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The King's Grand Army

The Kingdom of Syrelle had been blessed with a good harvest. Warehouses were overflowing with sacks of wheat and corn; there was ripe fruit aplenty; loads of vegetables; and barns were full of hay to feed the animals for the coming winter. As a thank-you for the farmers and workers who had brought in the crops, the King declared a long weekend holiday for all his subjects and had also arranged some celebrations. Well, actually, he hadn't done much himself apart from agreeing to think about it; in fact, he wouldn't have done that either if not for his servant's suggestion: "I reckon it would be a good idea to have a carnival, Your Majesty. I'm sure your new Wizard and his familiar could come up with something quite spectacular."

The King groaned. "Do you mean like this, Raymond?" he sneered, pointing to the crown on his head which had been a Christmas gift from Wizwoh and Lillfing. "The lights won't stop flashing, and with Jingle Bells playing over and over it's driving me mad. The worst part is that I still can't take it off."

"They are trying to fix that, Sire," Raymond reminded him.

"But when?" the King demanded in dismay. "And after they did this to my crown you expect me to entrust the creation of a carnival to an incompetent Wizard and that runt-of-a blue elephant he calls his familiar? It would be a total disaster."

At that point the door opened and Wizwoh swept in. "Good morning your Kingship," squeaked Lillfing, the tiny blue elephant sitting on the Wizard's upturned palm, "We bring glad tidings – we think we've fixed it."

The King frowned. "Fixed what?"

"The problem with your crown," said the Wizard, "So, if you would permit, we will cast a spell and..."

"Oh, no, definitely no!" stated the King shaking his head. "You already have a hopeless track record, what with bringing so much rain that it flooded the kingdom; then you made it snow in my bathroom. I don't think I can take anymore of your magic."

"Oh, don't be such a woos," chided Lillfing. "Just stand still, close your eyes if you like, and it will be over in a flash. Unless, of course, you want to be a walking Christmas decoration for the rest of your life."

Following a deep sigh, the King said: "Very well. Do what you must," and he closed his eyes.

Wizwoh glanced down at the tiny familiar sitting on his hand. "Ready?"

"You betcha, Boss," replied Lillfing. "Do your stuff."

Wizwoh placed his other hand over to cover Lillfing and chanted: "Christmas cheer endeth here." The hand rose revealing the little blue elephant who now had a very long trunk which was

pointing straight at the King. Spreading his fingers in the air, Wizwoh called out the magic word: "Scrammo!"

A bolt of lightning shot from Lillfing's trunk and struck the King's crown. The lights on it fizzed momentarily then started flashing again. The only change seemed to be that they were no longer the colours of the rainbow: now they were just white lights. "Oh," said Wizwoh, "That didn't quite work the way we'd planned, Lillfing."

"Not quite, Master," replied his familiar, "But at least it's playing a new tune."

"What's new about Twinkle Twinkle Little Star?" gasped the King angrily as he tried to lift the crown from his head, "And I still can't take it off! You are absolutely hopeless, Wizwoh!"

In an attempt to change the subject and calm the King down, Raymond said quietly: "Um... about the carnival, Your Majesty... Would now be a good time to ask our Wizard to sort it?"

The King scowled and remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, he gave a long sigh. "Oh, do whatever you want, Raymond. I'm going to take a bath. If I'm lucky I might drown. Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," he groaned in disgust as he trudged out of the chamber. "I'll be even more of a laughing stock now."

Once the King had gone, Raymond explained his idea for the carnival which really excited Lillfing. "Oh yes, my word. We can do that," she squeaked, "We'll create the most magnificent carnival ever; isn't that right, Boss?"

Wizwoh frowned uncertainly and was about to speak when Raymond cut in: "You won't mess up again like you did with the King's crown, will you?"

"Fear not, loyal and faithful servant," Lillfing reassured Raymond. "This will be a breeze; and when it's finished your King will be proud of you for giving us the job. Let's away to the village green." And off the three of them went to organise the carnival.

