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DUKE HUMLOCK RIDES AGAIN

A small company of soldiers set out from their quarters as they had every morning lately. These were part of Syrelle's finest, the King's Grand Army, and they were off to take over from the troops guarding the border. This was a result of His Majesty's order: "I want a close watch kept in case that sneaky brother of mine, Duke Humlock, decides to invade again." To date it had worked well, and on the odd occasion when some of the Duke's men had approached Syrelle, they saw the line of soldiers and fled. The relief company was almost at the border when an armoured trooper rushed back from the front line and handed a note to the leader, telling him to take it to the King.

On first receiving it, the King was angry; until he read further and declared with a snort of laughter: "Hah! Who does Humlock think he's kidding? Hand over my kingdom to him, just like that? He should be so lucky. It says at the bottom of his letter-of-demand that he wishes to meet to discuss the terms of my surrender. I'll give him surrender! Fetch Wizwoh to me, Raymond," he charged his servant; then remembered something: "No, better not summon him – he doesn't like that. Ask him nicely if he would care to join me."

Trudging down the stone steps into the depths of the castle, Raymond was hoping that this wouldn't be yet another disaster that he would get blamed for. It certainly seemed that every time the new wizard of Syrelle cast his spells, something always went wrong. At the moment, however, there had been no talk of magic, so maybe there wouldn't be any need for it. Reaching Wizwoh's room, he knocked politely on the door, only entering when a squeaky voice said: "Come in, Raymond; and wipe your feet." The voice, Raymond knew, was that of Lillfing, the miniature blue elephant that was the Wizard's familiar; but how she knew who was on the other side of a closed door he could only imagine. Witchcraft was really weird.

Shortly after, Raymond returned to the King's chambers with Wizwoh following, Lillfing perched on his shoulder. "We hear Duke Humlock's back again, your Kingship," squeaked the tiny blue familiar. "What do you want us to do about it?"

"Send him packing of course," snarled the King, toning his next words down to pleasant and friendly so that the wizard didn't get upset. "Maybe you could magic those horses off the carousel again." Turning to his servant, he commanded: "Assemble the troopers, Raymond. Have them ready to ride; and tell them to forget the flowers on their helmets this time." Then to Wizwoh: "Might be an idea to do the bee thing as well. I'll take my crown for the sparkling-hail bit."

It was a simple enough ploy, and as the army rode out on their brightly-painted wooden carousel horses and a few farm animals, the King trotted proudly at the head mounted on Parsnip the retired cart horse. Wizwoh was there too, flouncing confidently along in his flowing robe and carrying his staff with the jewel on top. Lillfing had advised that: "Just in case Humlock brings his wizard again, Boss. I bet he wants revenge for what we did to him with the bees." She was right about the wizard who was standing in the valley beside Duke Humlock, behind

them a line of armoured soldiers on horseback. Seeing this, Lillfing sniggered. “Will they never learn?”

The army of Syrelle halted a short way from the intruders, while the King and Wizwoh advanced to within speaking distance. “There’ll be no surrender on my part, Humlock,” he declared, ripping up the Duke’s note and tossing the pieces in the air. “Leave my kingdom, or suffer the consequences.”

“There will certainly be consequences, brother,” grated Humlock in a sneering tone, “But you’ll be the one suffering them. This is your last chance. Hand over the kingdom, or my army will ride all over you.”

The King laughed. “*That* pathetic bunch? You’ve got to be joking. Let’s give them a reminder,” he said to Wizwoh as he straightened his crown and waited. His wizard repeated what he had done last time, turning his staff round and round in the air which was supposed to make the crown spin and fire hailstones from its sparkling jewels. Not only didn’t it spin, but the lights in the jewels went out. Even the tune it used to play stopped – Twinkle Twinkle Little Star was no more.

Wizwoh was puzzled, the King speechless; but not so Duke Humlock: “Seems my wizard is more powerful than yours, brother. I’ll give you something else to worry about, shall I? There’s a minor thing I forgot to tell you - recently I made a small addition to my army. Bring up the reinforcements!” he called back to his line of cavalry. One of the mounted soldiers produced a trumpet and blared out a signal. At first, nothing seemed to change; then movement was noticed at the top of the hill in the distance. A number of shapes had begun to appear from behind the rise.

“More cavalry?” pondered Wizwoh.

They all watched as the shapes began moving down the hill and into the valley. As they came closer they were easier to see, and they clearly weren’t horses. They were too big for that. Lillfing said what no-one else needed to: “Elephants! I bet that interfering wizard conjured them.”

