

1. Escape from Gormincrag is Impossible



It was a quarter past midnight, four weeks before Midwinter's End Eve, and a thirteen-year-old boy was dangling precariously from a disintegrating home-made rope hanging from outside the darkest tower of Gormincrag, the Rehabilitation Centre for the Re-Education of Dark Magic and Wicked Wizards.

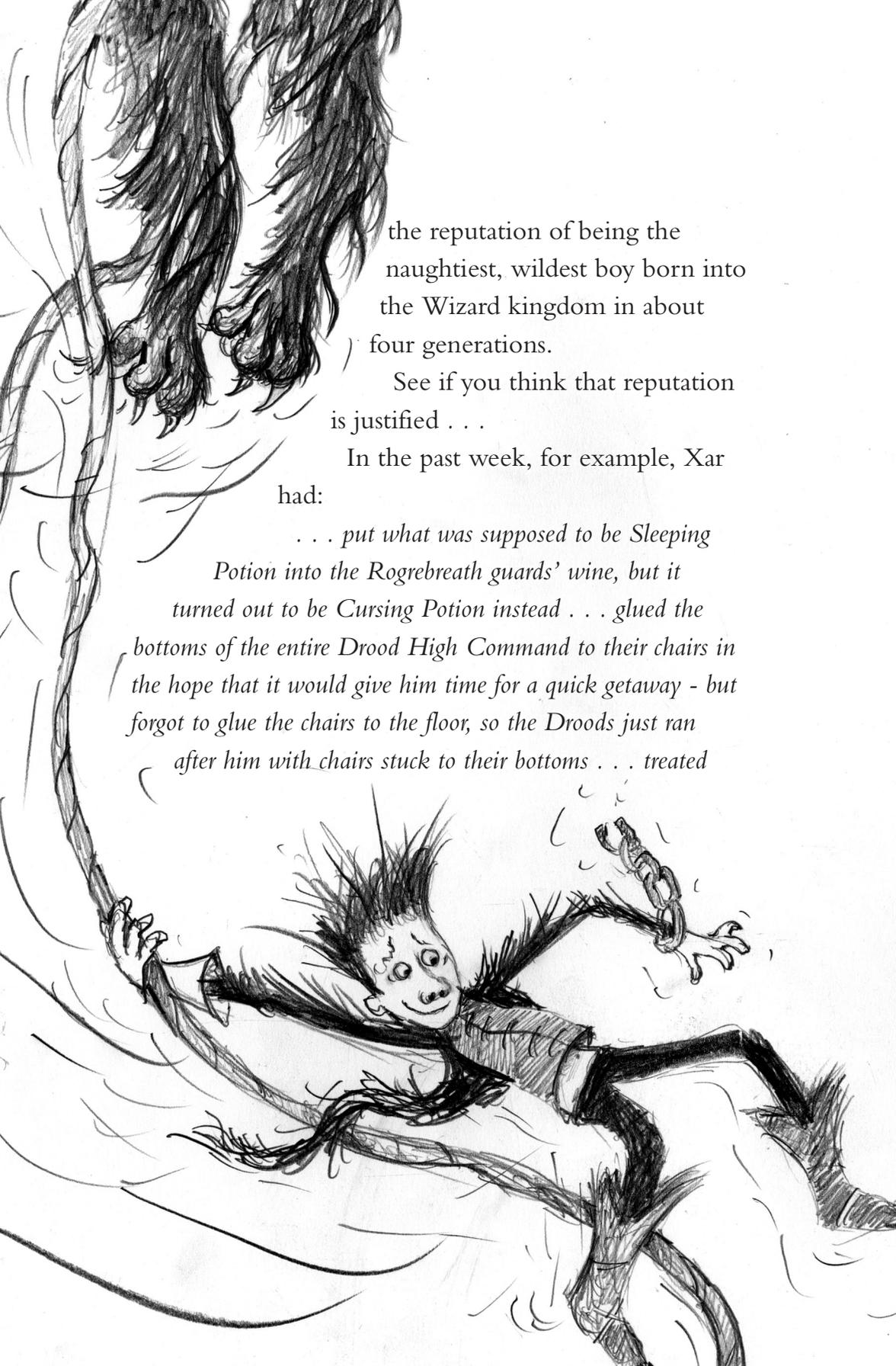
(That, by the way, is a long and fancy name for a jail, and not just any old jail, the most secure and impregnable jail in the wildwoods.)

The boy's name was Xar – (which is pronounced 'Zar' – I don't know why, spelling is weird) and he really, really, *really* should not have been there.

He was supposed to be INSIDE the prison, not OUTSIDE it, dangling fifty feet above sea level from one of the windows. That's one of the most important rules about prisons, and Xar really should have known that.

But Xar was not the kind of boy who followed the rules.

Xar *acted* first, and *thought* later, and this was exactly what had led him to be put in the Gormincrag Rehabilitation Centre in the first place, and given him



the reputation of being the naughtiest, wildest boy born into the Wizard kingdom in about four generations.

See if you think that reputation is justified . . .

