

Chapter 1

“Careful, Elfgurl, they may have piercing eyes posted throughout the castle. Even though you’re going to be invisible to most of the guards and minions, the eyes will be able to spot you, so be careful how you move about; stay on the edges of the rooms and corridors and don’t move when they are looking your way,” Nicholas warned through his headset.

“I’ll be careful, Arthuric, but don’t worry, I’m not exactly new at this.” Pix smiled at the concern she could hear in his voice.

“As soon as you let me know where they’ve hidden the Sacred Stone of Sartune, I’ll fight my way in and join you. I’ll protect you while you figure out how to break the guarding spells and steal the stone and then we can use the rune Cedric gave us to open a portal and we can get this sucker back to the grand master wizard.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Pix agreed cheerfully as she checked to make sure that all her buffs were at full strength. She loved these testing sessions with Arthuric. They were, by far, the favorite part of her job. She sure hoped that the rumors that were starting to circulate about the company having cash flow issues were false. If they shut down the gaming development program, she would lose her interaction with Arthuric. She had no other way of contacting him and had no clue who he was.

How she regretted insisting that they keep their identities secret! At the time they began the trial runs, she had been more concerned about hiding her precarious situation than she was looking for a romantic attachment, or even just a friendship. Her current circumstances didn’t allow for her to indulge in those kinds of things. But she certainly considered him a friend now; in fact, she had progressed as far as admitting to herself that she had fallen into deep like. But she couldn’t afford to allow herself more than that.

“Elfgurl? You all right?” Nicholas asked, surprised that she was just standing still instead of moving about like she normally did. One of the goals of the game programming was to better replicate small human movements. Right now he was sitting on a convenient rock while using a whetstone to sharpen his daggers, his sword was already in optimal condition. Elfgurl usually

liked to pace as she prepared herself to enter her mental state that would put her in thief mode and allow invisibility, but right now she was standing stock-still. “Elfgurl?” He put away the whetstone and stood to approach her.

The adorably petite figure on the monitor shook herself and turned to face him. “Sorry about that, Arthuric, I got caught up in a daydream.”

Damn, but she did something to him, especially those ears! He wanted to put his arms around her and pull her body up tight against his, show her just how much she turned him on. He wondered how realistic the toon bodies could be in showing physical responses. He’d have to experiment while she wasn’t able to see what he was doing.

He had agreed with her insistence on only knowing each other’s game info and keeping their real world identities private, he had some big secrets to protect after all. He couldn’t exactly announce that he was the son of Santa Claus and lived at the North Pole, although the family just called the compound Home. But now he wished that he could meet her in person and get to know the real woman behind Elfgurl. How much of her actual personality had she infused into her toon? He knew that some people preferred to pour everything they had always wanted to be, but weren’t, into the characters they created. While others tended to stay true to who they really were, as he had done – although there were a few more muscles on Arthuric than there were on Nicholas. He had to look like the role of hero that he played, didn’t he? He knew the ears couldn’t be real, but how much of herself had Elfgurl kept and how much had she enhanced? What was her real name?

“Well here goes nothing,” she said as she blew him a kiss and disappeared.

“Be careful!” he responded as he tried to see past her invisibility screen. All he could detect was her giggle.

“I’m behind you!” She slapped his ass and then quickly moved to another position.

Of course, there was no way for the program to convey sensations of touch, and no plans, as far as he knew, to try to add such a thing. If gamers could experience the damage done to their bodies during sword fights, there would be a massive drop-off in interest. So he didn’t feel anything when she spanked him, but the written narrative on the screen informed him what she had done and the monitor showed his body giving slightly in response to the strike. So he growled and spun around, spreading his arms wide to try and capture her. Contact would nullify her invisibility. “Naughty, naughty, Elfgurl!”

Pix giggled again with the thrill those words imparted on her and then squealed in startled excitement when she realized that he was trying to track her by sound. The gaming headphones were directional, another new piece of technology, and Arthuric had just barely missed her with his broad arm span. She quickly hid behind a bush and tried to stifle her breathing, which was slightly rapid with the arousal that was coming to life between her legs. She squirmed in her chair as she watched Arthuric stalk Elfgurl.

Nicholas tried a few more sweeping grabs and then decided to stand still and listen for Elfgurl. So she liked spanking, did she? He'd like to get her across his lap and show her a thing or two about spankings! "Come on, little elf," he crooned. "You know you've been naughty and deserve a spanking. Come to me and I'll temper what you've earned if you can show me what a good little elf you can be."