As the herd of elephants lumbered closer, another worrying feature could be seen. “They’re fully armoured,” said Lillfing, “And they’re wearing helmets like soldiers. I reckon they look stupid.”

The elephants came to a halt behind the normal cavalry. “Stupid or not,” moaned the King, “We haven’t a hope against them. Do something, Wizwoh!”

“I’m not sure I can, Your Majesty,” said his wizard with a worried frown.

“But maybe *I* can,” squeaked Lillfing. “I mean, I’m an elephant same as them, well almost. I could try and talk to them, like elephant to elephant, and suggest they turn around and go home.”

No-one was very confident that it would work, but it was the only plan they had at that moment. Wizwoh placed his familiar on the ground and Lillfing started out towards Duke Humlock’s lines. One thing was in her favour – being so small the grass in the valley was taller than her so she could advance unseen. They watched the grass moving as she pushed her way through it and eventually she was too far away to even see that. Then they waited, and waited, and waited. “What’s taking her so long?” grumbled the King.

“A bit of diplomacy maybe?” suggested Raymond nervously. “After all, those elephants are kind-of bigger than her... Hang on a minute,” he added in a whisper, “I think she’s coming back.” Eventually, Lillfing appeared out of the grass in front of them. “At least she’s safe,” said Raymond, “That’s a blessing.”

“Never mind that,” hissed the King irritably, then asked Lillfing: “Did you make a deal with them?”

“In a manner of speaking, Your Nobleness,” squeaked the tiny familiar. “I told them it would make you very happy if they went back where they came from.”

“And...?” urged the King.

"The head of the herd made me an offer I couldn't refuse," said Lillfing with a sigh. "To quote his meaningful words: 'clear off you freaky squirt before I stomp on you'."

It seemed they were doomed, until Lillfing came up with another suggestion: "The problem before was my size. Now, if you made me bigger, Boss, I mean *really* bigger, I wouldn't need to talk to them. I could scare them off; all of them including Duke Humlock and his silly soldiers."

"Do we know a growing spell?" Wizwoh asked. Lillfing began whispering in his ear. "Oh, that one? Yes, I remember; but we haven't used it yet. I only hope it works."

"Knowing you, it probably won't," grumbled the King, "But we don't have a choice. Just get on with it."

Once Wizwoh had done the main bit of chanting with Lillfing adding the special bits, it was time. Putting his familiar on the ground, the wizard lowered his staff so that the jewel rested on the tiny elephant's head. Then he began to raise it, muttering the words: "Uppity Uppity Up..."

As the staff rose, Lillfing was growing with it, bigger and bigger. Soon enough she was the same height as Wizwoh. "Bigger, Boss," she said, "I need to be really huge." And the wizard continued to raise the staff as high as he could. Lillfing still wasn't satisfied.

"I can't reach any higher," explained Wizwoh.

"Okay," said Lillfing, "Raymond, you climb on the Boss's shoulders and hold up the staff."

"But Raymond isn't a familiar," protested the wizard.

"We know him, don't we?" said Lillfing, "And he knows us. We even live in the same castle. How much more familiar does he need to be?" After much scrambling and grunting, the King's servant managed to climb on Wizwoh's shoulders. Taking the staff, he carried on where the wizard had left off; and Lillfing grew even bigger. In seconds she was quite massive; then she stopped growing because Raymond couldn't raise the staff any higher. "I guess that'll have to do," said the now-very-large blue elephant. "But it might be enough. Check out the Duke's lot. They look pretty scared and they're starting to back off. I'm going in. Wish me luck."

Lillfing began to advance on the invaders, slowly and menacingly; and with each plodding step, the enemy retreated. Humlock's wizard was stumbling backwards and in a frenzy, waving his staff around in an attempt to counter the growing-spell, and he was failing miserably; for a moment. Then a cloud of shimmering mist poured out of his staff to envelop Wizwoh's gigantic familiar. Only her shape could be seen through the veil and it was shrinking; and changing too. "Get off!" Wizwoh commanded Raymond, "And give me my staff. I have to reverse the reversing."

If no-one else knew what he meant, Wizwoh did, which was all that mattered; and he did manage to stop Lillfing shrinking even further; but by then she was about the size of a donkey and she had changed into a blue cat. Humlock's troops saw this. Their courage renewed, they moved in to surround a seriously diminished Lillfing. "Nice try, brother," called the Duke with a chuckle. "Seems you've played right into my hands and given me a hostage. Tell you what – I'll be chivalrous about this and give you until tomorrow to pack your bags; when I will be coming to take up residence in *MY* castle. Then you can have your silly blue cat back and leave *MY* kingdom."