In the meantime, the King was in his bath worrying over what kind of disaster his new Wizard would conjure up next; and as he worried, he kept a close eye on the ceiling above, just in case it started to snow again. When it didn't, he supposed something must be going right for once, and he lay back to enjoy the peace. It lasted quite a while until Raymond burst in, flapping his arms and pointing, but too out-of-breath to speak.

The King pushed away his rubber duck and scowled at his servant. "What is it? Has Wizwoh made a right hash of the carnival?"

"No, Your Majesty," gasped Raymond, taking a deep breath before continuing. "The carnival's fine, magnificent, actually. It's not about that."

"What, then?" the King demanded to know.

"It's Duke Humlock..."

"My *brother*?" puzzled the King. "What does *HE* want?"

"The harvest," explained Raymond simply. "He orders you to put all of the corn and wheat and fruit, and everything into his wagons. Should you refuse, he will attack and take your Kingdom; which, he claims, ought to have been his in the first place until you stole it from him!"

"How dare he accuse me of stealing?" snorted the King. "I am the oldest son, so the Kingdom is mine by right. And what does he have to back up this silly threat except for a few rag-tag farmers with shovels and pitchforks?"

"Um... er, a bit more than that, Sire," muttered Raymond awkwardly. "The Duke has brought an army, a proper one with armoured soldiers carrying swords and pikes, some of them mounted on horses; and not only that..." Raymond was about to say more but was cut short.

"Cavalry!" roared the King. "This is monstrous!"

"Indeed it is; however, I'm sorry to have to tell you, but there's something even worse – he not only has an army – he's brought a Wizard with him! I fear we are doomed, Your Majesty!"

Growing red in the face, the King bellowed: "It's over to you now, Raymond. Get the Captain of the guard to muster the troops; and I want them on horseback!"

"But, er...", Raymond started.

"No buts! Just do as I say; and tell Wizwoh I want him there when we go out to face that traitor Duke Humlock. I'll make him sorry he tried to take my Kingdom, my Grand Army will see to that. Now go!"

Alas poor Raymond. If it wasn't bad enough that the King always blamed him for everything that went wrong, he had been gifted a seemingly impossible task that had problems at every turn. To begin with, the King's soldiers weren't too happy over going back to duty, not when they were having so much fun at the carnival. Then there was the matter of horses because there weren't any in Syrelle; not after the King had sold them to his brother for a really hefty price. "What are we to do?" Raymond asked of Wizwoh.

The Wizard of Syrelle had no idea; but, as usual, his familiar came up with one: "The carousel, Master," said Lillfing, pointing at the merry-go-round. "We have ten horses ready for service. All you have to do is cast a spell or two and release them."

It was a terrible rush, but eventually The Grand Army of Syrelle was lined up in the courtyard of the castle. Considering how quickly it had been assembled, the King should have been pleased. Apparently, he was not. "For pity's sake! *You* must have done this, Wizwoh. Who else would present me with soldiers mounted on wooden horses? And look at the colours – pink, yellow, sky blue and purple! As for the rest: why have my troopers got flowers on their helmets?"

"They came straight from a party," explained Raymond.

"Well, they look stupid," grumbled the King, "More so those sitting on sheep; and there's even one on a donkey that's wearing a straw hat with its ears poking out! This is not what I'd call cavalry: it's pathetic!" He paused to focus on a single large horse at the front. "Isn't that Parsnip, the retired cart horse? What's he doing here; and why doesn't he have a rider?"

"Parson is yours, Your Royal Highness," said Wizwoh. "A noble beast who is tall and strong; and who will lead you and your Grand Army into battle with head held high."

The King looked Parsnip up and down, shook his head in dismay and whispered to himself: "I truly don't believe how I could let myself get talked into this insanity." Following a slow blink of his eyes, he said: "If I have to..." then: "Someone fetch me a ladder."

So The Grand Army of Syrelle rode out to face Duke Humlock. His men were lined up at the foot of the hill waiting; and when they saw their approaching enemy on horseback, most were surprised and started to worry. That, however, was only until the advancing force came close enough to see it properly; then the laughter began. "What did I tell you, Wizwoh?" the King growled at the Wizard marching by his side. "I shall never be able to live this down."

"Have faith, Your Kingship," squeaked Lillfing. "We've got everything covered."