Her breath caught at his words. How could he know exactly what to say to get her so aroused? She whimpered slightly with the need to go to him and then gasped as he plowed through the bush and captured her.

"I've got you now, naughty elf," he announced with satisfaction as he carried her back to the rock where he had been sitting before and resumed his place, putting her across his lap and quickly starting a spanking. Too bad there wasn't any way to pull up her tunic and bare her bottom. Or was there? His fingers raced over the keyboard as he tried various commands to see which would get his toon to pause the spanking and lift her clothing, without letting her get away.

Pix had entered into the spirit of the spanking and was having her toon kick and squirm – much as she was squirming in her chair as she watched the spanking on the monitor. She paused in her struggles as she watched Arthuric fumbling with her clothing, was he... He was! He was trying to bare her. "Now who's being naughty?" she taunted. "Shame on you!"

"Nicholas, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I—" the faint voice Pix could suddenly hear in the background was drowned out by Arthuric's roar.

"Mother!" He leaped to his feet, trying to block the monitor, and then realized that his erection was probably obvious through his jeans. He quickly placed his hands strategically. "Mom, I told you that I wasn't available during these test sessions."

Hmm, so his name is Nicholas. Pix wanted to hug herself in the excitement of finally knowing a concrete fact about her hero. “So you live with your mother?” she giggled. *Oops! Did I say that out loud?*

“Hush, naughty elf, I’ll deal with you in a moment.” His growl sent a very pleasant shiver through her body.

The sound got muffled as he apparently put his hand over the microphone on the headset. She could hear that Nicholas was talking to his mother, but she couldn’t make out any more words. So she took advantage of his distraction and managed to get her toon off Arthuric’s lap. Once they were no longer in contact, Elfgurl resumed her invisibility and started towards the castle on her reconnaissance mission. When Arthuric realized that she was gone, he wouldn’t dare chase after her and give her position away to the guards.

“Sorry about that. Slush! Where’d you go? I wasn’t finished with that spanking; come back here, naughty elf!”

“I guess you were as finished as you were going to get,” she whispered as she crept past the first guard. The computer-operated toons were unpredictable in what they could hear in the scenes. “Does your mommy need you for something?”

He dropped his voice to match her low tone. “For the record, I don’t live with my parents. I’m at work right now; the graphics on the computer are better. She wants me to check a production line. We’re starting to gear up for our busy season and there seems to be a glitch in the toy pony line, they are coming out with rainbow stripes instead of in rainbow colors. I need to go over the programming. But I told her that I have to finish this run with you and asked her to shut the line down for a little while. So how far into the castle have you gotten?”

“I’ve made it past the portcullis, be careful when you follow me in, there is a trip wire five inches above the cobblestones. Plus there’s a piercing eye hovering right inside the castle looking at the gate. I kept close to the wall and moved very slowly and it never noticed me. You’ll probably have to take it out. I’m headed down the left corridor now.”

“Got it.” Nicholas’ voice changed. “So, you heard my name and I told you I work for the family business, how ‘bout you tell me something about you? What’s your name?”

“Hmm, I think I like having an advantage over you, *Nicholas*. I’m going to keep that information to myself a while longer.” Pix made no effort to keep the teasing out of her voice, how nice it was to have the upper hand!

“Then tell me something else. It’s only fair, *partner*.”

She sighed, that was true. They were supposed to be partners, working seamlessly together on their quests for Arch Mage Cedric. What could she tell him that didn’t give too much away? “I have a soft spot for cats.”

“What did you name yours – Elfcats?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have one, much as I wish I did. You know what they say about beg—” *Oops! No! Stop mouth! Too much info!* “I’m at a junction with a stairway. Do you think I should go up or down?”

So she was in a situation that didn’t permit her to have a cat. That was too bad, she deserved to have a pet if she wanted one.

“Arthuric?”

“Sorry. Hmm, it seems to me that bad guys always like to hide things in the dungeon. So go up, he’ll try to trick us.”

“Are we sure he’s that smart?”

“Not at all, but it’s supposed to be a challenge. The dungeon just seems too easy.”

Pix looked up the stairway; from where she stood she could see at least three guards. This would be a true test of her abilities as a thief. “Going up.”

“Careful, Elfgurl. Easy does it. Don’t take any risks.”

“Shh!”

