



Fantasy Kingdom XXI

by Lisa Anne Disula



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Chapter 1

Charles Mayfield was turning thirteen today and clearly too old to be called “Charlie.” Unfortunately, he seemed to be the only one who thought so. Mom had gone so far as to say that, if he was too old to be Charlie, then maybe he was too old to have birthday presents. That was clearly not true, so he thought he was bearing up quite well when Aunt Hepzibah pinched his cheek and called him “Little Charliekins” as soon as she arrived. He even put up with her asking if he’d done finger painting in art class, but when he opened his present, he wondered if it was all worth it. It was a sweater.

At first Charles thought it was a girl's sweater; there was too much lavender. But the shoulders seemed awfully wide when he unfolded it and held it up against himself, and as he looked closer, he did see a lot of blue. In fact, the background started out blue, faded into purple

and lavender, then to pink and back to lavender and blue. Over that was a series of little patterns: X's and O's, patterns of dots, flower things, stars — all in cream, gold, and gray. It had the slightly uneven look of something handmade, but Charles was completely certain Aunt Hepzibah hadn't made it herself. The whole effect wasn't bad. It would have been a nice sweater for a girl who liked pastel colors. No boy who liked the shape of his nose would have been caught dead in it.

Mom leaned over and rubbed the sleeve. "It feels like real wool."

Aunt Hepzibah snorted. "Do you think I would give a cheap sweater?"

Charles bit his tongue hard to avoid saying anything Mother would make him regret.

"How thoughtful," Mom said.

"Yeah, thoughtful," Charles said. He hoped it sounded sincere. He didn't know what Aunt Hepzibah had been thinking when she picked out a girl's sweater for his gift, but something must have been going on in her head.

"Well, try it on." Aunt Hepzibah leaned in for a better look.

Charles didn't want to have that thing in his birthday pictures. He might actually want to show them to some of his friends. He turned to Mom, hoping for sympathy.

"Now Hepzibah, I'm not sure that's a good idea. He might get frosting on the sleeve, and then he couldn't wear it to school on Monday. Something that special needs special handling in the wash."

Charles got the message and dragged the sweater over his head. He was supposed to be science partners with Abigail McClenn on Monday and he wasn't about to do that wearing this sweater. He could put up with it for a few hours, and drag his arm through the cake somehow. Then Mom could lose the sweater in the wash.

When his head popped out, Charles could see his mother was smiling. "Now for our gift." She reached behind Dad and took out a small, flat, thin, rectangular present, five inches by seven inches. It could only be one thing. Charles could hardly wait to pull off the paper. He didn't need to see the title, just a few inches of the picture.

"Fantasy Kingdom XXI!"

Mom was leaning over his shoulder. "Is that the right one? The kid in the electronics department said it just came out on Tuesday."

"Yeah. You can be a ninja ranger, with double snake kick and healing. And when you customize your character at level two, you can do all kinds of cool stuff. There's sixteen noses and Abby said it took half an hour to make her character. Girls get thirty-six hair styles and eighteen colors. Guys only get twenty-six." Charles could see everyone's eyes glazing over. He could understand them not getting ninja ranger, which was why he didn't explain single hand ranged weapons and dominant hand bonuses, but he had thought they'd understand hair styles. "It's really, really cool. Thanks."

"That everything?" Aunt Hepzibah asked, pushing herself to her feet. When no one answered, she turned to Dad. "Where are the cards?"

"Bridge or pinochle?" Dad was pulling out the table.

Charles picked up his video game and followed Mom into the kitchen.

Mom moved the coffee urn from the floor to the counter. Charles pulled the plastic off of his game.

“Can I please go up and try my game?”

Mom didn’t look up from measuring out the coffee. “You’re the host.”

“But Dad and Aunt Hepzibah get to play.”

Mom didn’t look up from assembling the filter, but she didn’t say no either.

Charles peeled away the security seal. He could tell he was winning, just a tiny bit more convincing. “I just want to see how it starts. I promise I won’t start designing my character or anything.”

“It will take twenty minutes for all this coffee to brew and me to get everything set up for cake, so you’ll come down as soon as I call you, right?”

“The second I hear you, I’ll go to the nearest save point and be right down.”

“All right.”

Half-way up the stairs, Charles looked back. “What if Dad and Aunt Hepzibah don’t come when you call?”

“We’ll give them five minutes and if they’re not here, you can go back up and play until the party ends.”

“Cool.” Charles ran up to his room before she could change her mind. He had the game up and running in no time, then sat on the bed watching the opening credits. He tried bypassing them, but none of the buttons seemed to do it. Then the opening movie. He had to watch that to get the plot, but it was cutting into his twenty minutes. The king was showing his castle,

explaining the threat to the throne, then he was attacked. Charles sat up as he took control of the king. It was easy enough, just a few giant rats, but it also showed him the basic controls for fighting. If he could get through the intro level, he should hit a save point in time to go down for cake.

