

## Epics of Ghulu- Magik

### Prologue

In the land of Ghulu, all residents practice the same rare art form; magic. Sharashla was the mightiest wizard in all of the land. She could move buildings with the flick of her wrists. Even the oceans bowed to her mighty power. Although she was very strong, the citizens of Ghulu respected Sharashla and let her rule to protect their lands from the angry gods.

Not all of the gods are angry, however. Archimus, the god of all gods has built an army to descend upon the magic kingdom. With his power, combined with that of the other gods, Archimus sent powerful storms and destructive earthquakes to punish the land of Ghulu. The gods are upset because they believe the humans have forgotten them. Humans used to pray for salvation. The gods blessed them with magical powers. Since then, the people have become unresponsive and neglectful to the gods. Their independence has made them greedy. "Why pray for something that you can just make appear all by yourself?" the humans thought.

Sharashla could watch her people be oppressed no longer. She sacrificed her physical form to create a barrier around the entire continent of Ghulu. This barrier was placed to keep the gods out of the land, keeping them at bay for a century. The seal on the barrier is breaking and the land seeks a hero to rise against the gods and defeat them. To determine the best-fit wizard, one must participate and win in the skills tournament to be held next Wednesday at the Coliseum.

### The Coliseum- Part 1

Axle walked down the narrow pathway into the Coliseum. He was blinded by the harsh rays of the sun beating down on him. He looked all around him, at the hundreds and thousands of wizards all waiting for him to emerge from the gates. A voice spoke from the intercom above:

**"Ladies and gentlemen! Presenting our seventh competitor, from the southern deserts of Ghulu... Axle Presto!"**

The crowd began cheering anew. Axle was no legendary fighter, but his skills were known across the land. He fought with a unique style using the elements to his advantage. While other wizards may use disability and shape-shifting spells, Axle was more of a fire and ice kind of guy. He joined the six other competitors already introduced on the stage in the middle of the ring. He stood beside a tall and very handsome man by the name of Michael Charm. He had shining golden locks and carried a blue rose with him wherever he went. He smirked at Axle: "Good luck child." he snarled. Just then, the intercom spoke again:

**"Now! Get ready for the one, the only, the beautifully talented Lady Macabre!!!"**

The crowd stood jaws dropped in awe. Lady Macabre was the most beautiful woman imaginable. Her long black hair and bold eyes pierced through your gaze and made your knees

shudder. She wore a long black dress that sort of frayed at the bottom with a signature witch hat to cover her head. She strutted slowly to the stage as if to replicate a catwalk, then tossed her hat into the crowd. A large man in the front row caught it and before he could enjoy the moment, he was turned to stone. Lady Macabre let out a little chuckle and danced her way onto the stage.

She approached Axle and Michael. "My friends just call me Lady," she said flirtatiously. Axle could simply reply "Gunh!" and Michael fell to the ground. Both struck by one act of lust, Lady knew she had a clear advantage in this tournament.

"Ugh, boys" the fifth contestant barked as she rolled her eyes sarcastically. Contestant number five was named Allie Grove. Axle knew her from the magazines. Allie was a shape-shifter and a darned good one at that. She could turn into land creatures that have underwater traits. She's also the only shape-shifter to ever successfully replicate a dragon. Axle worried about his competition but hoped that he had trained enough. You are only allowed to carry five spells throughout the competition. You can, however, make one substitution after the second round. Axle worked hard to get pick his strongest five spells and was very confident in his abilities. He believed that if he could lead the wizards to freedom, he could finally be recognized as the powerful wizard he truly is. He was snapped out of his thought by the roar of the crowd over the intercom:

**"Well, folks the stage is set! All sixteen of our competitors are ready for the first round to begin. Battles will be held in a random environment and all combat will be 1 v 1. Only five spells per wizard and that includes shapeshifting spells. The winner after four rounds will be crowned champion!!!"**

The crowd roared again. A man in a rather dashing-looking suit came out onto the stage holding a fancy top hat. He stood in front of the first contestant. The intercom spoke again:

**"Now, Anthony the Great will pick his first-round matchup."**

Anthony reached into the hat, hands shaking with pure nerves. He drew a name and unfolded the crumpled piece of paper. He spoke the name "Michael Charm." Suddenly, Anthony and Michael were transported from the Coliseum and out of sight. The crowd watched the battle on the screen in front of them. Only moments passed when the doors opened and Anthony the Great emerged from the doors holding a blue rose in his hand. He tossed it in the air and pointed his wand. "Combustive!" he shouted and watched as the rose burned to just ash. Axle had only just then realized what he had gotten himself into. When you leave the Coliseum, you may never come back.

## The Coliseum- Part 2

Axle was clueless as to what was happening around him. It was only when the blue-haired girl pulled a name out of the hat that he started to pay attention again. She spoke "Axle Presto."

