

Arthur and Felicity in the Case of the Missing King

Chapter 1

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, settle down, please! This is a serious matter, requiring our closest care and attention! Kindly keep your eyes forwards and – what’s that? No, I don’t want a canapé, go and take them somewhere else.”

Sir Bartram Maxwell sighed inwardly and shooed away an errant waiter with his top hat. He’d known it was a bad idea to hold a meeting in the middle of the Chameleonic Society’s annual summer picnic. Night had fallen, people had been partying for hours already, and most were either too tired or too excited to spare much thought for business. The surrounding merriment wasn’t helping much, either. Every few seconds a firework would go off with a great *whoosh* and *bang*, completely drowning out what he was trying to say; the Orchestra was sailing up and down the Artificial Lake, playing selections from Handel’s *Water Music*; and several of the Society’s younger and more enthusiastic members had begun singing all twenty-seven verses of the Chameleonic Society Anthem. But rules were rules, and the rules clearly stated that any call for help must be considered as soon as possible, no matter what other business might be going on. So Bartram had rounded up as many of the Society Governors as he could find and made them sit in a semi-circle, while he himself fetched an empty wine crate to act as a podium. (He would have preferred to go inside to the Governors’ Office, but the Keeper of the Keys had had too much to drink, and couldn’t understand anything they said to him.)

“As I was saying,” he continued, “we have received an urgent telegram from the Spolettan Embassy. Their King, Roderick the Fourth, is currently missing, presumed kidnapped.”

“Spolettan?” put in one of the Governors. “What’s that?”

“The Kingdom of Spoletta,” said Sir Bartram, “is an island nation located approximately half-way between Minorca and Corsica. It was originally controlled by the Spanish Crown, until the year 1707, when the English privateer Roger Cooke drove out the governor and set himself up as its ruler. Its capital is San Martino, located on the southern coast; its official languages are English and Spolettan; and its principal exports are wine, oranges, and olive oil.”

He sounded as if he were quoting from an encyclopaedia article, which he probably was – Sir Bartram had a good memory for this sort of thing, and liked to show it off.

“Nevertheless,” he continued, “the kidnapping did not take place in Spoletta itself. King Roderick was on a state visit to London when he went missing.”

A murmur of consternation ran through the assembled Governors. They were all opposed to kidnapping, of course, and especially to kidnapping Kings and other important people. And for such a thing to happen in the heart of London! – If word got out that foreign monarchs were being abducted in the streets, no Englishman would ever live down the shame. What would they say in other countries? What would they say in France? Immediately the Governors started to feel that it was their patriotic duty, as well as their humanitarian one, to find the missing King Roderick at once.

“Well, then, no point delaying,” said one. “Let’s round up a couple of agents and send them off at once!”

“Hear, hear!” cried the rest.

“As it happens,” said Bartram, “we already have one agent earmarked to go. May I present Miss Felicity White!”

A young lady, who had been waiting unobtrusively a few feet away, stepped forwards into the semicircle. Her long auburn-brown hair was tied into a loose bun, and she was wearing a simple yet fashionable yellow pillbox hat and dress. But it was her face that really drew attention: not quite classically beautiful, perhaps – it was too pointy and freckled for that – but frank and open, the sort of face you couldn’t help but like and trust.

“Miss White’s involvement has been specifically requested,” said Sir Bartram. “Her father once recovered the stolen Crown Jewels of Spoletta, and they expect the daughter of such a gallant person to be no less gallant herself.”

“Gentlemen,” said Felicity, curtsying politely, “I would be honoured to go on this mission for you.”

The Governors nodded approvingly, won over by her demeanour, which, they felt, showed a suitable combination of pluck and modesty. Old friendships played a part, too – Felicity’s father, Sir William White, had been one of the Society’s top agents until he perished in the line of duty, and many of those present still nurtured fond memories of him.

“I’m glad you all approve,” said Sir Bartram. “Nevertheless, in view of the lady’s youth and inexperience – this will be your first field mission, I believe? – I deem it advisable to send a co-agent along with her.”

The Governors gave another chorus of assent, and Sir Bartram turned to Felicity.

“Well, my dear,” he said, “do you have any idea whom you wish to accompany you?”

Felicity paused for a moment, as if thinking carefully. Then she said, “I choose Mister Arthur Littlehouse!”

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There was a brief pause, and then everybody started saying “Who’s that?” and “Never heard of him!” and other such things. Even Sir Bartram scratched his head in puzzlement.

“My dear girl,” he said, “you will forgive me, but I don’t think I recognise the name.”

“He’s new to the Society,” said Felicity, “just like me. He hasn’t been given any missions yet – at the moment he’s working as a clerk in the accounts office.”

“And I’ve no doubt he’s doing an excellent job there,” said Sir Bartram. “But are you *quite* sure he’s suitable? When I suggested a co-agent, I meant somebody more experienced, who could keep an eye on you and make sure you don’t get into any trouble.”

