

When armies can invade solar systems and magic can destroy planets, only the Xen Guardians can preserve the peace. As a new enemy emerges, Prince Xentor prepares to take on the burden of his ancestors. He will not be alone.

Guardians of Xen

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Guardians of Xen

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Part I - Apprentice

Chapter 1

Black clouds of smoke filled the sky, plunging the villagers into shadow as they rushed to pour water on the burning inn. Every man, woman, and child in the town of Ka'Loen knew their role, having been through this many times in the past few years. The women and children formed a chain, filling buckets with river water and passing them down the line to the fire where they were emptied and sent back. Most of the men had already climbed up to the roofs of the larger houses and were firing arrows into the air, trying to repel the attacking dragons. The foolish magician was, of course, in his shop searching for the rainstorm spell that always seemed to be lost when needed most.

A few of the older folk, too slow and weak to be of any real use, simply stood in the cobblestone streets watching the flames eat through the flimsy wooden structure, and watching the horrible beasts circle in the skies above, spurring out a few last breaths of fire before flying off to the west to their well-protected home in the deep heart of the forest. They never stayed very long, preferring to destroy a few small houses and retreat before the archers could ready themselves. Today, however, was different. For the first time in months, a group of men had journeyed into the forest to end these raids once and for all, and apparently their deaths were not enough to quench the beasts' hunger. This time the target had been the village inn, the social center of Ka'Loen, where the men would gather after a hard day of labor, drinking and singing until the sun set.

Now the inn was gone, or would be shortly since despite the efforts of the villagers, this fire was too large to be quenched so easily. The roof was already gone and the third-floor rooms were burning as the dragon-fire worked its way down. Just then, the buckets stopped and the archers turned as a bright red light bathed the town square. Perhaps the magician had actually found his spell and would save the inn before it became damaged beyond repair. No, this light wasn't coming from Mallus, who was emerging from his magic shop with a curious look on his face. It was simply a point floating in mid-air a few feet from the ground. Then the point of light grew in intensity, expanding into an oval shape as tall as a man and twice as wide. Within the shape, two silhouettes appeared, growing larger...

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Chapter 2

The reddish-blue clouds swirled in the sky above, casting strange shadows on the bleak desert landscape of Xen. The mountains blocked the view to the north and south, but the desert stretched as far to the east as the eye could see. From his bedroom window on the upper floor of the royal palace, Xentor could see several small villages nearby and the tiniest speck of red light that marked the location of the Pedestal. There really wasn't much else to see except the occasional caravans bringing supplies between the tiny settlements. That's why he was glad to be finally leaving for a while.

The sky would darken soon, and he wanted to leave while he could still see well enough to use a portal orb, unless of course Relvar insisted on creating one himself. Stopping only to pick up a small metal cylinder laying on his dresser, the young prince left his room and started on his way to the main courtyard.

"Leaving so soon, brother? I was hoping you would at least stay for dinner." She had been waiting in the hallway, not about to miss her chance to bid him farewell. As always, she was dressed to kill, wearing a stunning white dress that revealed every curve of her body and a cloak that let her hide them at will. No one would contest that Xentalia was one of the most beautiful women on Xen, but very few of them would believe that there was no magic involved.

"I've already eaten. Besides, I've heard that there are dishes on that world that make our food seem like desert sand."

"I'm sure we can conjure food just as good as anything on—where did you say you were going?"

"Earth"

"What a miserable little planet. I hope you contacted the Uranans. It's in their territory." She was just thinking of excuses, of course. Xentalia had always been protective of her younger brother, and clearly wasn't ready for him to leave Xen without her.

"Everything's been arranged. The Uranans gave their assent, so long as I don't reveal their presence to the lesser races. Now, I really want to get going, if you don't mind, sis—"

"Why Earth? You have billions of inhabited worlds to choose from, and you choose a miserable little hybrid world that hasn't even discovered dimensional travel yet?"

"There were reasons. They look just like us, for one."

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“So do the races on a million other worlds. You know it as well as I.”

“Well this one is special. I’m not sure why exactly, but, well, there’s something about it... I just have to go there.”

She sighed, realizing he’d made up his mind. “Well, good luck brother. Come back soon.”

“I will.” He smiled to her briefly then made his way down the hallway. This part of the castle was only modestly decorated, with rich red carpeting and golden candleholders on the unpainted, brown, marble walls. The entrance hall, however, was a different story.

The grand staircase that led down to the ground floor of the palace was carved from a solid block of shiny black stone, something Relvar had once referred to as “obsidian.” On each side was an intricately carved marble railing, and at the bottom was a bare black floor formed of a single giant slab of black marble. Well, perhaps “carved” would be the wrong word, since no manual labor was involved in the making of Castle Xen. No, this magnificent structure was conjured up many thousands of years ago by one of Xentor’s ancestors.