Axle was transported from the Coliseum into a dark and damp cave. "Aluminous" Axle hummed. His wand began to glow a faint light, just enough so that he could see the rocks around him. He chose a direction at random and began walking slowly to not be heard. He followed the narrow tunnels into a massive room full of mining equipment. Tracks, carts, lifts, and drills of all kinds. Although it looked to be abandoned now, the equipment looked to be in fairly good shape. It was full of soot and dust, but a quick shine would make these new. Axle picked up a diamond and put it in his shirt pocket for safekeeping. He examined the entire mine shaft meticulously as to learn every nook and cranny of it but stopped when he came across a large switch, switched off.

"I wonder if this runs the power for the mine shaft?" he thought. He wiped the label clean to make sure it was safe. Axle looked at the reflection in the metallic of the label. He noticed the tiniest movement and dove out of the way.

"Serpent Snakeskin!" shouted the blue-haired girl. She launched an attack like a laser beam with the face of a snake. The beam missed Axle and hit the switch, flicking it back on. All of the mine carts; drills and lifts began operating again. The noise itself was enough distraction for Axle. "Mistappear" he cast. Axle blew up into a large cloud of mist around the blue-haired girl and reappeared fifty feet above her in a cavern.

"You can't hide from me!" the blue-haired girl stated.  
"Aqua Marine always gets her prey."

A light bulb went off in Axle's mind. This was THE Aqua Marine. Aqua was legendary in the Ghulu. She was the only wizard to ever swim to the bottom of the Great Sea and live to tell the tale. Luckily, Axle had done his homework on her. Unless she was near the water, she was useless. Axle watched her look aimlessly around for him.

"Come out Axle! Come out and play!" she mocked.

Axle was not happy now. He was being taunted by the likes of her. He jumped off the ledge and cast a furious spell. "Shock Storm!" he yelled as large sparks began shooting out of his wand. Aqua just laughed as the shots were firing all over the place, nowhere near his target.

"HA! You talk big, but you got no shot."

Just as she said that a shock wave hit her straight right in the stomach, knocking her to the ground. She got up and ran down the nearest tunnel away from Axle. He chased Aqua up and down the cavernous maze. Continuously firing Shock Storm after Shock Storm to no avail. He just couldn't find his aim with that spell. Aqua stopped in the dead middle of the tunnel.

“Liquefy” she pronounced articulately. This turned Aqua into a life form made of water that she used to snake her way up the cavern walls. She used her water form to crack the sediment on the ceiling causing the cave to collapse. Axle was trapped and more rocks were falling by the minute. As the room around Axle began to close in, he closed his eyes as to better focus.

“No more silly games Aqua! Infernus!” Axle cast. His body began to heat up and his core temperature rose to immense temperatures. He combusted into flame and eventually his body was made purely of fire. Aqua was feeling the heat and began to evaporate. She escaped the chasm of the collapsed cavern and turned back into her human form. Still wondering whether Axle would immerge, she waited. The rocks that once stood as a prison began to melt before her eyes. How could he get to such an intense temperature? The chase was on again. Aqua had a good head start but was having trouble avoiding the fireballs being shot repeatedly.

She ran until she hit a dead end. Slapping her hands against the walls, she turned to her eventual maker. “Serpent Snakeskin.” she cast. Only to be tossed aside by Axle-like bags on trash day. His core was so hot, he melted the stone he stood on with every step. Aqua rose her wand in the air and slammed it down as hard as she could. The ground beneath Axle began to crack and eventually, the whole room’s floor opened up. They fell to the floor below and into an underground lake. Axle’s flames were put out immediately. It created thick steam through the entire cave and made it nearly impossible to see. Axle watched underwater as Aqua was shape-shifting into a carnivorous fiend.

Axle swam as fast as he could to the nearest ledge and looked over the calm underground lake. He could hardly see ten feet in front of his face. When from behind came Aqua’s Aquarian form. She was a menacing beast. Two sets of teeth, razor-sharp fins, and a tail that could whip like a bullwhip. “Satan’s fish tank has spawned another.” Axle thought. Aqua pounced out of the water and sliced Axle’s leg with her fin, only to dive back in and jump out again. This time slapping his face with her tail. Axle was all bloody and beat, charred and wet. He had only one hope. When Aqua attacked out of the water again, Axle dove out of the way and waited for Aqua to return to the water. He cast a Shock Storm and pointed directly at the lake. The cave surged with power, lighting up seven types of yellow and orange. The raw water bubbled and boiled, adding more steam to the already thick fog field. Axle paused and waited a moment when suddenly he noticed the lifeless body of Aqua Marine floating on the water.

A door made only of light appeared before him. This must be the way out. Axle made his way through the door and found himself back in the Coliseum, the crowd cheering his name.

Axle sat quietly in the corner of the Coliseum all alone. It was dark now and the first round of the tournament had come to an end. He thought about his battle earlier that afternoon. Did he have to take the life of another to prove he was better than them? The principles of this tournament made no sense to him. That is why he had to win, to make the place he lived a little bit better. Axle believed that the people and the gods could work together to create better things for Ghulu. So Axle sat and pondered these things alone in the Coliseum. He was surprised to see a familiar face approaching him.