Nicholas tensed and held his breath as he imagined Elfgurl creeping past whatever danger she saw. He wished that there were some way that he could also see what she did. Hmm, he’d have to suggest that they create a shared vision spell so partners could monitor each other’s movements.

After what felt like ages, he heard her whisper, “Okay, I’m past them, turn— Damn!” The screen went dark for the mandatory five minutes when a team member died. Nicholas checked the time and groaned with frustration. They’d played long enough that their long-standing agreement meant that they would call it a night rather than sit idling while the minutes ticked by. He shut down the equipment and headed out to check the toy pony production line.

* * *

As soon as she saw the time, Pix knew that Nicholas wouldn’t wait for her resurrection. Not only was it past the minimum time that they had agreed that they would play, but also his

mother needed him to check that production line. Rainbow colored toy ponies? They must be making them for preschool children; she couldn't imagine any other type of ponies that were not realistically colored. She remembered that once upon a time she'd had a pink pony with a purple mane and tail. Back when she was young, her parents were alive, and life was good. What a shame that she hadn't appreciated what she'd had until she lost it all. She shook herself to physically break that line of thought.

Nicholas seemed to be willing to exchange information now, she mused as she shut down her equipment and tidied her workspace. Maybe she should have told him her name. She felt that instinctive gut response that told her she had made a huge mistake. Only a few minutes before she had been wishing that they had shared information and then when she was handed a golden opportunity to do exactly that, she had chickened out. What was wrong with her? She had acted with a coy, girly response instead of going for what she really wanted. Nicholas made her do things and feel things that her current situation just didn't permit. She was one step away from living on the streets hiding from death; she couldn't afford to indulge in the fantasy of having a boyfriend.

Next time she would be share some information, she decided as she climbed the stairs to her living space in the attic of the old Victorian house where the company was headquartered. It was only one in the morning, too early to head to bed. So she pulled out her crafting supplies and went to work on her current project – a rag doll with red yarn hair and a green checked dress.

* * *

“Sorry I'm late,” Nicholas said as he dropped into his chair and simultaneously put his headphones on.

“No prob,” Pix responded easily with a smile in her voice. “Did you get the problem with the striped ponies fixed?”

“Yes,” Nicholas said with a chuckle. “Can you believe they still had the candy cane setting on?”

“Oh! That would explain the stripes!” Pix giggled. “But why would you be making toy candy canes? Oh I know! It's for the children who can't have sugar. What a great idea!”

“Yes,” Nicholas agreed slowly, suddenly realizing that he had nearly given away the fact that their magical equipment could make anything; changing from candy to toys with the push of a few buttons was commonplace. “It is a great idea. Wish I had thought of that.”

“Well, I’m sure that you have good ideas too,” Pix said airily, in a generous spirit. “So what are you going to do with the rainbow striped ponies? Not going to send them to the Island for Misfit Toys, are you?” she asked with a giggle. “How many are you stuck with?”

Nicholas froze. Had he somehow compromised himself and revealed his identity? “What do you mean?”

“You know, in that Christmas special where the toys that are somehow different are sent away because everyone thinks that the children won’t want them.”

“Of course children will want them! Children are so open-minded and accepting of differences that it would never occur to them not to want them. It’s a shame so many will lose that as they grow older.”

“Just checking. I wanted to make sure that you didn’t throw them away or something. I know a place that would be happy to get them, but I guess you have a plan already. Are you ready to game?”

“Yes I am. What do you say we play longer this time? I want a chance to get to know you better, and I’m hoping you will take pity on me and share some information.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh, “sorry about that. I guess I got caught up in the competitiveness of gaming mode. My name is Pix.”

“Nice,” Nicholas said. “I like it. It suits you. Do you have a problem playing late tonight? Do you have to be up early for work?”

“This is part of my job. I work for the designer. But I do have a production meeting at ten o’clock, so I shouldn’t play past four AM.”

“Cool. Do you have as much fun with the rest of your job as I do playing with you?”

“No, unfortunately I don’t have the training to write code. So during the day I do all of the stuff that doesn’t take any skill and no one else wants to do. Gaming with you is the highlight of my day. So are you happy? Now that I have given you a swollen ego?”

“Every guy likes to have a girl stroking his ego.” *Among other swollen things.* “But in all truth, I feel the same way about spending time with you. I cut short my visit to my cousin to get back here and game with you. That’s why I was late; I didn’t realize what time it was. When I did, I left abruptly. Niccolo is probably wondering what was going on with me.”