In the past week, for example, Xar had:

. . . put what was supposed to be Sleeping Potion into the Rogrebreath guards' wine, but it turned out to be Cursing Potion instead . . . glued the bottoms of the entire Drood High Command to their chairs in the hope that it would give him time for a quick getaway - but forgot to glue the chairs to the floor, so the Droods just ran after him with chairs stuck to their bottoms . . . treated

himself to some stolen Invisibility Potion, but unfortunately it had only made his HEAD disappear, giving the Drood in charge of Reprogramming a terrible shock because he imagined on visiting Xar's cell that the prison had been invaded by headless GHOSTS . . .

None of these disobedient things had been *intentional*, exactly. They had all just happened by accident, in the course of him trying to escape, for even though Xar was a happy-go-lucky cheerful sort of person, two months of imprisonment had given even *his* high spirits a bit of a battering, and his quiff of hair had drooped a little under the pressure, and he had been feeling, at times, a little desperate.

Gormincrag was well known to be impossible to escape from, but Xar never let a little thing like impossibility put him off. So although to an outsider his present predicament might have looked pretty bad, Xar was remarkably pleased with himself for a person who was hanging on to a crumbling rope swaying violently above seas known to be infested with such dreadful monsters as Blunderbouths, Daggerfins, and Bloody Barbeards.

His wide-awake eyes were bright with excitement and hope.

'You see!' Xar whispered triumphantly to his





Squeezypoos

companions. 'What did I tell you? We're doing brilliantly! We've *nearly* escaped already!'

And Xar was right, they had really done a very good job to get this far.

The Gormincrag Detention Centre for the Re-education of Dark Magic and Wicked Wizards had been designed to imprison some of the most terrifying monsters in the entire Magical world. Bogeymen. Ogres of all sizes and savageries. Jack o' Kents, Bugbears, Kelpies, Grim Annises, you name it, and even, once upon a time, dare I say it, WITCHES, that were once extinct, and had recently re-emerged in that part of the wildwoods.

NO ONE, no Dark-sprite, no Rogrebreath however large and terrifying, no Wicked Wizard of spells the most fiendish, had EVER escaped from Gormincrag before.

People had tried of course, and the legends of brave but

failed escape attempts

from Gormincrag

were told from

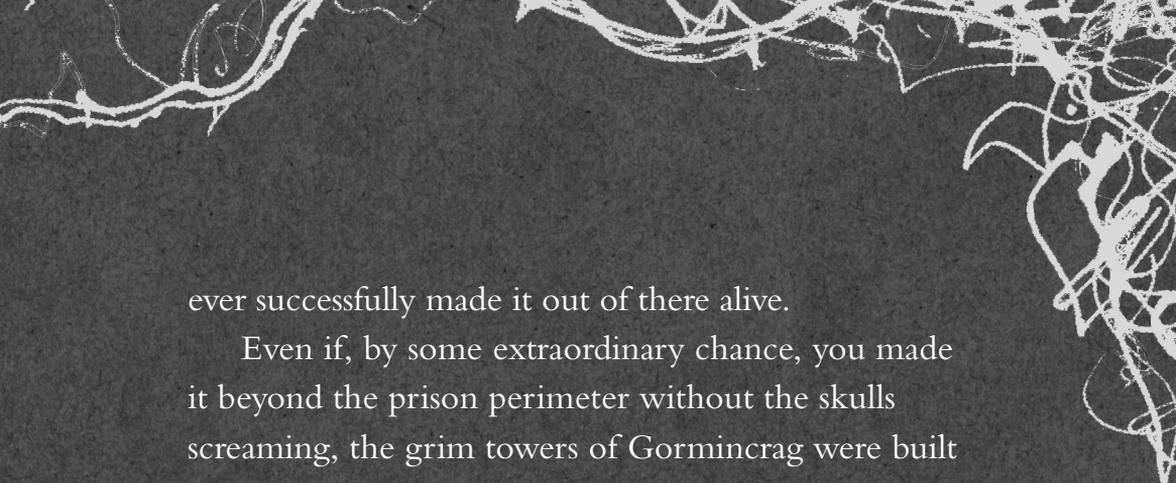
sprite to sprite

across the years.

But no one had



Bumbleboozle



ever successfully made it out of there alive.

Even if, by some extraordinary chance, you made it beyond the prison perimeter without the skulls screaming, the grim towers of Gormincrag were built on seven islands set in a sea called prettily ‘*the Sea of Skulls*’, and the treacherous waves would get you, or those vicious merfolk, the Bloody Barbeards, would swim out of their holes in the Drowned Forest on the seafloor and get you, and bring you back.

As the son of a King Enchanter, and a boy with a great deal of personal charisma, Xar had quite a few followers.

At the moment he was accompanied by five sprites (Tiffinstorm, Timeloss, Hinkypunk, Ariel, and Mustardthought) – and these were beautiful, fierce-looking creatures, resembling a cross between a very small human and an angry insect, and three hairy fairies, (Squeezjoos, Bumbleboozle, and The Baby), smaller, more bee-like animals, who were too young to have climbed into their cocoons and metamorphosed into proper adult sprites yet.

Sprites can light up like stars in the nighttime, but these ones did not want to be detected at the moment, so they had subdued the light of their little bodies to the very dimmest of glows.

The
Baby