Allie Grove was a very fit girl for her age. She was nearly forty-four years young and you could not tell. She had the body of a thirty-two-year-old and the spryness of a jaguar, literally. Her go-to shape-shift is a jaguar. She loved to embody the spirit of the feline. She felt free to move, but deadly and stealthy when she needed to be. Plus cats always land on their feet. She gingerly approached Axle with a rather impressed look.

“You battled well today skip. I like your style, but boy does you need to work on your aim!”

Axle smirked. “So you watched the playback did you?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t show up. Playback is an excellent time to strategize.”

Axle’s smirk turned into a chuckle. “I don’t need a strategy, I think on my feet. You should know a thing or two about that.”

Allie felt mocked. “Well, I hope you’re coming to practice tomorrow. This tournament is merciless, some practice in the field could do you some good.”

Axle’s chuckle rose to a hearty laugh. “If I want to practice, I’ll just wait until the second round.” he laughed away.

Allie stormed off in a furious rage. Not impressed at the half-witted remarks made by her competitor. When Axle had time to reflect on the conversation, he realized he may have been a bit of a jerk. But it was just like she said, this tournament is merciless and Axle was not here to make friends.

When Axle woke in the morning, it was to the sound of the intercom blasting at a ridiculous volume.

**“Good morning contestants! Congratulations on your first-round success. Today is the day for rest! Why not enjoy a complimentary breakfast and state-of-the-art practice field? Have a good day and be ready, tomorrow we begin round two!”**

Axle crept out of bed. The first mention of breakfast and he’s the first to spring into action. He took his walk to the cafeteria. Stopped at the personalized omelet station... twice. Then he made his way to the showers. He took a nice long steamy shower. It may be his last one after

all. That mentality grew on him. He crept back into bed. It was just a nap he thought. He would be up again and ready to go to practice, just as Allie suggested.

Axle woke out of his nap to watch the gorgeous sunset over the mountain range. He scrambled out of bed and towards the door of the cabin where all the competitors were rooming. As he reached out for the handle, the door flung open and a muscular, hairy-looking man by the name of Rosco Rodriguez walked through the entrance.

“You should watch where you’re going little man.” Rosco gawked.

Axle’s nose bled for nearly twenty minutes as he made his way over to the training area. Only Allie and Lady Macabre were using the field. Allie approached Axle first as Lady shoved her nose the other way, ignoring their presence.

“About time you showed up!” Allie said panting with every word. She was winded from having run so many laps and judging by the cat fur all over her clothes, she’d been shape-shifting today.

“I overslept, my bad!” Axle said nearly panicked.

“Well, let’s get to work then” Allie insisted.

The two of them trained until the owls howled in the night. Axle shot his Shock Storm and missed the target that Allie had set up for him. He had nearly given up. He was tired and feeling frustrated. Allie recognized his behavior. It reminded her of herself when she was growing up.

“Axle, stop,” Allie said shaking her head. “What you need is a little less intensity. You need to let your mind go. All your troubles disappear and everything has to go blank.”

Axle regrouped himself. He took a deep breath and exhaled accordingly. “SHOCK STORM!” he gasped. The shockwave curved up, flying nearly ten feet over the target’s head.

“UGH, not even close!” Axle said stomping his feet.

Just then, the ball of energy stopped over top of the target, dropping directly on top of it and frying it to pieces.

“You’ll do just fine kid. I’m sure of it.” Allie just smirked. Axle brushed it off like it was no big deal. Tomorrow was another day, another day he has to prove himself.

All eight contestants gathered in the Coliseum at the crack of dawn. Only Lady, Arthur, and Miles Gallaway were present when Axle showed up. Miles was a bigger woman. She was physically fit and hard as a rock. Miles was an underdog for sure but snuck her way past the first round on good luck alone. Axle hoped that he battled her this round.

Rosco was next to arrive along with the other big goon in the tournament Oscar Kazam. Oscar was the same build as Rosco and used finesse in his fighting style. He never missed a beat. What he lacked in brain power, he made up for it in raw power. He could go far in the tournament for sure.

Next, the Summoner arrived. Artemus Flask was an amazing conjurer and could summon spirits and furious animals alike. If you're not careful, he can catch you off guard. Arty was a small guy but he was a force to be reckoned with. Axle hoped he didn't have to battle that guy. The intercom spoke, disrupting the small banter between the participants:

**“Good morning contestants! This morning we will pair you with your second-round partners. I hope no one made friends, for they could be gone by the end of this day. As I call your name, please pair up with your partners and head over to the Coliseum to prepare for the show. Is everyone present?”**

Axle looked around the crowd and counted only seven people.

“Allie Grove is missing!” shouted Arthur to the omniscient intercom.

Allie could be seen running as fast as she could towards the meeting area.

“Wait! I'm coming wait!” Allie was panting as she arrived “Sorry, I slept in. Someone was keeping me up all night.” she said as she looked over at Axle. To which Axle just dismissed with a nudge the other way. The intercom resounded:

**“Wonderful! Now that everyone is here, let's begin the pairing.”**

A large screen appeared before the contestants. The screen projected two randomizers with the name of each contestant on the tiles. It scrolled and began to slow down its pace.