Charles had just learned the defensive parry when he saw a bit of movement out of the corner of his eye. He hit “START” and looked around. Nothing. Probably a floater in his eye.

He unpaused the game and practiced the slashing attack. There it was again. He looked around fast. It was bigger than a fruit fly. Maybe a moth. Hopefully not ants. He didn’t like those, or thousand leggers.

It didn’t come back until he was practicing fierce attacks. Charles saw it out of the corner of his eye, and then it was in front of him. A tiny person. Male, looking too young to call a man and too wise to be a boy. His slightly pointy face was unlined, with large brown eyes and thick brown hair under a small, acorn shaped hat. On closer inspection, Charles realized the hat wasn’t an acorn at all, but a knitted cap made to look like an acorn. The tunic he was wearing was knit too, only it was patterned to look like bark, like his hose. Only his little shoes didn’t seem to be knitted; they were felt. He was clearly hovering in the air, but Charles didn’t see any wings.

Charles slammed his thumb on the start button and stared. He’d clearly gone nuts. Then the little person spoke. “This is bad.” His voice was small, but not high or shrill as Charles would have imagined.

Charles managed to avoid asking the first question that popped into his head (“What are you?” sounded rude) and instead asked, “Who are you?”

“My name is Bobble and I am one of the sprites working on the King’s grand plan to defeat the evil Necorious.”

“I’m Charles.” It seemed a bit inadequate even if it was accurate.

“It is a great pleasure, Master Charles, and I would enjoy the opportunity to get to know you better, but I am on a mission and I must complete it.”

“Sure, I understand.” What Charles couldn’t understand was why the sprite was here if he had a mission.

“Then if you would kindly give me the sweater, I will be on my way.”

“My sweater? You can’t take that. Mom’ll kill me.”

“Surely she would not...”

“Look, I’ve got to get to this save point so I can start there next time and not have to re-watch the intro, then go down for cake.”

“And I too must return, so if you would just...” Bobble held out his little hand.

“I can’t. It’s a birthday present from Aunt Hepzibah.”

The sprite’s face fell and Charles wondered if he knew Aunt Hepzibah.

“It was gifted to you?”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, it was a birthday gift. Do you need to sit down or something?” The sprite really wasn’t looking well.

The sprite sat on the edge of a bookshelf. “Gifted. How could it have gone so wrong? Gifted.” He started rocking back and forth, whispering, “Gifted. It was gifted.”

“Do you want some water or something?” Charles had no idea what to do to help the little guy.

“No, no. You’re very kind.”

Charles wasn’t sure what to do, so he tried an all purpose, “I’m sorry.”

“That’s quite all right. It isn’t your fault. You did not ask for the gift, did you?”

“No.” Charles put down the controller and went to the shelf. He knelt a little so he could keep an eye on the sprite, just in case he started to look worse. “Why does it matter so much? That it’s a gift I mean.”

“With a magic item like that one, something to be used personally by the owner, it needs to be gifted. Then it will take on the properties that will make it work for the owner. Of course that means that it will not work properly for anyone else. You see the difficulty.”

This sweater being magic was even harder to believe in than Bobble. “So if I gave it to you, it wouldn’t do you any good anyway.”

“Exactly.”

“If you waited until the party’s over, I could give it to you as a gift. Would that work?” Even as he said it, Charles knew that was too obvious.

“No, it is a good idea, but the gift has attached itself to you. It will not take a new owner until you die. Then it is fair game. That is why adventurers go looking for artifacts of dead heroes; they will attach themselves to anyone once the original owner has died, although the

connection will never be as strong.” The sprite grinned and launched himself off of the shelf, “But I do think it would be rude to kill you on your birthday.”

Charles smiled. “That’s a relief.” He hadn’t really believed that the little guy would hurt him, but it was nice to hear.

The sprite flitted back and forth in front of Charles, twisting his little hands. “Well, I’ve found it. That’s something. They can’t fault me for losing it. What am I saying, of course they can. This is a disaster.” He started flitting faster. He reached into the pouch at his waist and pulled out some knitting. He stopped wringing his hands and started knitting instead.

Charles straightened up. “Who are you afraid of?”

The sprite turned to him and slowed down, still knitting. “Not afraid, not really. I mean he’ll be mad, but he is fair, even though they were counting on this. I mean, anyone would be mad... But I am not afraid of King Regulous. Not really. Just...” He flung his arms in the air, almost throwing his knitting across the room, then started knitting again.