“Wait, your name is Nicholas and your cousin’s name is Niccolo? Isn’t that a little odd? Are you both named after the same relative or something?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, something like that. My other cousins are named Nicholai Nico and Dominic. Do you like puzzles? Can you figure it out?”

“Of course I like puzzles! That’s a huge part of gaming, figuring out how to overcome obstacles.” She was silent for a moment. “It’s obviously not that Dominic is the only one that starts with a different letter... Oh wait, you’re all Nicks!” She groaned. “Who thought of that brilliant idea? The Nick you’re all named for must be pretty darn special. So what about siblings? Don’t they feel left out? Or is there another relative that a bunch of people are named after, as well?”

“No siblings, so no other group of similar names. And yes, the person we’re named in honor of is considered to be very special.”

“What about the siblings of Niccolo, Nicholai, Nico and Dominic? Are they jealous?”

“None of us have any siblings. That’s one of the reasons that we’re extra close. It’s like having four brothers instead of cousins. What about you? Any siblings?”

She sighed. “Yeah, a brother, but I can’t see him anymore.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a long story that I’m not supposed to talk about.” She wasn’t about to try to explain that he was in the witness protection program. There was potential danger to her if certain people ever connected her to him. “So, are you ready to get going with this test run, or are you planning to gab all night?”

“I’m ready to go. Is there some way that we can keep the communication line open so we can talk whenever we need to wait for a resurrection? Sitting here waiting for five minutes is boring. I’d much rather be talking to you.”

“I agree, but that is what the designers wanted. They figured that if you pay a penalty every time you die, people will be more cautious when they play, forcing them to respect the danger of death. I remember there was a game that I used to play that gave extra points for exploring and doing certain things, but there were always dangers associated with them. I never worried about that. I just accepted that I was going to die multiple times and my spirit would have to keep returning to my body over and over until I timed it just right and got the bonus.”

“But it’s the nature of testing things – that we’re going to have more problems than the average player. That’s the point, to try every aspect and work out the bugs. Since I’m doing this as a volunteer and giving up my time for no financial benefit, I think that at the very least I

should be able to talk to the cute girl during the blackouts.” Nicholas shook his head at himself as he heard the words emerging from his mouth. Why couldn’t he talk with women like this in person instead of getting all nervous and tongue-tied?

Pix giggled. “Be careful what you think! I could be built like a sumo wrestler for all you know.”

“Well, if you are, then you are a very cute sumo wrestler. It’s your personality that makes you cute, not your appearance. And babe, with that bubbly attitude and that adorable voice, you’ve got cuteness mastered.” He raised his eyebrows at his audacity. He had never had the courage to call a woman ‘babe’ before. Was he acting macho because he was channeling his hero gaming alter ego? “Besides, for all you know, I may be built like a sumo wrestler too. Remember *Shrek*?”

“All right,” she laughed. “I have to reward that kind of sweet talking. Any man that identifies with Shrek deserves a break. I can’t do anything about the headsets going silent, but give me your phone number and I’ll call you during the blackouts.”

“Sure, why don’t you give me your number as well?”

“Not a chance, buster. A girl’s got to be careful, you know.”

“Aw, come on! How am I a danger to you if I know your phone number? We’ve been gaming together for a long time; don’t you think you can trust me by now? Do you think I’ve been keeping my sleaziness under wraps all this time?”

“But suppose...” She sighed. “You’re right. That was kind of insulting of me wasn’t it? I’m just not a very trusting kind of person these days. But I think I would have gotten some vibes by now if you were some kind of crazy stalker or something. Sorry.” She gave him her number and hoped that she wasn’t making a mistake.

“Thank you. Here’s mine.” He gave her the special magical number that could track him wherever he was. He wanted to make sure that he never missed a call from her, should she ever try to contact him outside their gaming sessions. “If it makes you feel more comfortable, I promise not to call you unless it is very important, okay? I’ll let you be the one to initiate all phone calls, unless I have to let you know that I need to reschedule. It’s getting to be the busy season for us and sometimes emergencies come up.”

“Thank you. That does make me feel better.”

Aw, the poor thing has been harassed by guys before. I'd like to give them some harassment! He could feel his balance shifting slightly towards the naughty side with his bloodthirsty thoughts, but couldn't regret it. Pix was just too sweet to have to be afraid like that and he would do whatever he could to make her feel safe and appreciated. He was careful to keep the subsequent phone calls light and easy.