**“The first battle will be between... Arthur the Great and Oscar Kazam!”**

**“The second battle will be between... Lady Macabre and Artemus Flask!”**

**“The third battle will be between... Rosco Rodriguez and Axle Presto!”**

**“The fourth battle will be between... Miles Gallaway and Allie Grove!”**

Axle gulped and took a deep breath. He had to face that monster. Rosco was going to tear him apart. And then of course Allie gets the easy one Axle thought to himself.

Oscar and Rosco did a belly bump together.

“We get the two chumps!” Oscar grunted.

“Third round here we come” Rosco followed up as he pushed Axle to the ground. “See you at the Coliseum little man!” he snorted.

Arthur helped Axle off the ground. “Don’t mind those guys. I’ve seen what you can do, you think smart and that’s your advantage over them.” Arthur was very wise for being so young. In the wizarding world, forty-four is considered your prime. Arthur was striking for his age and he knew it. “I don’t care what happens in this tournament Axle. You know why I’m here?” “No, I don’t,” Axle replied. “I’m here to take out Oscar Kazam. I rigged the second-round pairing so I could take him out myself. He plans to side with the gods and oppress the people of Ghulu.”

“Good luck Axle... You’ll need it.” Arthur said as he made his way to the Coliseum.

Axle didn’t know what Arthur meant by “you’ll need it”, it’s not like he’s got no chance. As Arthur said, he was smart right? But still, Axle knew nothing of Rosco’s fighting style, what his attacks were, what his shapeshift is. If Rosco was half as smart as he looked, he would have watched Axle’s fight on playback. He probably knows all of Axle’s attacks and that his best attack only hits once out of a hundred times. Needless to say, Axle’s anxiety was not wanted as he headed toward the Coliseum.

He walked beside Rosco as they headed into the Coliseum. Axle’s knees were shaking noticeably and he could not stop even if he wanted to. Allie tapped him on the shoulder: “Hey kid, take it easy. Just remember, clear your mind, stay focused and use your head for a change. You’re not going to get by on strength alone this time.”

Allie’s words soothed Axle’s nerves a little and he was able to get the shakes to go away. Then she added the five words Axle dreaded to hear. “Good luck, you’ll need it.”

She smiled, but Axle felt every painful bit of that backhanded compliment. It slapped him across the face and forced his ego back down his throat. Suddenly, Axle’s knees began to shake again. He was never going to live to see another day.

When they entered to Coliseum, the blinding light was all too familiar to Axle as was the roar of the crowd and the holler of the intercom:

**“Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to round two!!!”**

Round Two - Part 1



Axle waited in the back room for Arthur to return from his fight. "They've been gone a long time," Axle exclaimed. The crowd roared louder and louder. That must have meant the end of the fight, Axle thought. Axle expected to see Arthur's face come out through the curtain and was distraught when Oscar emerged all bloody and bruised.

"Little pipsqueak put up a good fight, but I showed him what for." Oscar did a belly bump with Rosco, nearly knocking him down. "You're next little man," Rosco said as he ground his teeth together.

It took Lady Macabre almost half the time it took Oscar to dispose of Arthur, but Lady didn't gawk about it. She simply walked into the room, brushed off her arm, and exited the tent with a flare that made Axle weak in the knees. Rosco crunched his fists together: "C'mon little man, we're next."

Axle hesitantly made his way out of the tent. Allie smiled at him as he passed and Axle grimaced nervously back at her. "You'll do just fine, relax Axle."

As they entered the arena, the intercom was the first to speak.

**"Okay folks, we're only halfway through our action today. Presenting matchup number three in round two. First up, the energetic, the uncontestable, the very, very big, Rosco Rodriguez!"**

Rosco entered the Coliseum and flexed his muscles as to impress the ladies in the front row. He flexed so hard he ripped his shirt right off, then promptly used his wand to pop up a new one.

**"And now, the challenger. The man of mist, the heated hero, the thunder from down under... Axle Presto!!!"**

Axle was greeted by the crowd rather excitedly. He received a better reception than Rosco did that's for sure. That boosted his confidence for sure.

**"The battle will begin in 3... 2... 1..."**

Axle was transported to an empty city. The wind blew in the abandoned streets, blowing whatever debris was left behind. Axle walked wand in hand stealthily to not disturb the silence. Rosco had a different plan. Axle could hear him four blocks over, flipping cars and whatever else was in the way. Rosco, like most wizards, have a shapeshift form. Rosco's was that of a hairy dumb werewolf who just destroys everything in its path. The crashing and bashing continued as Rosco seemed to be relentless in his search for Axle.

Axle cast an Infernous spell and used his heated state to rise to the top of the buildings above. He watched as Rosco continued his rampage, continuously snarling "Come out little man!" Axle shot a warning shot the way of Rosco, just nearly missing his right shoulder and igniting the

stack of garbage behind him. Rosco growled and leaped to the top of the five-story building Axle was perched upon.

Axle shot another blast towards Rosco knocking him off of Axle and onto his back. Axle focused on only his target. "Shock Storm" Axle cast. He watched as the orb of energy sailed ten feet over Rosco, then stopped and fell directly on his target.