Before Charles could think of another question, there was a creaking sound. Charles ignored the noise. “Look, I’m really sorry you’re in some kind of jam, but...”

The creaking sound got louder, and was now accompanied by the rattling of every frame, book and action figure resting against the wall. It was impossible to ignore that. Charles turned away from Bobble and tried to figure out what was going on. The sound seemed to be coming from somewhere above the wall that was shaking violently. As Charles watched, a crack began to develop along the join between the wall and the ceiling.

“What are you supposed to do in an earthquake? Is that where you stand in a door frame?”

But the sprite was giving him a blank look like he’d just asked if it was easier to get to Mars by boat or by car.

Charles looked around the room, wondering if he should run downstairs, and then it was too late. The ceiling was shaking so hard that little bits of plaster were flaking off and falling as a fine powder onto the floor. The crack was getting wider, growing along the seam between the wall and the roof, tiny cracks splintering off it. Charles looked around, hoping to see something that would protect him if the roof fell in. Maybe under the computer desk?

And then there was no roof. Charles stood there, dazed, staring up at the starry sky. It took him a moment to realize that the roof had not caved in on him as he’d expected, but peeled up. He wasn’t sure if he should run and hide or stay and try to figure out what was going on. Before Charles could decide if he was more scared or curious, there was a huge eye the size of a football looking over the edge of the ceiling. Charles stood there, trying to get his feet to move, as an enormous hand came through the hole in the ceiling and closed around him.

“No, Glorf!” Bobble called. “Not yet!”

That woke Charles from his stupor. He started to struggle against the hand, kicking, punching, and trying to twist around and bite the fingers.

“Slippery little thing, aren’t you?” growled the giant, but he didn’t loosen his grip.

Bobble flitted around, wringing his hands and saying, “No, no, not yet.”

And then everything went dark.



Chapter 2

At first Charles thought he'd fainted, but he was still able to hear the sprite muttering, "No, no, not yet," over and over again, and there was a rush of wind in his face. And then, just as suddenly, it stopped. Charles blinked a few times and looked around.

Bobble was flitting around, still snapping at the giant, but not doing anything to help Charles get free. Charles doubted there was much the little guy could do against a giant, but he would have appreciated the effort.

They weren't anywhere near his house. They weren't anywhere near anywhere Charles had ever been before. It was a town, that much was certain, but the buildings were small, only a couple were more than two stories tall. All the rest were half-timbered, with shops on the ground floor and curtains drawn in the windows above. Bobble and the giant did not stop on any of the streets, but made their way to the center of the town. If

this were Fantasy Kingdom, they'd either be going to the castle or the enemy's stronghold.

The castle came into view over the buildings. It didn't look like an enemy stronghold, but Charles knew it was a mistake to judge it until he saw the residents. The outer walls of the castle were thick stone with round towers every few yards. Through the open gates, Charles could see the keep, with thinner walls, more windows, and wooden doors that were large enough for Charles to see even from as far away as he was. They had gone several yards before Charles could begin to make out the guards, looking like toy soldiers left by the playroom door.

They passed through the first set of gates and into the marshaling yard. No one paid any attention to them. Normally Charles would have been very interested in the squires polishing their swords and the knights practicing some moves off to the side and the archers on the walls watching everything, but being kidnapped by a giant made things like that a bit less interesting.

They were passing into the inner courtyard when the giant stopped and Charles felt himself being lowered.

"Can't go on. You'll have to take him," the giant grunted to the sprite. It would have been funny if Charles hadn't been so worried about what was coming.

Bobble seemed surprised by this change. Or maybe it was just that the giant had spoken two sentences together. Bobble was definitely the less scary of the two kidnapers. If nothing else, Charles was pretty sure he could flick Bobble away. But Bobble didn't seem to want him here anymore than he wanted to be here; maybe it would be easier to go along with Bobble and try to convince the sprite to send him home.

With that decided, Charles became a bit more interested in the castle's defenses. As he followed Bobble inside, Charles tried to look for signs of the spell or defensive weapon that was keeping the giant out, but he quickly realized it was much simpler than that. Only one side of the second pair of gates was open and the giant couldn't fit through the opening.

Bobble kept on talking, switching to Charles since he couldn't keep nagging the giant. "It takes four men to open the gates, and Glorf is always afraid he will break them if he tries. He doesn't know his own strength, or the strength of the doors. Welcome to the home of King Regulous of Pelimaa."

The guards in purple and gold moved to block their way until Bobble flitted forward calling, "King's business, let us pass." The guards stepped aside at once and saluted as Bobble entered the castle.

Charles was impressed that someone so small could command such respect. He looked around the entryway. It was impressive enough to break through his panic. The walls were almost tall enough to have let the giant stand, with carving everywhere, concealing small windows Charles was sure hid archers. "Whoa, it's just like something out of Fantasy Kingdom."