“If I understand the situation correctly,” said Felicity, “we don’t yet know where King Roderick is being kept, so we’ll be investigating as much as rescuing. We’ll need attention to detail, conscientiousness, a determination to follow things up – all qualities which I’d expect to find in an accounting clerk. As for keeping out of trouble, if I were interested in *that*, I wouldn’t have joined the Society in the first place.”

“But—”

“It won’t hurt to ask him, at the very least,” said Felicity. “If he doesn’t want to come along, then I will accept whomever you suggest in his place.”

Sir Bartram shrugged and said, “Very well, then,” mostly because he didn’t expect this Arthur Littlehouse fellow to accept the mission anyway. He sent a couple of Governors off to find him. This turned out to be somewhat harder than expected, since Arthur had already gone home for the night. But despite Sir Bartram’s urgings that she choose someone nearer to hand, Felicity remained adamant that he should be asked first. So a driver was dispatched with directions to Arthur’s cottage in Clairview Parva and instructions to bring him back immediately.

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While we wait for Arthur to arrive, I might as well tell you a bit more about the Chameleonic Society. It is certainly worth knowing about, for the organisation was unique in the world – a group of people dedicated to using their peculiar talents to help mankind in any way they could.

“Peculiar” is the right word, for the Chameleonic Society was made up exclusively of people who could transform at will into animals. Not just any animals they wanted – most people only had one, or at most two, forms they could change into – but one was generally enough. Being able to turn into a mouse and get into places too small for regular humans, or into a bird and fly over obstacles that would defeat other men, or into a fish and travel undetectably through the water... Small wonder that the Society had become famous the world over for daring rescues, incredible heists, and impossible feats of espionage. Even national governments had been known to seek the Society’s aid when their own security services failed. Not that the Society had ever let this fame turn them from their strict devotion to righting wrongs. But their business had proved a profitable one, as witness their headquarters at Clairview Hall, a seventeenth-century manor house in the Chilterns and the traditional site of the annual summer picnic.

The Chameleonic Society had never revealed the secret to their success – their agents’ job was always much easier if nobody knew their real nature. Only let the truth get out, and soon every villain, terrorist, and kingpin would be festooning his lair with mousetraps, fly paper, fishnets, and other such contraptions. The most unsporting might even get a cat or a dog, trained to eat strange animals on sight – and then how would the Society’s agents be able to break in successfully?

No, it was far better if no-one outside the Society itself knew of its members’ special talents. That was why everybody at the Society headquarters, from the President himself right down to the boy who scrubbed the toilets, was carefully vetted for reliability. Most were shapeshifters themselves. All were free to volunteer for field missions, but generally only the more adventurous did so. The rest did the necessary but unglamorous jobs of cooking, cleaning, and making sure that no important paperwork was lost.

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Arthur Littlehouse was one of these necessary but unglamorous people, and might have remained so, if Felicity hadn’t been so insistent that he come along with her. Even as it was, he nearly refused. When the driver reached his cottage, he had already gone to bed, and only after several minutes’ banging on the door did he finally get up, put on his dressing gown, and go to

see what all the fuss was about. When he opened the door and heard that he was needed for an urgent mission to find the kidnapped King of Spoletta, his first reaction was that this must be some kind of elaborate practical joke. His suspicions only deepened when Felicity was mentioned. He secretly thought that Felicity was the prettiest of all the Society's agents – although, of course, he would never dare tell her this himself – and the thought that she of all people would want him sounded altogether too good to be true. But eventually he agreed to come along, if only to get the joke over with, and went into the car.

Meanwhile the Board of Governors had been growing increasingly restless. Most of them had wanted to go off and enjoy the party while Arthur was being fetched. But Sir Bartram was worried they'd all wander off and be impossible to find again, and so he insisted that they remain where they were. As more and more time passed, they became more and more annoyed at having to sit there uselessly whilst everyone around them was having fun. Their earlier enthusiasm, and their feelings of patriotic and humanitarian duty, gradually waned, until they wanted nothing more than to be done with the whole business as quickly as possible.

So it was that, when Arthur finally arrived, they were in no mood for excuses or debates about whether he'd make a suitable agent. Instead they simply started cheering "Brave heart!" and "Hero of the Society!" and other such flattering things, partly to pressure him into accepting the mission without complaint, and partly out of sheer relief that their meeting would soon be over.

Arthur certainly didn't look very heroic – he was on the shorter side of normal, inclined to stoutness, and still wearing his dressing-gown and pyjamas. It didn't help that he was standing next to the fashionable and elegant Miss Felicity White, either. He had never been greeted so enthusiastically in his life, and stood there feeling utterly bemused, blinking rapidly in surprise and confusion. At least it looked like there *was* a genuine emergency – the President and Board of Governors weren't the sort of people to go in for practical jokes – but this just made the entire situation even more bewildering. He tried to stutter something about how he'd be no good on a field mission, how he was happy where he was, and how there were many, many better-qualified people to send instead. But the Governors' cheers were ringing in his ears, Sir Bartram Maxwell was urging him on, and the Society's prettiest agent was taking his hands in hers, calling him "my dear fellow" and saying how *terribly* grateful she'd be if he agreed to come along with her – and, in short, he really didn't feel he could refuse.