He made his way down the obsidian staircase, looking towards the gold-trimmed double doors on the left wall. There stood Xenlic, captain of the castle guard, waiting in front of the entrance to the throne room, dressed as always in full armor with a pair of Blade Staves at his sides. He wasn’t actually a member of the royal family, but the surname was given to him to honor his loyal service for so many years.

“Young prince, his majesty Lord Xen is in conference with the Cairean ambassador, but sends his greetings and wishes you well on your journey!”

“If he actually chose to say so in person, I would probably die of shock. But thank you, Xenlic.”

The old soldier paused, looking Xentor over carefully for a short moment. “Where is your weapon, prince?”

Xentor drew the metal cylinder from his pants pocket and held it up as he reached the bottom of the stairs. For decades, Xenlic had been teaching him the art of melee combat with countless different kinds of weapons, and had a habit of pointing out every mistake no matter how minor. He smiled, proud to show his instructor that this time there was no mistake.

“How many times must I tell you, Xentor? Keep it on your belt within easy reach! Do you think your enemy will stand and wait while you search your pockets for it?”

“I’m... sorry. I forgot...” He clipped the six-inch cylinder to his belt, hanging it at his left hip, his moment of pride cut away in an instant.

“Well be sure not to forget when you’re out there. I won’t be there to protect you.”

“I know.” He quickly made his way across the entrance hall, and the immense stone doors swung open to allow him passage. Damned soldier! Why must he always be right?

The main courtyard was completely empty. Not a single person could be seen between the main palace and the outer walls. Xentor made his way across the sand-covered expanse to a small cabin near the far corner, the home of Relvar, who over the past few years had been teaching him the art of Xen Magic. Relvar was the most powerful mage on the planet, even more so than Lord Xen himself, Xentor’s father. Ranked an Arch-Sorcerer, the old man had every right to claim the throne but preferred to sit on the sidelines and act as an advisor to the rulers and a teacher to the new apprentices. He was excellent in both areas.

“Leaving already, my apprentice? It is still early,” Relvar called out as Xentor pushed open the wooden door to the cabin.

“Aye, I’m eager to see Earth.”

“Indeed. I have prepared a portal orb for you. Come in.”

Xentor walked inside, glancing around as he always did at the dozens of books, documents, orbs, and amulets on the shelves. Some of the books dated back hundreds of years, full of historical records, magical techniques, and anything the old mage decided was worth remembering. Only one important book was missing from his collection, as it was stored under heavy protection in the royal throne room.

Relvar emerged from the back room, dressed in a modest brown shirt and black pants, devoid of the black cloak he always wore in the palace. Many of the older mages seemed to prefer black clothing, though Xentor wasn’t sure why.

“Are you sure you’re ready to journey alone to an unfamiliar world? You have barely begun your training, and there are those who are unfriendly toward Guardians.”

“I’ve spent nearly my entire life in this castle, Mentor. I only see other worlds when my sire allows me to accompany him on diplomatic missions. Besides, Earth is a primitive world with weak magic, and I can take care of myself in a fight.”

“Indeed you can. Xenlic has always been a skilled teacher, perhaps better in his profession than I am in mine. Still, I would prefer you pass at least the Magician test before going out on your own.” Despite his words, Relvar was

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making surprisingly little effort to dissuade him. With a simple glance, a small, dark-red orb lifted off its shelf and floated over to Xentor's hands.

"Thank you, mentor."

"Go now, young apprentice. It is best not to keep a woman waiting." He smiled warmly, then turned and headed into the back room. Xentor turned around, not at all surprised to find Lenalta standing there. She must have teleported over just after he left the palace. He smiled at her, grabbing the portal orb and walking out of the cabin to meet her.

"Your sister said you would be here, love, though she asked me to convince you to stay."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Of course not! I want to see Earth just as much as you!"

He smiled, glad to have her support. Then again, he never suspected otherwise, since she had always supported him no matter how wrong he was. Having her along would make this trip even better. Having her along made *anything* better. Ever since they met almost five years ago on one of his sire's trips to her home world, they had spent nearly every day together, or at least every night. Whenever Xentor wasn't busy training with Xenlic or Relvar, he would be with Lenalta, pacing along the parapets of the castle walls or on the quiet beaches near the mansion in which she lived. She was no princess, but her father was one of several advisors to her king, and that afforded her family certain privileges. One of those privileges was access to the finest of attire, custom made and imported from any part of the world. This often led Xentor to wonder why she normally dressed in a simple, pale-yellow blouse and an old pair of beige pants.