"YES!" Axle exclaimed having just fried Rosco to a crisp. But Rosco just got right back up and smacked Axle back down. He jumped high again as if to slam on top of Axle. Axle cast a Mistappear just in time and fled the area causing Rosco to rampage again. Axle had to regroup, he took shelter in the sewer and thought of another game plan. He couldn't use the water again. Rosco wouldn't stay still long enough for him to strike. Unless he found a way to make Rosco stay put.

Axle was good at thinking on the fly, he was never good at making plans and sticking to them. He was good at thinking on his feet. Just like Allie was!

Axle paused. He counted the moves he had used to date. "Shock Storm, Infernous, Mistappear, and Aluminous." he counted on his fingers. He could still use one more spell. Axle tried his best to perform a shapeshift into a jaguar just as Allie did. Axle was no jaguar, but the result was not half bad either. A six-tailed cat-like creature with leopard's spots was not exactly what Axle was looking for, but it would have to do.

He climbed through the alley and onto a large building overlooking Rosco as he continued the senseless rampage. Axle pounced on Rosco's back and dug nearly two inches into his shoulder blade with his razor-sharp claws. Rosco let out a thunderous roar. He reached behind him and grabbed Axle by three of his tails, throwing him across the street and against the side of a brick wall. Axle lay motionless on the ground. He struggled to regain his footing, but simply fell back down again. Rosco approached Axle slowly, he talked in a low and growly voice: "This is it, little man, I'm going to finish you. Then no one will be able to stop me. Thanks to Oscar, even Arthur is gone now."

Axle snarled at Rosco, though too wounded to battle. He noticed his tails were getting tangled together. He could make them all wag, but he had trouble figuring out which tail was which. He whipped out three of his tails towards Rosco, taking out his feet and sending him crashing to the ground. Axle regained his footing, revitalized by this near impossible feat. He clawed Rosco right in the mouth and growled rather furiously then fled to the rooftops above.

Rosco chased after Axle anew. They jumped from rooftop to rooftop, never missing a beat between jumps. Their animalistic reflexes made it easy for them to move so quickly. Although Axle was quick in his feline form, his wounds were slowing him down. His one-time supersonic speed was now just enough to keep Rosco at bay, but not for long. Rosco, the savage hound, was coming up from behind... and fast. Axle tried his very best to keep going but was just too hurt to continue. He was slowing more and more with every leap. A thousand thoughts raced

through Axle's mind. "What am I going to do now? How can I beat that monster? I'm never going to win now."

His thought process, though dementing and non-helpful seemed to ease his mind a little. He didn't even notice the large brick wall he was about to run into. CRASH!

Axle crashed through the already weakened brick wall and now found himself at the top of a rickety old metal staircase that spiraled ominously down to the bottom of a black abyss-like pit. Rosco broke through the rest of the wall sending bits and pieces of the ceiling crashing down. When the large dog stepped on the staircase, it bent and looked almost like it would burst any second. Axle made note of this. He would need a reason for Rosco to get angry or begin jumping around he thought.

Rosco swung ferociously at Axle. Axle easily avoided the attack, jumping lower to the next level. Axle would taunt the fiend.

"Can't catch me you smelly old mutt." Axle purred.

Rosco leaped at Axle, which made Axle avoid by jumping to the floor below. When Rosco landed he destroyed the stairs which he fell upon, bending and busting them into scrap metal.

"Is that the fastest you can go?" Axle taunted again.

Rosco became infuriated. He pounced after Axle, going from staircase to staircase until Axle reached the bottom and took shelter in front of the door. Rosco hit the ground and made the earth shake below him. He huffed and puffed, clearly exhausted from the hunt, but his eyes had a fire in them that projected thoughts of murderous rage. Axle flinched at the horror but stayed focused a diligent.

"Got nowhere to run now little man." Rosco barked as he crept towards Axle.

"I'm done running, you're sunk," Axle smirked back as he looked up at the staircase.

The metal of the stairs creaked and bent more and more as gravity did its work. It sent the whole staircase crashing down on top of Rosco, smashing him into oblivion. As the dust settled and the quiet dark room became tranquil again, Axle could struggle to make out Rosco's arm, in its human form poking its way from between the shattered stairs and heavy girders.

As the door of light presented itself before Axle, he knew he had done it, round three was next.

## Round Two- Part 2

Axle returned to the tent to find the baffled face of Oscar and the relieved one of Allie. "Your friend turned out to be the chump," Axle said as he belly bumped the air and landed a little awkwardly, but caught his fall. Axle had nothing to brag about, he got lucky with that staircase. He needed a whole new strategy. He was allowed to substitute one move for the third round.

He wouldn't stay to stick around for Allie's match. He was confident that she had Miles beat and that they would speak again. If Allie was to struggle with Miles, maybe she wasn't cut out for this tournament after all.

Axle walked back to the cabin and looked at the empty bed where Arthur's things once lay. They got rid of his stuff fast he thought. He noticed Allie's things still placed neatly in front of her bed. Axle sighed in relief. When he looked over at the bed of Miles, it still had all of her belongings as well. They were placed in somewhat of a mess over her bed.

