable manner mainly for trade purposes. Others... well, I already mentioned some of their reasoning.

"So, when it comes to our elemental realms converging on your realm in particular, those of us like myself... uh, those of us more secure and centrist in mindset, well, we get concerned."

"And start putting voices in our heads to manipulate us?" interrupted the gnome, feeling slightly angry at the thoughts he was generating.

"No, no!" the Kalipha comforted. "On the contrary. While my timing did seem a bit... abrupt and intrusive, I have been meaning to contact you for several years. You see, for many of us, and you too, Phixeuas, there is a yearning to expand the uses and knowledges that are passed down through our blood. We learn to exploit our personal powers and exert our Will to whatever end we deem appropriate.

"Now, at a certain point, I have been receiving visions of your adventuring. Some events have not been so, shall we say, fortuitous?" The gnome stopped chewing for a moment and nodded with raised eyebrows.

"I approached one of our chroniclers on the matter who then pointed me to one of our clergy. He helped me focus my inner Will and narrow my gaze upon you. It wasn't until you interacted with the Brimstone that I was able to pierce the plane of realms long enough and hard enough to make contact.

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"Oh, Phixeuas. You are on your way toward such a glorious collection of discoveries. I was excited to get the chance to inspire you. And help you, of course. I think you were surely doomed on the prow of the Brimstone."

"What exactly was that magnetic, umm, rock... ship... thing?" Phixit inquired.

"Well," Sahlah began with a short sigh, "the Brimstone, as it is known on the realm of Fire, is really a... ship, as you call it. It has a crew of elementals controlling it known as the Efreet. They can be viewed as, mmm, our maligned fire-loving cousins. Very powerful. Very dangerous. And VERY interested in events of your realm.

"Our realms sometimes intersect with one another, though, by your time frame, it is every few generations. Every millenia or so, a convergence of realms occurs that throws all five of our realms into convergence together. We are not in that time now, though. But, Air and Fire are close to your realm.

"According to the chroniclers of a few close Kaliphus, the Brimstone was carved from a portion of volcanic mountain in the realm of fire and tooled in a way so as to make it a flying ship of sorts. Several small wars were waged between the Efreet and the elementals of the earth realm. In the end, the properties that make it so terrorizing in your realm, the magnetic core, was fashioned by enslaved earth elementals and a few Efreet who had to be encased within it to work the Wills of the elementals. There is no rudder or sails, you see. It is more moved by Willpower and magic than anything else.

"The Brimstone first pierced this realm long ago, after it was first launched from the realm of fire. It destroyed the palaces of more than a few Kaliphus before we were able to send it through a portal back to Fire. Only in the last few of your realm's years has it made an appearance. My chroniclers do not know the motives behind it, or Kaliphus Efreet control or serve it. As you can already attest, though, it does not bode well to be in your realm either." Sahlah took a long draught of his glass. As he set it down, a wine servant had already slid into place to pour more into the glass.

The gnome, in turn, took a long draught from his much smaller glass. It was instantly refilled in the same manner. He nodded to the wine servant, who promptly bowed and slide away. It wasn't until now that Phixit realized that no one else here really touched the floor. They all seemed to hover solidly in place and glide from here to there. He cleared his throat in an obvious gesture and peered beneath the great table at which he sat. The flowered cushion on which Sahlah sat wasn't even touching the dark stone floor. He brought his head back up to address Sahlah with lifted eyebrows and perhaps a slight look of amazement.

"So, umm, Uncle Sahlah," Phixit began, Sahlah giving a slight nod of approval. "I suppose a "thank you" is in order for reaching me when you did. That moment has certainly inspired me to push myself towards a more focused look at my passions as well as my studies and adventuring. I suppose I should study more before utilizing my spellcraft in alternate ways. Since it isn't the right time to talk about my origins, perhaps you can help me make sense of what it is I am to become?"