There was nothing the King and his army could do but withdraw from the battlefield. Back in the castle and certain that all was lost the King began stuffing clothes in a trunk, mumbling: "I'm a King, I shouldn't be doing this myself; and I wouldn't have to if my servant wasn't off playing familiar to that useless wizard."

The two in question were down in the wizard's chamber, both thumbing through books of magic spells and charms. "Here's something, Boss," said Raymond, and caught his breath. "Um, is it alright to call you that?"

"For the moment," Wizwoh assured him, "Until I get Lillfing back. Have you found a spell to achieve that?" Scanning the page Raymond had been reading he began nodding. "It might just do the trick. Well done, Raymond; but we will need two birds, one green and one red." As it

happened, the King's servant and now part-time familiar said he kept two as pets and went off to fetch them. On his return, his new Master wasn't pleased. "They're both *red* !!"

Raymond frowned at the birds in the cage. "Are they?"

Wizwoh groaned. "You aren't by any chance colour-blind?"

"Oh, didn't I mention it?" said Raymond sheepishly. "Sorry about that, Boss."

The pair trudged up the stone steps with Raymond carrying the cage of birds, Wizwoh following behind muttering: "The book said the spell needed a red bird and a green one. I only hope two red birds won't mess it up." They were entering the royal chambers when thumping could be heard outside and the floor seemed to tremble. "What's that?" queried the wizard.

Just as he said it, the King burst in. "I'll tell you what it is," he gasped breathlessly. "My cheating brother lied when he said he'd give us until tomorrow. He's here *now*, attacking the castle! His elephants are ramming the walls! You'd better do something, Wizwoh; and quick before the whole place falls to bits!"

Wizwoh and his temporary familiar hustled up to the battlements and looked over. The elephants were charging the castle walls, while the Duke and his horse-soldiers stood back watching. In the midst of them was Lillfing, the same size as Humlock's wizard had made her, and her shape was still that of a cat. "Get ready with the cage," ordered Wizwoh. He turned his staff parallel to the ground and thrust it forward over the battlements. "When I say the words, open it." Taking a deep breath, he called out: "Mini Mize!" As he did, Raymond opened the door of the cage and the birds flew out.

They went straight for a time, then began circling; going lower and lower over the heads of the elephants. Faster and faster they flew, but that was all. "It's not working," groaned Wizwoh. "Help me, Raymond. Hold one end of my staff and repeat the words with me."

Holding the wizard's staff between them, they chanted together: "Mini Mize, Mini Mize." Their combined effort must have kicked in the spell at last. The birds were still circling, but they were also creating a cloud of pink smoke that grew and grew, spreading outwards so that it not only covered the elephants, but also Duke Humlock and his cavalry. "One more time, ordered Wizwoh," and they both repeated the chant. After a time the pink smoke began to clear and it was possible to see what it had been hiding. Wizwoh frowned. "The elephants are smaller, certainly; so are Humlock and his troopers; but why have they all become mice?"

"It was the spell, Boss," said Raymond, and went on to repeat what he had chanted: "Mini Mice."

Wizwoh sighed in exasperation. "Don't tell me – as well as being colour blind, you are also hard of hearing."

"Pretty much," admitted Raymond casually.

The King had kept out of the way in case something went wrong with the spell. Now he appeared and looked out. "Well done, Wizwoh," he declared as he scanned the battlefield. "You've turned them all into pink mice; and I see you've conjured a pink cat to chase them away. Good thinking."

It was, of course, nothing of the sort. The spells had gone wrong as usual, but they didn't tell the King that. The invaders had been chased away which was all that mattered; well almost. "I don't like being a pink cat, Boss," complained Lillfing.

"Is she really, pink?" queried Raymond.

"Of course I am, dummy," grumbled Lillfing. "Now I'd prefer to be back to my normal self and size; and can you change this ridiculous colour - whoever heard of a pink elephant?"

Raymond sent Wizwoh a cheeky grin. "I reckon she'd look quite cute, eh Boss?"

Fortunately for Lillfing, Wizwoh didn't agree. After helping him turn Lillfing back into a miniature blue elephant once more, Raymond returned to being a simple servant again; which was a relief to him, and probably everyone else; especially the King.