"Are you sure you have everything you need? It's a long way to Earth," he asked.

"I have you, love. What else do I need?"

He smiled and turned towards the open courtyard. He held the portal orb before him in one hand and waved the other over it slowly. As he was taught, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the Xen Magic. In moments, it appeared in his mind as clouds of differently-colored mists, flowing and combining in all directions. He opened his eyes and the mists remained in his vision, a dense black cloud within the orb itself. Obeying his will, the red mists around the orb moved through the glass to combine with the black, triggering the spell stored within.

As he allowed the mists to fade from his vision, the orb began to glow red, and a point of light formed in the air a few feet in front of them. It slowly expanded, forming an oval shape about the height of a man and twice

as wide. The interior clarified, showing a stone path stretching into a world of purplish mists. He pocketed the orb, took Lenalta's hand in his, and stepped onto the path.

"So where on Earth are we going?"

Hmm, good question. When he activated the orb, he never told it exactly where on the planet to take them. Apparently, it chose its own destination. "I have no idea."

They walked in silence for a time, following the narrow stone path through the purple void. Occasionally they would spot a fragment of rock floating aimlessly through the void, and at one point, Xentor thought he spotted another path in the distance. There were hundreds of Xen guardians, constantly traveling to and from countless dimensions, but it was still rare to see one in transit, given the near-infinite size of what they called "Trans-Dimensional Space." No one on Xen or on any of the worlds they'd visited had any idea what Trans-D space actually was. Some people theorized that all of the dimensions exist at the same location in the same way pieces of paper could be layered, and that walking through Trans-D was simply the way you moved from one layer to another. Others thought mortal minds simply could not fathom the concept of dimensional travel, and it was just a hallucination. Regardless, to travel from one dimension to another required a trip through Trans-D, and so they traversed the dangerous area. It was indeed dangerous, since stepping off the path could leave a foolish mage stranded in the void for the rest of his natural life.

Lenalta broke the silence. "What should we tell the Earth people if they ask where we're from?"

"Tell them we're from a far-away village. Just make up a nonsense name. They'll have no reason to doubt us."

"What name should we use?" She seemed a bit nervous. There was no reason to worry, after all. The Earth people were far too primitive to be any kind of threat.

"It doesn't matter. Even if I tell them I'm from Xen, they'll probably think it's a town on the other side of the world."

"Well what if they don't like outsiders? My magic won't be any good in a fight, and you've barely started learning yours."

"I've been training with Xenlic longer than most of the Earth people have been alive."

"I hope you can keep your temper in check, love. You'll probably draw your weapon the moment someone says anything even resembling an insult."

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He had to laugh at that. Sure, he tended towards violence a bit more than most, but she made it seem so much worse. “Nay, I don’t care what the primitives say about me. Of course, if any fool utters one wrong word to you, I’ll cut out his tongue and feed it to him.”

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. “Always the guardian, love...”

“Aye”

Several silent minutes later, the end of the path came into view. When they reached it, the second portal would open and they would be delivered to their destination.

Still nervous, Lenalta turned to him again. “So what do we do when we get there?”

“Find the nearest town, and see what happens.”

“What if the portal lands us in a town? How will we explain how we appear out of thin air?”

“On a world this primitive, what are the chances of a portal randomly taking us to a populated area?”

Lenalta said nothing, because they had just reached the end of the path. The second portal opened and they stepped into the unknown.

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Chapter 3

What were the chances of them landing in the middle of a town? Apparently, better than Xentor expected. He quickly glanced around at the small wooden houses and cobblestone streets. Most of the villagers seemed to be busy passing buckets of water from a small stream to—

“Look, Xentor! That building is on fire!”

He was just about to mention that, but had noticed that most of the villagers had paused in their tasks and were staring at Lenalta and him. Some men were running towards them, armed with swords and axes. He also noticed his hand was already grasping the cylinder on his belt and consciously forced himself to pause, not willing to prove Lenalta right so soon. There had to be a peaceful way out of this.

Wave to the fire, young mage!

What was that? Who said that? He looked around for the source of the strange echoing voice, but no one but Lenalta was that close.

Wave to the fire!

There it was again! Well, the armed men were getting closer, and it couldn't hurt. He kept his left hand on his weapon, raising his right towards the burning building, palm forward. To his surprise, the reaction was nearly instant. A crack of thunder got everyone's attention as a storm cloud materialized above the building. Torrents of rain suddenly poured from it, quenching the fire in moments. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone. Xentor just stared, trying to hide his surprise, for obviously whoever summoned that cloud wanted him to take the credit for it.

“I thought you were still an apprentice, love.”