Axle pulled his sweaty shirt over his head and looked back at Miles' bed. Her things were gone and her bed was empty! Even the sheets that had been shuffled all over the bed were just gone. The bed was empty. Axle had learned to not question the wizarding world anymore. The strangest of things were not abnormal. In fact, normal could be considered abnormal. He remembered the time that he made it rain jelly beans in his classroom and had a small chuckle to himself.

Axle was relieved that Allie was safe. She dealt with Miles quickly. The walk to the cabin was not a short one, but a good battle normally took somewhere between thirty to forty minutes or longer.

Just then, Axle's thoughts were interrupted when Allie came bursting through the doors. She had cuts all across her face and down her legs. Her stomach was stained red clearly from continuous blows or some sort of trauma. Regardless, she held her abdomen in pain as she approached Axle.

"Did you fight well Axle?"

"Better than you did clearly." he chuckled, though he wept for Allie on the inside.

"Don't pity me Axle. I know why I entered this tournament. Next round you will see why you have as well."

Allie fainted. She nearly fell to the floor, but Axle caught her fall just in the nick of time. He placed her gently on the precisely made bed. The sheets tucked so tight, Axle could hardly lift them out from under the bed. He crept away from the slumbering Allie when she flipped an eye open and whispered to Axle. "We'll give 'em hell tomorrow, won't we? Then we can end this

senseless fighting.” Axle couldn’t say anything to Allie. He had nothing to say He didn’t know what the future held for anyone. But Allie seemed to. It’s almost as if she was hinting at something.

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Without the emptiness of the Coliseum at night time, Axle may have gone insane by now. He needed his alone time. If he and Allie both won tomorrow, they could end this all? Would it be so simple? Axle always thought long and hard about things. He never bothered to look around him. Off in the distance, Lady Macabre sat alone just pondering her life away as well. She watched as Axle made his way all across the Coliseum and sat in the seat two rows above her.

“Good evening Axle,” she said, though not looking in his direction.

“Good evening Lady, very still night tonight, is it not?” Axle replied.

“It is.” she agreed. “The battlefield is always calmest before the battle itself. It’s a sign of death. Of blood to be spilled and cheers to be had. On the battlefield, I am alive. The rush, the energy, the pure essence of witnessing a life being lost. It keeps me sane. When I strike my foes down, I do it with prowess and stealth. You could learn a thing or two from me cutie. I’d hate to see such a pretty face wasted for nothing.” She turned towards Axle now with a devilish smile and a look that gazed into his thoughts.

Axle sat speechless in front of Lady.

“When the pairs are picked tomorrow, just remember that nobody is friends anymore.” You were wise to stay away Axle, it just saves you from heartbreak later.” Lady continued. She stood up and made her way towards the exit. “Goodnight young magician. Get a good night’s sleep. You’ll need the energy for the next round.”

Axle sighed as Lady faded from view. He thought about Lady’s words and what she said about staying away. He thought about Allie. Although he shouldn’t, he cared for her deeply. He feared that she would not win tomorrow, or that they would have to battle each other. He would not be able to do it. But would he give his own life to save hers? Axle pondered all the way back to the cabin. Everyone lay motionless, locked in a deep slumber. Axle looked over at Allie and smiled solemnly. Tomorrow was a new day. Although his thoughts kept him distracted, he finally managed to close his eyes and rest for the night.

### Round Three? - Part 1

Axle woke at the crack of dawn. His cold sweat and his anticipation kept him up all night. He decided not to fight it and just walk like a zombie to the communal shower. He took his time in the shower. It might be his last after all. The shower was a place where Axle, like many, ponder life and all of its little things. Like chocolate-covered doughnuts, or a difficult puzzle on a rainy Sunday. He sighed rather loudly but turned quickly when he heard the door open. Allie came through wearing the clothes she had used for battle the day before. She was still cut beneath her knee and it looked rather nasty. She was all bruised from the top of her right arm to the bottom.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a strange-looking wand with two leaves sticking out of the tip. She carefully picked one of the leaves off her wand and rubbed it on her wounds. Axle could see the cut slowly start to heal itself until the ailments disappeared.

"I only have one of these left. I need to be more careful from now on." Allie spoke aloud. It was only then that she noticed Axle in the shower with a rather fixed gaze on her. Though he was covered, Axle ducked behind the five-foot wall and turned off the water. Allie giggled, "Don't be embarrassed Axle, I've seen it before you know." This made Axle's face turn a little bit red. He wasn't embarrassed by her, was he?

He wrapped a towel around his waist and exited the shower clean as a whistle.

"Good luck today Axle. No matter what happens, remember. Don't ever miss a chance to strike. No one is friends on the battlefield."

Axle grabbed his clothes and went into the changing room. He took nearly four seconds to get changed. When he came out he spoke to Allie: "Allie, I care for you. I truly do. I fear that if something happens to you today that I won't be able to continue."

Allie paused for a moment. She had no idea that Axle could care so deeply, he must have seen something in her that she didn't. Regardless, Allie thought nothing of it. She could not care for Axle for one of them would be dead by the end of this tournament. She picked up her things and went into the showers, dismissing Axle's words completely.