"Beg pardon?"

"Fantasy Kingdom? It's the video game I was playing. It has these kinds of castles, but there's usually a hidden way in, somewhere on the grounds outside, to get you to the good stuff." Charles realized he was babbling and stopped. Bobble was probably even less interested in the finer points of Fantasy Kingdom strategy than Mom and Dad.

“That would be with the safe-points?” At least Bobble was pretending to be interested, but he didn’t pause long enough for Charles to say anything else. “The main hall is this way. Perhaps it will interest you as well.” Bobble flitted away. Charles followed him.

The main corridor was worthy of the greatest kings of Fantasy Kingdom, all polished stone and bright tapestries, with carved wooden chairs and silk cushions. Charles could hear music and the buzz of voices. Bobble led him towards the sound.

“Don’t worry,” Bobble repeated those words over and over. It wasn’t until he started adding, “He’ll see you and send you right back,” that Charles realized they might be for his benefit and not just a private mantra. It was a hopeful thought. He wasn’t sure why he wasn’t wanted, but he didn’t really care.

The sounds were coming from another pair of double doors, not as big as the ones outside but made of the same dark wood and carved deeply. There were two guards at the door and pairs of guards stationed along the hallway leading there. Several of them looked ready to stop him, then they saw Bobble and fell back. Bobble ignored them.

Twenty feet from the door, Bobble stopped murmuring and went forward in grim silence. Now Charles could hear the music over the hum of voices. It was being played on a cheerful instrument, maybe a mandolin, but it was a sad song.

As they approached the tall double doors, Bobble started wringing his hands again. The closer they got, the twitchier Bobble got. Charles wanted to ask if he was supposed to do anything when he met the king — bow, or

speak, or stay silent until he was spoken too — but his throat had gone dry and the words got stuck. Hopefully he could just stand and nod.

The throne room was long and relatively narrow, with two rows of stone columns funneling the newcomers down the central aisle, over a green carpet, straight to the throne stairs. Bobble flitted ahead of Charles, down the center aisle. Charles followed.

There were many people wandering and whispering on the sides of the room, outside the columns, dressed in velvet and jewels, like extras in a Shakespearean play. Charles could see the king was standing near the throne, bent over a map, surrounded by men even grander than the ones milling around. Bobble had stopped wringing his hands and had them balled into fists at his side. They were shaking visibly. He started to speak, but his voice was just a croak. Bobble swallowed and tried again.

“Your Highness?”

The king’s head snapped up. “Bobble? Where are you?” The voice boomed out, filling every corner of the room. Every pair of eyes turned in his direction.

Bobble had stopped shaking. It was possible he’d stopped breathing, Charles couldn’t tell. Just when Charles was beginning to worry, Bobble flitted forward. Charles followed.

“So the sweater has been gifted. Bring the hero forward.”

“Well, Your Highness, it appears there was a bit of a, um, mix-up.”

“Bobble,” the king’s voice dropped ominously and he looked directly at the sprite for the first time.

Charles could see the moment the king noticed the sweater, the way his eyes focused on it, and the moment he realized what that meant.

“No,” the king hissed. Then he yelled, “How? How did this happen?”

There was a buzz of conversation as the advisers discussed this development.

Bobble darted forward, trying to explain how the confusion had started, while explaining that he didn’t really know.

Charles could feel the eyes of the advisers on him, judging, trying to blame him for this he was certain. Charles wished he knew what was wrong, why this sweater and the hero it belonged to were so important, if he was allowed to slink into the crowd and hide from the stares, and most of all, if he really was to blame for this mess.

Bobble was explaining the complex series of charms needed to find an unknown hero. The king was not paying attention. “And that helps us how?”

Bobble dropped his head. “I know, Your Highness. It is a great disappointment.”

“And how are we to fix it?”

All eyes were on him again, and Charles was certain he was the disappointment.

Four of the advisers on the dais began to offer suggestions and the court turned to them, trying to separate what the Minister of Finance was saying from the suggestion of the Minister of Defense

Charles didn’t bother to try and understand. He wanted to use the time to find a less-conspicuous spot, but when he tried to edge beyond the row of pillars, many heads snapped around to him.

One man melted out of the crowd at the dais. He was dressed brightly, but without the gold and velvet of the others. He walked right down the center aisle. Nobody paid any attention to him. “You probably want to sit down.”

Charles wasn’t sure how to answer that. Then the man smiled, not a broad smile, just a friendly crinkling of his face. “Come on.” The man rested a hand on Charles’s shoulder and led him towards the dais. Around the side, half hidden from the room, there were two chairs, one with a mandolin on it. The man gestured to the empty chair, then picked up the mandolin and sat in its place.