That voice again! No, that was Lenalta, whispering into his ear. He spoke softly in reply, keeping his eyes on the villagers. “It wasn't me.”

“Then who was it?”

To the magic shop, young one...

Magic shop? He looked around at the nearby buildings, but he couldn't read the signs. How foolish to assume that just because they spoke one of the frame's common languages, that their writings would be just as understandable.

“Hmm, look at that old man. He's not like the rest of them.” She was always so observant, both a gift and curse to him whenever he made a mistake. Xentor followed her gaze and saw an old man in a dark-grey cloak, walking into a small shop. That struck him as odd, since every other person

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in the village was cautiously approaching, wondering whom their unlikely savior was.

“He was watching us from the moment we left the portal, as if he was expecting us...”

“Perhaps he was.” That was all the proof he needed. That had to be the magic shop, and that man had to be the anonymous mage who had put out the fire. Still holding Lenalta’s hand, he ignored the developing crowd and walked calmly towards the shop.

“Who are they?” asked one old woman.

“Stay back, son, they might be demons,” warned a father as he held an arm in front of his teenaged son.”

“But father, he just saved the inn!” the boy replied.

The inside of the magic shop reminded Xentor of his mentor’s cabin. Every wall was covered with books, scrolls, potions, scrolls, amulets, and trinkets he couldn’t identify. The old man sat behind the large stone counter in an armchair, looking at Xentor as one would at a pet.

“Greetings, young mage... I am Mallus the Magician, and this is the town of Ka’Loen.”

The man knew more than he was letting on, and Xentor decided not to bestow more information upon him than necessary. “I am Xentor, this is Lenalta. Was that voice—”

“Yes, that was me,” the old man replied. Lenalta was looking back and forth between them, a bit lost in the conversation.

“You wanted the people to think the rain spell was mine. Why?”

“The villagers think of me as a bumbling fool with barely enough magic to light a pipe. Who am I to dispute that?”

Xentor hesitated long enough to think through the situation. “I suppose I should thank you. You saved me from an unfavorable fight. They’ll think of me as a hero—”

“Not quite yet, young one. That fire was the work of dragons, and quenching it will only buy a respite. They will come again, see their failure, and attack more aggressively. The villagers will blame you for angering the great serpents, and you will be offered up as a sacrifice. It will not be pleasant.”

Even Lenalta was speechless after that cruel revelation. Was the old magician psychic, or did he plan this from the beginning? Why did he save them from the paranoid townspeople only to let them be killed? Perhaps this was merely a clever lie, but to what end?

Finally, Lenalta spoke up. “You wouldn’t tell us that just to scare us, since we could always just go back home and escape the situation. What do you want from us?”

The old man smiled at Lenalta. “Ah, young lady... You have a keen mind to accompany your beauty. No wonder he loves you so strongly.”

Now it was Xentor’s turn to be speechless. How could the old man know of his feelings for Lenalta?

“You didn’t answer my question, milord,” she replied.

“Indeed. The issue is not what I want, but what the village needs. The dragons have been raiding us for years without end, and someone must put a stop to it.”

Xentor frowned, not quite willing to let a feeble Earth magician give him orders. “Perhaps you overestimate our powers, old man. We aren’t prepared to fight even a single dragon, and I assume there are several.”

“Fifty-three, to be exact. More if you include the young ones, though I doubt the parents would ever allow you to approach their children. Take the main road west, and follow it into the forest. The dragons will not be difficult to find.”

The two of them paused a moment, exchanging a glance. Lenalta was probably thinking the same as him. This old magician had to be completely insane. “Magician, do you really expect us to face fifty-three dragons and survive? A mission like that is surely suicide.”

“You underestimate yourself, young one. Go now.” With that comment, the old man stood up and walked into the back room with surprising swiftness, closing the door behind him.

“What now, love?”

“If this Mallus person is telling the truth, our only options are to face the dragons or flee the town. I would look like a complete fool to run home to Xen so soon.”

“Our lives are more important than your pride, you know.”

She was right. She was always right. Then again, perhaps there was more to the situation than either of them had seen. The old man was clearly more powerful and knowledgeable than he looked, and didn’t seem like the kind of fool who would suggest a hopeless quest. Somehow, the old mage expected them to complete the quest, so either he wanted them dead or it truly was feasible. If he wanted to kill them, why allow Xentor to take credit for the rainstorm?

Xentor contemplated this for a moment, and then turned to Lenalta. “Which road did he say to follow?”

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“He said to take the main road west and—Wait, are you actually thinking of walking into the dragons’ den?”

He nodded once in reply, then turned and walked outside with Lenalta nervously following. This time, he would prove her wrong.

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