"I seriously doubt that," sniped the King, "And what do you propose to do about their Wizard, may I ask?"

"I've brought my special magic staff," said Wizwoh, holding out a long pole with a jewel at one end. "With this I can block any spell he chooses to cast."

"I hope you're right," said the King. Holding up a hand to stop the advance, he declared: "This is as far as we go." Raising himself higher on his saddle, he called out: "Turn your men around and leave, Duke Humlock; or pay the price!"

"That's telling him," sniggered Lillfing. "Uh-oh, he's coming towards us. Now he's stopped; but his Wizard hasn't. And just look at him – standing out front all on his own without a care in the world. Show him, Master," she said to Wizwoh. "Wack him with a bit of magic."

"Not yet, Lillfing," muttered Wizwoh quietly. "Let him make the first move."

This was not long in coming. Duke Humlock's Wizard raised his staff above his head momentarily; then brought it down quickly and pointed it at the King. The silver ball at the end glowed briefly before spitting a stream of light which speared out and struck the King's crown. The King shuddered as the crown started turning on his head, faster and faster; and both the flashing lights and Twinkle Twinkle Little Star kept pace. "Now, Boss," hissed Lillfing urgently. "Do it NOW!"

As the other Wizard had done, Wizwoh raised his staff above his head; but instead of bringing it down, he began to turn it in the opposite direction to the spinning crown. In seconds the crown had slowed to a stop. Taking a deep breath, the Wizard of Syrelle thrust the staff in the direction of Duke Humlock's army and chanted: "Showers of ice A-wayee."

There was a very brief pause, and it seemed yet another spell had gone wrong; then it happened: the lights on the front of the King's crown burst into life, flashing faster and faster; and as they did, hailstones fired out from them and zoomed towards the Duke's army. The soldiers were startled by the ice balls bouncing off their armour; and the horses were terrified, rearing and shying, tossing off their riders one by one. But if the army was in disarray, the Duke's Wizard appeared unmoved, rightly so because he had created a protective shield around himself that easily repelled the hailstones.

"Better be quick, Boss," urged Lillfing. "He's going to chuck another spell our way."

"Right," said Wizwoh. "Er... Oh," he exclaimed in a sudden panic. "I've forgotten the words." His familiar shuffled along his shoulder to whisper in his ear. Wizwoh's eyes widened with understanding. "Yes, I remember. Okay, here goes." Lowering his staff, he placed the jewelled end on the ground and chanted: "Unfreeze beeze."

The King's crown stopped spitting hailstones. No longer under fire from the shower of ice, the Duke's army had begun to recover, believing this show of force to be no more than a harmless delaying tactic. What they had failed to notice, however, was the carpet of ice that surrounded them. It was melting quickly. As it did, what had been trapped inside was being released – hundreds of bees – and being kept cold for so long, they were far from happy. Buzzing erupted and in moments the insects were swarming around the ones they blamed for their captivity. Soldiers ducked, flapped their hands and arms; tore off their helmets and tried desperately to remove armour because the bees were getting inside. The angry buzzing insects had somehow managed to invade the Wizard's protective shield, and he was running away.

The Grand Army of Syrelle watched and laughed for a while, until there was nothing more amusing once the invaders had charged off into the distance as fast as their panicking horses could carry them. Needless to say, the King was pleased; even more so after the other Wizard's spinning spell had loosened the crown and he was now able to lift it off his head. Proudly leading his troops back to the castle, he waved his crown to the cheering crowds lining the roads. "Don't you think it might be best to put it back on your head before you drop it, Your Victorious Majesty," suggested Lillfing.

The King glanced at the crown, then at Lillfing who was still sitting on Wizwoh's shoulder. "I suppose you're going to promise me it won't get stuck again," said the King.

"Well," replied Lillfing, rocking her head from side to side. "I think "promise" might be a bit rash. But how about a maybe-with-a bit-of-luck? Would that do?"

"Knowing you two, I'm inclined to doubt it. For the time being," the King added, "I'll leave it off. Now, let's get these wooden horses back to the carousel; and I believe you mentioned something about a party...? I think everyone might enjoy that... perhaps even me."