“I’m Phichorian. I didn’t get your name.”

“Charlie — I mean Charles.”

“Pleased to meet you. I take it you know Bobble. That’s King Regulous. The rest are pretty much interchangeable. Except for Sir Amertious in the armor. He’s the betrothed.”

“The betrothed?”

“Yes, Princess Melissina's betrothed. You don’t know about Princess Melissina, do you?”

“No.”

Phichorian sighed. “Then I’d better begin at the beginning. None of this makes any sense to you, does it?” He put the mandolin down, resting it against the dais. “Princess Melissina has been captured. That’s not the beginning, but it’s essential. We are in the midst of an attempt to overthrow the king. Bobble was creating an enchanted something to help the hero.”

“Yeah, this sweater.”

Charles thought Phichorian went a bit pale, but in the shadow of the dais it was hard to tell. “Oh dear.”

Phichorian closed his eyes. “Oh dear. Well it can’t be helped. There was an opportunity to get intelligence from the usurper’s fortress. Everyone said we should wait for the hero, but Melissina went and now we have to get her back.”

“And you were waiting for the hero for that.” It was worse than he’d thought. Some princess’s life depended on this stupid sweater. Why couldn’t Aunt Hepzibah have gotten him a set of blocks again?

“It’s not your fault, Charles.” Phichorian rested his hand on Charles’s shoulder. “Not yours, and I don’t think it’s Bobble’s either. We’ve become too dependent on this idea of a hero. What’s important is to save Melissina. Sir Amertious should be able to handle that.”

Of course, Sir Amertious, the knight. Charles perked up a bit, “Then...”

“Sh.” Phichorian gestured for him to be quiet as he turned to the dais.

Bobble was speaking. “As you know, Your Highness, that was the purpose of the sweater. It would allow the wearer and a small number of others to pass through the enemy’s force fields.”

“It certainly worked well,” Sir Amertious muttered.

“There’s nothing wrong with the spell. It just ended up in the wrong hands.”

The king stood and both fell silent. “It would have been so simple. We could have sent the hero with a few men and set up a rescue mission. But now it falls to you, Sir Amertious. If there is a way to get in, you will have to undertake the mission. Bobble, how long will it take for you to recreate the spell?”

Bobble looked up. “The last one took almost a year. Now that I have worked out the full spell, six months might be possible.” Charles could tell Bobble knew this was not good enough.

“Six months?” Sir Amertious stared. “Six months? Do you know what they could do to her in six months? That won’t work.” He turned to the king. “I told you the sprite was worthless. If we want Melissina back, we need someone with more power.”

“It could still work,” Phichorian murmured. Even though his voice was barely more than a whisper, everyone stared at him. “Not permanently of course, but for one rescue mission, if Charles was willing to help us.”

Charles wasn’t sure he *was* willing to go along, but Phichorian was giving him such a pleading look.

“I guess I could.”

Sir Amertious was not convinced. “I’m not playing nursemaid to some green boy.”

“He doesn’t need to go anywhere near the fighting. Just get you though the spells around the fortifications.”

“Then what do we do, leave him at the door?”

“I’ll come along and keep an eye on him.”

Sir Amertious looked uncertain, but King Regulous spoke, “Then it is decided. How many will the sweater protect?”

Bobble flitted back into view. “Seven at most.”

“All right. Does that include the boy?”

Bobble stared at Charles and Phichorian. “Seven, armed men. If Charles and Phichorian are unarmed, they might count as one.”

“All right. All right. Sir Amertious would be two, so five more.”

The guards on the dais stood at attention, waiting to be chosen. The king made his selection. “Go and arm yourselves. Sir Amertious is in charge.”

“We leave in an hour.” Sir Amertious strode down the center aisle. The chosen guards fell in behind him.

“Come on,” Phichorian murmured. “I’ll take you to the armory and we’ll get some leather armor; it’ll be better than nothing.”

That didn’t sound very promising, but Charles went with him.



Chapter 3

Phichorian led Charles around the back of the dais and into another stone hallway, this one less ornate than the entry hall, but warm and dry. Charles's sneakers squeaked on the stone floor.

Phichorian stopped at a thick wooden door and knocked. "It's Phichorian the bard."

"Enter," said a low rumble.

Phichorian swung the heavy door open and murmured, "I'll go in first."

Charles didn't mind at all. He liked the idea of the bard being between him and whoever had the grumbling voice.

"Never expected to see you here, Phichorian."

"I'm on a mission for the king, with my friend Charles." Phichorian rested his hand on Charles's shoulder and pulled him forward. "Charles, this is Rothgar."