"Ahhh," the Kalipha threw his head back and laughed heartily while he clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. "But of course! Your Will is my command." He raised an arm and snapped his fingers twice. One of the larger male servants glided from the room. The faint sound of large stone doors shutting soon followed. Servant girls moved forward to the table and cleared away several platters to make room on the

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table in front of the gnome. The male servant returned soon after and set three very large tomes on the table. He made a gesture to the gnome with an open hand slowly moving over the cover of the topmost book. Phixit was unsure about the gesture and was quickly thinking about how he was going to get into the books to turn pages and not look a impish fool.

"Apologies, Phixeuas. Tap the inlaid circular crest twice" The gnome did so. The book instantly shrank to a size more befitting a three foot tall humanoid rather than one of Sahlah's stature. As Phixit opened the cover and turned the pages therein, a wisp of smoke arose each time. As it did, the words on the page changed from a script somewhat foreign to him and into the gnomish script to which he was accustomed. He was amused at the effort. Sahlah began speaking again as Phixit read over each page.

The tomes went into great detail about the powers and possibilities that those with Djinn heritage can affect. There were chronicled histories of individuals from Phixit's realm as well as many other realms that seemed eerily similar to his but the landmasses were different as well as the names of races and classes. The second tome in particular seemed to focus on a class of sorcerer know as a daivrat. Those who progress in this subclass allow the magical energies to activate markers in the person's blood that cause the physiology of the Djinn to overtake the sorcerer's obvious race. They, in essence, become a Djinn, with many of the extraplanar abilities and uses of magic.

Uncle Sahlah continued to speak at length on the various ways the Djinn can communicate, how focused thoughts are used, how the innate powers within blood markers can activate sigils and devices. All the while, Phixit is poring through the third tome. His mind was taking it all in as his curiosity and urge to learn more drove him to turn over every page and not stop until he was done. Then, at long last, it WAS done. The gnome turned the back cover of the third tome over to meet the end page and put tension back in the leather spine. Mentally, the gnome felt as though he had eaten an entire feast all by himself just up to the point of regurgitation. He pushed himself back into his chair. One of the serving maidens brought a goblet to his lips. He blankly stared across the table towards his uncle and accepted the drink into his mouth. It was as though he hadn't drank in days. Yet, one small series of swallows sated his pallet.

It seemed as though his uncle had finished giving his series of speeches at just the same time as Phixit closed the cover of the third book. Twilight was upon the castle now. It wasn't truly dark and not yet very bright with light. The stars of the cosmos shown through the archways as though some surreal painting had been altered with fiery, vibrant colors. It was cooler than just a few minutes ago. The braziers on the wall were lit. And another series of food trays were being brought to the large table. Phixit reached his hand out to the first book as if he were hungry enough to take one more educated bite. But as he did, the three books slowly disappeared into aether and were gone. He looked at his uncle across the table with an inquisitive open mouthed stare.

"Not a trick. Well... to a degree. You now have all the knowledge you need within you to set yourself on your way to becoming whatever it is your Will demands. It is MY desire that we work together to bring about a few of what I deem to be necessary changes to your realm, as well as my own. But those decisions are truly yours to make. You are not my pawn. And I am not your captor." As he finished speaking, he again raised an arm, snapped his fingers once, and made a motion to be brought something. A male servant showed up seconds later with a scroll tube. Oddly enough, it was already Phixit's size.

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Over the next few hours, Sahlah and Phixit shared a meal while listening to the seductive sounds of flutes and harps, all the while being intertained with women dancing in thin scarves, veils, and golden bangles. When the meal was finished and the table cleared once more, the only thing that remained on the table was the scroll tube. Sahlah rose to his feet and motioned for Phixit to follow him. The dancers thinned and parted ways for the two as they strode towards a small grotto inset in one of the walls. A series of servants glided in with an armor rack and a small padded stool. On the rack was the gnomish armor, glistening in the light of a nearby brazier.

"Phixeuas, I wish you to pardon me for my abrupt conclusion of tonight's events. I have matters to attend to within my kaliphate and you, well, let's just say that time here does not mirror time in your realm. You need to get back rather quickly." The gnome complied as he advanced on the rack. As he did, servant girls glided past and lifted the armor. They helped him put his original clothing on and cinched up his armor, pushed on his boots, combed his hair with massaging fingers, and parted from his gaze each with their own lingering kisses. Phixit had not yet had a chance to explore the gratitude of the servants here and was now of a mind to do so. But, he heard the snap of Sahlah's finger and the servants retreated back towards the center of the hall.