Axle returned to the small cabin that housed the remaining wizards in the tournament. Oscar was just leaving as Axle walked in. "Move pipsqueak!" he said as he pushed Axle from out of the doorway. No sight of Lady today, Axle thought as he looked around the room. Perhaps she had gone to the Coliseum already?

Axle put his battle gear on the same way as any wizard did, two legs at a time. He put on the same shirt that wore in the two previous battles for good luck and sprayed it with his favorite cologne. As soon as he was ready, he made his way to the Coliseum and stood before its gates nervously. Allie and Oscar were already awaiting their next challenge, but still no sign of Lady.

This made Axle ponder Lady's words from last night. She seemed so eager to battle and yet and the morn of her most important fight, she's nowhere to be seen. The intercom spoke and snapped Axle out of his daydream.

**“Good morning competitors! As I notice we are one short this morning, I must ask if anyone has seen Lady Macabre.”**

Axle eyed Oscar and Allie a little confused as they mimicked his confused look. Lady was missing and no one knew her whereabouts. Even the crowd was a little concerned now.

The fancy-dressed man with the top hat stepped out of the arena holding a wand that looked like it was taken out of a children's play set. He waved it around and around above his head and he began to create words out of thin air. Axle squinted as to get a better look at the text written in a fog of nothing. He spoke aloud as he read:

“In the event of abandonment or neglect of participation by one of the entrants. A battle of three will be held to balance out the battlefield. One winner will emerge in this event and the battlefield may be subject to change throughout the battle. Should abandonment take place in the third round, the victor will be crowned champion and earn the title of the strongest wizard in all of Ghulu.”

Axle looked at Allie. She had a morbid look of concern on her face but held her composure otherwise. The crowd began to murmur slowly and increasingly louder as more and more of them clued into what was going on. Oscar had no movement, he didn't gasp, smirk, or anything. He just stood like a stone wall and stared at the letters as they vanished in a mist. The fancy-dressed man promptly made his way back out of the Coliseum, cueing the intercom to speak once again:

**“Well, now we're in for some fun ladies and gentlemen! These three willing competitors will now be pitted against each other in a three-way, winner take all situation!”**

The crowd rocked the Coliseum with their cheers. There had only been three tournaments in history and there had certainly never been a three-way fight in any of those. Allie looked concerned but not towards Axle. She feared Oscar would be their biggest challenge. Or perhaps she feared that she would have to take Axle out to save herself. A bell sounded and suddenly Axle found himself in the jungle all alone. No doubt in his mind now, he had been welcomed to round three.

## Round 3? Part 2

When Allie woke, it was in the dark of the night. It was pitch black and she couldn't see much but a small blinkering light off in the distance. She tripped over a few rocks on the way, but she eventually made her way close enough to the light to realize that she was in a cave. The light, of course, is the sunshine on the outside of the cave. Allie stepped out of the crevice to a wide open field surrounded by plants and trees as far as the eye could see. She stood small in the near 10-acre field, but she failed to slip the eye of the rather large T-Rex some distance away. The hungry lizard sprinted his way across the field at the sight of his tasty snack. Allie, not taking any chances, took shelter inside the cave and waited for the brute to pass. She best not just wander outside anymore, she thought to herself. Was a jungle not bad enough that they had to go and make it pre-historic? Allie would need a game plan before she left the cave again. She grabbed a stick that was leaning slightly on a rock in the cave. She flicked her wand at the tip and set fire to it to replicate a torch. That would stay lit long enough, she thought, and made her way deeper and deeper into the cave...

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Axle had been trudging along the side of the river for several hours without seeing another soul. Not Allie and certainly not Oscar, he could smell that oaf from a mile away. Not that he wanted to see Oscar really, he just wanted something fun to do. So he simply followed the river until he found some trouble, or until trouble found him.

He looked above at the blazing hot sun. It was bright and the longer he looked, the hotter he felt. He examined the skies just long enough to catch a glimpse of the stream of light flying across the sky. It looked to be going pretty fast and the longer Axle stared, the more he thought that the object may be coming towards them. Now feeling a little concerned, Axle's stroll along the riverbank became a light job along the riverbank. Even though he didn't know where he was going, anywhere but in plain sight was a good idea. What if they had aliens? Or worse, chickens. That was Axle's only true fear, he just didn't like their beaks or the sound of their call.

When Axle came to the end of the river, he came to the cliffside. He poked his head over the edge and saw nothing. Right there, where there should have been a waterfall, there was nothing. Just an abyss of nothing. Axle thought it would be best to not tempt fate and turn the other way. Only just then did he see Oscar. Oscar wound up and gave Axle a big right hook sending him over the ledge and into the abyss.

Oscar leaned over the horizon and could see nothing. Axle was not falling nor visible. He had just disappeared! Oscar chuckled as he turned back around. "One chump down, one chumpette to go." He snarled.

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When Axle finally came to, he was not anywhere. He was not sleeping in his comfortable bed, not back in the jungle, he was just floating in nothing. Even all around him was void of any kind



of foliage or construction. He was utterly alone. Suddenly he heard a voice, one that sounded all too familiar.