Now he could see the man, tall and broad, with the pudgy look of an athlete gone to seed and the deeply lined face of someone who had lived outdoors. If he thought Charles and Phichorian were an odd pair to be on a mission for the king, he hid it well.

“Pleased to meet you,” Charles said, knowing he had to say something.

“Aye lad. As you can see, I’m too old to fight, so they put me in charge of the armory. I miss those old days, a good fight, a good horse, and stars as far as the eye can see. But that’s not why you’re here. What do you need?”

“I’d like you to outfit Charles. He won’t be doing any fighting.”

“But better safe than sorry. Wish some of these squires would think like that a bit more. Not that I did at that age.” He chuckled as he turned to the rows and rows of racks behind him. “There’s a nice set of leather armor back here, barely worn. Young Alcor had a growth spurt just after he got it. Isn’t that always the way? Here we go. That should do well. Now, what kind of saddle?”

Charles swallowed and almost dropped the armor he was holding.

Phichorian must have noticed. “I think a wagon would be best.”

Rothgar chuckled again. “Probably faster than any horse you could handle. I’ll let them know in the stables. You can handle arming him?”

“Should be able to.”

“All right.” Rothgar put his hands around Charles’s head above his ears and studied them. “You have a large head.” He walked away and came back in a moment

carrying a helmet. “Looks like you’ve got something between those ears, best protect it.”

“Thanks.” Charles shifted the load he was carrying so he could take the helmet.

“Just be sure you wear it. Don’t want your brains too scrambled.”

Phichorian rested his hand on Charles’s shoulder again and led him back out into the hallway. Charles couldn’t decide if he was glad Phichorian was giving him discrete clues about what to do, or if he felt like a puppet. While he was considering it, Phichorian asked, “Mind if we stop for my stuff?”

At least he was a puppet with a say. “Sure.”

Phichorian’s room was on the third floor. It was smaller than the other rooms Charles had been in, with a single bed and a view of the courtyard. There were musical instruments on every flat surface. Phichorian gathered up a harp and a recorder from the bed and set them on the clothes chest. He motioned for Charles to take their place. Charles dumped the armor next to him as he sat.

Phichorian flattened himself on the floor and reached under the bed. He pulled out his own leather armor and helmet. Charles tried to remember what Phichorian was doing as he worked the complex series of buckles and straps that attached the various pieces over himself, but Charles quickly realized he’d never be able to remember how to get all his pieces in the right places. He picked up a large, rather flat piece. It either went over his back or his chest, Charles couldn’t tell. If he couldn’t manage that piece, then how would he know where all the small rectangles went?

Phichorian had gotten most of his armor on and was leaning against the wall, studying Charles. There were still a few pieces of leather on the floor. Charles even recognized two of them as gloves.

“I think you should wear the sweater on top of the armor. It will make the guards take you more seriously and give the magic a clear shot at whatever it needs a clear shot at.”

Charles could handle that. He pulled the sweater over his head and dropped it on the bed.

Phichorian poked through the pile of armor on the bed and pulled out another flat piece. “Hold that bit you’ve got in front of your chest and I’ll buckle this in the back.” Charles smoothed his dress shirt then held up the piece.

With Phichorian’s help, Charles got himself buckled into the armor. Once everything was adjusted, it was fairly comfortable- until he pulled the sweater back on. Even though the stone rooms were cold, the combination of leather and wool was hot.

Phichorian seemed to understand. “Tonight you’ll be glad of the extra layers.” He picked up his own gloves and helmet. “Come on, the sooner we go, the sooner we’ll be back.”

“And the sooner I can go home,” Charles thought as he grabbed his things and followed Phichorian out.

* * *

In the courtyard, Rothgar was waiting for them with the wagon. “You should be able to handle this on your own.”

“Thank you.” Phichorian used the spokes of the wheel as a step and climbed to the seat. Rothgar handed up the reins.

Phichorian got himself settled, then nodded towards the back of the wagon. “Charles, go around to the other side and climb up here by me.”

Charles walked along the side of the wagon, which was large enough for three or four people to lie down inside and covered with a canvas tent that had a large royal crest painted on it.

Charles copied what Phichorian had done to climb into the wagon. It wasn't as hard as he'd thought it would be. Phichorian had some kind of brake set which kept the wheels steady as he climbed up. The seat was hard but not uncomfortable.

Sir Amertious came out from the stables, leading a horse so covered in armor Charles couldn't even tell the color. “You're ready?”

“Whenever you are,” Phichorian called.

Sir Amertious swung into the saddle, then turned to the stable door and gave a sign. The other five knights rode out on horses covered in slightly less armor than Sir Amertious's.

“Try to keep up,” Sir Amertious called, looking directly at Phichorian. He turned his horse towards the main gate.