"This way my friend," said Sahlah who extended an arm to motion towards one of the hallways out of this chamber. As Phixit walked by, Sahlah handed him the scroll tube. A minute or so later, and a few turns down the hallway, the sorcerer and the Djinn were standing at the foot of another grotto. On either side, stood two Djinn even larger in stature than Sahlah with the look of stern indifference on their faces; obviously guarding this small antechamber. One the floor of the grotto was a circular sigil in wide black lines. Encircling these lines were small individual sigils, only a few of which that Phixit recognized. As his attention began to focus narrowly on deciphering the sigils, Sahlah spoke one last time in a more governing turn as if to either impress or inform his guards within his given words.

"Phixeuas Orgontiam Zapponilium, it has been a pleasure to meet you this day. As you have the capacity to discover for yourself, you may be back here again to my welcoming hospitality. Just as a professor may test his pupil, so, now, do you have a test of your own. This portal has been charged and awaits your magical inscriptions. If you are as astute as I have belief in you, I will see you again and welcome you more as my equal than just a guest in my palace. Good journey to you." He backed away as he finished speaking and the guards stepped two steps further aside.

"Thank... thank you, Sahlah. I will... do my best to find my destiny." His words were a bit cracked in his voice. He was not quite sure what to do here. He had seen sigils on the floor before. Most of those were arcane traps that usually got sprung on his halfling roguish acquaintance. He stepped onto the center of the circle. The two circles glowed and a slight crackle of energy emanated forth. Phixit squatted down and moved his hand just above the surface of the stone floor on which the sigils were marked. When he got to a certain one, the tip began to glow blue. He touched his fingertip to the sigil and traced it. It began to glow a bright pale blue. He continued around the circumference until all but one remained. He took a breath and traced the last sigil. The entire circle seemed to turn into white light allowing Phixit's body to fall through it.

The light receded and the crackling stopped. There was a slight smell of burnt coal and the remnants of the sweet aroma from the large hall beyond the grotto. Phixit stood up slow and was a bit off balance. His

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surroundings were very familiar. He was in the back of his warehouse workshop just behind a bookcase. He kept them three feet away from the wall so they made a hallway. He quickly fondled over the top of the bookcase for a small item of any kind. He found an old farthing coin. A short muttered phrase and the coin glowed white, casting light all along the makeshift passage. The sigils were still on the floor, very faint, and were fading away to nothing. He remembered about the scroll tube around his neck. He tore it off, popped the toggle and fished out a rolled parchment from within. He unrolled the paper just enough to reveal that the sigils he had just traced and those now fading away from the transport circle. He had a starting point for his own private portal to the Plane of Air. He just needed some research and time to hone his magical talents.

Outside the warehouse, a halfling dressed in the drabbest of colors made his way up the street. Just as he was about to start the sequence of push plates to get the secret door to the warehouse open, the door flew open. Phixit jumped out, not really even noticing the halfling.

“Hey, Phixit. Hey... man. Where you been?”

“Oh, hey Tiberius. I didn’t see you there. Were you looking for me this morning?” responded Phixit, looking around at the cloud structures and noting the wind speed.

“No, man. Some of us have been looking for you for about the last ten days, dude,” the halfling retorted. It took a few seconds for that to sink in. Then he spun around and looked a bit hard at Tiberius. He didn’t seem to be joking. He thought back to Sahlah’s remark about time passing differently between “realms”. All the sorcerer had in response after that was...

“Hmpf!”

“Man, are you feeling alright? We have work to do and places to go,” stated Tiberius.

Phixit tucked the rolled parchment into his scroll tube and patted the halfling on the shoulder.

“What we really need to find is a decent library,” said Phixit.

“Library? What for? Books? Bor... ing!” he responded. “Dude, stop walking so fast. Why a library? Hey! Slow down.” And the two walked away into the morning bustle of the docks.