“Hey... Axle. Didn’t expect to see you here so soon. I thought you’d last a little while at least.”

“Who said that?!” Axle replied to the ominous voice.

“I haven’t been gone that long Axle, I thought I made an impression on you last night.”

“Lady?” Axle replied, though very confused.

“Exactly Axle! I’m not gone, I’ve been banished. Oscar cast a spell on me last night and my physical form broke apart. I’m here to help you now Axle. Pull that gem from out of your pocket.”

Axle reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the gem he had picked up in round one when he was inside the mineshaft. He examined it and still floated puzzled at Lady.

“What am I supposed to do with a stupid diamond?” Axle asked.

“Well Axle, that right there is the key to your victory. I can’t tell you how, but that was no chance that you found that gem. You were meant to find and use it to defeat Oscar. You are the one who needs to win this tournament. Not just for me or you, but the entire kingdom of Ghulu.”

Axle held the gem carefully in his hand. He studied it from all angles. It was just like any old diamond. Nice cut, squared-off edges, and a pretty smooth point. All around, a pricy piece of jewelry.

“Just let your mind go Axle. When the time comes, you’ll know. Now I’m going to send you back to the battlefield. Do your best and remember, no one is your friend out there.”

Axle saw a bright flash and then found himself back in the jungle at the entrance of a cave. He could hear spells being tossed and see the bright flashes of spell casting. Then he heard a large roar and flames shot out of the opening. Axle only just got out of the way before the mighty dragon flew out of the entrance with Oscar clinging to its foot. The monster flew several meters in the air and when it reached the point above the clouds, it released Oscar sending him plummeting to the ground.

Axle ran to his side to see what had happened. When Oscar looked at Axle, he spoke:

“T-t-the girl... She’s s-s-s-stronger than she looks.” He gasped one last time as his body disappeared from the game surface.

Axle looked up at the dragon who was doing circles around her foe’s resting place. Allie, the once timid young woman was now a ferocious dragon. She caught a glimpse of Axle and swooped down onto the ground with a thud. She took in the air as if she was going to speak but

instead let out an infuriated fire breath all over the open field. She took in a breath again, this time targeted right at Axle. He took the diamond out of his pocket and threw it at Allie. It hit her right in the chest and dropped to the floor harmlessly causing the dragon to laugh in Axle's face.

"I guess that wasn't what Lady had in mind."

She let out a fire breath towards Axle and he cast Mistappear just before being incinerated. Axle appeared behind the beast and cast an Infernous right at the dragon's back. This again causes Allie to burst out laughing. She flung her tail and hit Axle fairly hard into a nearby tree. He fell to the ground and decided it was time to go feline. He transformed himself into the Wacky Tiger as he called it. He was determined now. He climbed up Allie's back up to her shoulder. He mercilessly attacked her wings, tearing them to pieces while clawing at her arms as well. She roared rather softly, wincing in slight pain. Axle's attacks were landing, but not doing very much damage.

Allie tried to flap her wings but to no avail. She was grounded now and felt it unnecessary to continue to be the dragon. She ran as fast as she could away from Axle. When she was far enough away, she shrunk herself back down to normal size. Axle could see Allie begin to regain her true form. He decided to not waste any time, he picked up the gemstone anew and sprinted in her direction.

Axle felt freer than ever. A wild cat in the jungle. He had no problems maneuvering through the trees. Allie was shocked at how fast he got to her. Axle just stood before her. Allie spoke to him:

"You play the game well young magician. It's mages like you that remind me of why this land is so beautiful. You know when I came to the surface world, I didn't expect to be courted by this tournament. When I had the opportunity to enter, I figured I could just rough up a couple of mortal wizards, have a laugh, and go home. But only you Axle could beat my dragon. Perhaps some wizards possess the true power of gods. If the bloodline lives on, then it does not reside in you only Axle. There must others, I must first find these individuals. Then I will rid the planet of the scum to usher in a new world of magic. A purer world of magic."

Allie's face melted and so began the rest of her body. Out from the ooze grew a massive man, twice the size of any Axle had ever seen. His beard was long and grey and nearly touched his toes.

**"I am the God of Ghulu. I am Archimus!"**

Axle went from shocked to scare in a heartbeat.

"Then Oscar's not the one who stole Lady's powers, you are!"

**"Very smart Axle. Do you figure that out all by yourself? How about this one? I am the one who made sure you would be here. That's right, this whole tournament is designed for us to meet."**

Axle took the diamond out of his pocket and held it tight. If this wasn't the right time, what other time was it? He threw it into the air and called out: "Shock Storm!"

The large beam of electricity shot straight into the air and into the core of the diamond. It shot the concentrated beam right at Archimus blasting him into a million little pieces. Only a smoke stream remained where Archimus stood. A face developed in it and Archimus could be seen in the haze.

**"You haven't won young wizard. I am a god and although I cannot die, you have destroyed my physical body. And hear this Axle, I will be back and when I come, I come for you first!"** he spoke as he laughed maniacally.

The door of light appeared before Axle and he stepped through it for the last time...