Phichorian let the other knights ride out behind their leader, then guided the wagon out after them.

As they rode through the gates, Charles looked back, to take another look at the castle.

King Regulous was standing on a balcony, watching them leave. He was half hidden behind a pillar,

his shadow more visible in the flickering torchlight than he was, and Charles realized he didn't want to be seen.

As the wagon approached the second gate, after all the other knights were outside, Charles turned and waved. He thought he saw the king smile and a slight movement of his hand, like he was waving back, but at that distance, Charles couldn't even be certain it was the king.

* * *

As the small party rode towards the enemy fortress, Charles started getting nervous. This was more than a ride through a strange world, he was going into battle. He noticed very little of his surroundings until the fortress was in sight.

This fortress was not like the castle Charles had just left. It seemed larger, big enough to hold a whole town. The walls were thick but hastily constructed; all rough stone and sharp edges. The hinges and other metal were black iron, hastily pounded into shape, not the smooth, shiny metal of King Regulous's palace. Charles couldn't see how he was supposed to get them into this place.

Sir Amertious led them around the wall. As they got closer, the five guards moved in, surrounding Charles and Phichorian. Charles assumed it was to protect the two weakest members of the party.

The group approached a plain wooden door, apparently unguarded, and dismounted.

"All right," Sir Amertious whispered. "Bobble said we all have to be touching it."

“With or without gauntlets?”

“I didn’t ask that. Better safe than sorry.”

There was a scraping sound as six knights each pulled off a gauntlet. The instant Charles’s feet touched the ground, they all pushed in around him, each grabbing a handful of sweater. Phichorian was knocked aside in the confusion and Charles took a sword pommel to the shoulder.

“Hey, ease up! Let him breathe.” Charles felt Phichorian’s hand on his shoulder and relaxed. “And not too fast, some of us have short legs.”

The mob slowed down and Phichorian managed to push through and walk alongside Charles.

It took two knights to lift the latch and open the small door, since each could only use one hand. The opening was narrow and the knights had to spread themselves out, as close to single file as they could. Charles’s sweater was stretched out in front and behind him as the knights pulled him along towards the door.

“Hold out your arms,” Phichorian suggested. “Let them grab the sleeves. It will let them spread out more.”

Charles stretched his arms out to the sides. The knights rearranged themselves, two grabbing his cuffs and two his elbows, leaving only Amertious and Phichorian at his torso. It did make it easier for the knights, although Charles still had to sidle along with Phichorian and Sir Amertious pressed against him to make it through.

When all the knights were in the inner courtyard, Sir Amertious called a halt. Six hands dropped from Charles as six swords were drawn, and there was silence for several breaths.

“I think we’ve avoided discovery,” Sir Amertious murmured. “Good; Bobble wasn’t a complete fool.”

Charles wanted to defend Bobble, but Phichorian shook his head. Charles couldn’t tell if Phichorian knew what he’d been thinking or not, but he decided speaking up wouldn’t help anything anyway.

Sir Amertious was still giving orders. “You two will stay here. We will go in and rescue the princess.” He turned to the guards and nodded. They fell into position behind him. “Forward!”

The five guards saluted and followed their leader.

Phichorian saluted the retreating forms. “I guess there’s nothing for us to do but wait.” He settled down on a bit of fallen pillar. “Pull up a ruin and make yourself comfortable.”

Charles sat on a broken statue base.

“Any questions I can answer while we wait?”

Charles didn’t feel much like asking questions. He didn’t feel like thinking about anything but home. But Phichorian’s eyes kept darting towards the stone fortress. Charles thought Phichorian could use a distraction from his thoughts. “What was this place?”

“It started as a university, then it was fortified and used for storing records, until Necorius’s army took it over.”

“Did they do all of this?” Charles nodded towards the broken stones.

Phichorian nodded. “Pretty much. Some of it is just age, but they did help it along.” Phichorian looked around again, but this time he was actually seeing the stones.

That had worked well enough, so Charles tried another question. “What’ll happen to Bobble?” As he said it, he realized he really was worried about the little guy.

Phichorian sighed. “I suppose it depends on exactly what went wrong. He was almost at the next level; that certainly won’t happen.”

“Next level?”

“A promotion within his guild. More prestige, more complex projects, more freedom. The main spell, the entering spell, seems to be working fine, so if he was careless and lost the sweater, that would be worse than a locator spell gone wrong. I suppose the rebels could have stolen it too. That’s always possible, if they knew about it. Then it would be a security breach, I’m not sure where that falls on the spectrum. At best it will just be a temporary demotion, some time on probation. The guild is not unreasonable; if he didn’t do anything too incompetent, he’ll be fine.”

Charles nodded, but he wondered if they could tell whose fault the incompetence was.

Phichorian was watching him now. “You didn’t do anything wrong, you know. It’s not your fault the sweater got misplaced. Whatever Bobble did, you were dragged into it after the fact.”

“I guess,” Charles murmured.

Phichorian looked ready to go on, but there was a crashing of armor and they both fell silent, hoping that the noise was coming from people on their side. Then the group turned the corner and Charles could see the knights returning. “That was fast,” he said more to himself than Phichorian.

“Too fast,” Phichorian replied. “Look, they don’t have Melissa.” He stood as he spoke. Charles jumped to his feet too.

“There was a problem?” Phichorian asked, trying to keep his voice light, even though his knuckles were white and his hands were shaking.

“Yes.” Sir Amertious was not one to beat around the bush. “Another door with a ward on it.”

“Oh, that’s not so bad.” Phichorian turned to Charles. “Are you up to it?”

“I guess so.”

Sir Amertious looked at them for a moment, then knelt down and slid his hands along the sides of his boots. When he straightened up, he was holding two thin daggers in worn leather sheaths. He pulled the blades half out and inspected them, then slid them back in and held them out to Phichorian and Charles.

Charles raised his hand to take one, until he saw Phichorian made no move to take the other.

Sir Amertious pushed the worn leather handle of one knife into Charles’s hand. He held the other one out to Phichorian. “You have to take it. You’ll be closer to the fighting. You’ll need defense.”

Phichorian looked ready to protest, but Sir Amertious kept holding out the dagger until Phichorian turned his palm up and let Sir Amertious put the dagger in his hand.

“If you want to be in on the fight, you have to fight,” Sir Amertious said.

“If you say so,” Phichorian muttered and stuck the blade through his belt. Charles copied him.

Sir Amertious led them to the second stone wall. There was another door, just as small and flimsy looking as the first.

“How do you know which doors are enchanted?” Charles asked. He looked at Phichorian as he said it, but it was Sir Amertious who answered.

“They are small and seemingly unprotected. Surely you’ve noticed.”

“I had,” Charles bristled a little. “I thought there might be more to it.” He turned to Phichorian. “Why make them so weak looking? Aren’t they asking for trouble?”

“He probably planned to use them as a trap, an easy way to catch his enemies. Necorious didn’t know that we knew about the spells he uses. He still might not. It must have been a great bit of espionage which enabled Bobble to make the sweater.”

“Espionage by the Order of Rooksguard, no doubt,” Sir Amertious added.

Phichorian ignored him. “It’s such a small thing; it will be very hard for Necorious to figure out how we got in.”

* * *

This time they had the system worked out and organized themselves around Charles’s outstretched arms in a few seconds. Sidling through the door was still a tricky maneuver, but once through, they were in a second courtyard, this one more run down, broken up, and overgrown, with lower walls that looked older than the

outer walls, and more ornamentation and broken statues. The forest was starting to take over around the edges.

The guards fell into formation behind Sir Amertious. Sir Amertious turned to Charles and Phichorian. "It is safe enough here. It's best if you stay here until we return. It is possible we will encounter large numbers of guards and we have to be focused on our mission, not on..."

Sir Amertious blustered on as if he was addressing a wayward troop of new recruits. When he had finished, Phichorian said, "I have no desire to fight. You know that. Good luck on your mission."

Sir Amertious didn't seem to know how to respond. Instead he turned to his men and began giving orders.

Phichorian sat on a flat piece of ruin. Charles watched Sir Amertious lead the guards around the corner and into the main part of the complex. When he was pretty certain they weren't coming back, he sat down beside Phichorian and waited.

It was very quiet in the courtyard. Even though there were lots of trees, there were no birds, not even a breeze to rustle the leaves, just the sound of his own breathing and the occasional sound of Phichorian fidgeting.

Charles smelled it first. Burning. But he couldn't tell what. Then he heard the crash of metal on metal and the screams of men. And then he saw it; the smoke and flames dancing up from the center of the compound.

Phichorian stood up. "Let's have a look." He climbed onto a stone foot to see over the edge of the wall.

Charles climbed up after him. He didn't want to be left alone this close to danger.

Phichorian was looking thoughtful as he studied the battle taking place in the main yard. "So much for secrecy."

Charles squinted at the fire. It seemed to be a bonfire made of old furniture and books and papers, presumably the remains of the library. "Did our side start the fire?"

Phichorian shook his head. "Even Sir Amertious would not be barbaric enough to allow books that old to be burned in battle. It was Necorious's troops. Sir Amertious seem to have run directly into their forces, so they lit a bonfire to help them see the fight. They know they outnumber us, so they don't need the cover of darkness. I would have snuck around in the shadows." He turned to Charles. "Are you up for a bit of adventure?"

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