

# Chapter One

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Fighting against the butterflies in his stomach, excitement bubbled in his chest as a sea of faces watched him walking down to the stage. This was the moment he'd been waiting for. Charles kept his gaze on the scroll in the headmaster's hand... his prize. He reached out to take it, but the headmaster stopped him, opening his mouth.

*Beep! Beep! Beep!*

Charles fumbled to uncover a hand and quiet the clock. Groaning, he rolled over, scrunching his eyes as he tried to get his dream back. Reluctantly, he stumbled out of bed, stretching his arms above his head.

*"Today is the day,"* he sang, swinging his arms out and accidentally wrapping a hand in the robe hanging on a hook beside him. *"The... day... that I will..."*

He jerked his hand, trying to free it from the tangle.

*"The day that I will... whoa!"* As he jerked his hand one more time, suitably harder than the previous attempts, the robe tugged back and he lost his balance, falling to the floor. "Ow."

The robe tumbled off the wall onto his head as it finally let him go. Despite knowing that he was alone, he glanced around to see if anyone had seen him fall as he stood again.

He cleared his throat. *"Ahem. Today is the day! The day that I will finally be free!"*

He threw his arms out again, making sure nothing was waiting to grab him this time. Opening the window wide, he allowed the cool breeze to wrap around him. Goldenbrire Forest swayed in the wind, ever vigilant as it stood guard around the town walls. Old Darlingdeen was already awake. Charles could see the kids running to school, carts plodding up and down the streets, and on the other side of town dark shapes flew through the sky above the farm that housed his favourite creatures. Leaning on the ledge of the window, he watched the people milling about the market.

*"I have waited all my life for this very day to come,"* he sang at the top of his voice. *"The day where I can let you all see just how awesome I can be—"*

A wet rag hit him square in the face. "Shut up, Charles!" someone shouted.

The rag slid down, disappearing into the shrubs below his room. The window to his left was open and a familiar, most unwelcome, face was poking out of it. "You've been singing that song on this day for the last two years!"

"Well, today's going to be different, Clay. I know it is," Charles pouted.

“Whatever.” Clay retreated into his room. Charles looked back down at the crowded streets, hearing the music inside his head once more.

*“Today is the day! The day that I will finally be free! I have waited all my life for this very day to come. The day where I can let you all see just how awesome I can be!”*

“Shut up, Charles!” A shout from almost everyone in the street rang up to him.

Charles stuck out his tongue and returned to the comfort of his room once more. Changing out of his pyjamas, he sat down in front of his mirror. Grabbing a brush, he started to attack his blond hair as he attempted to tame it.

He began his usual routine of checking for zits, blemishes, dirty marks and anything else that might have appeared on his face overnight which would stand between him and perfection. His brush ran over a tangle as he finished his inspection. He let it go, hoping that it would simply fall out. It didn't. Sighing, he grabbed the handle with both hands, pulling as hard as he could.

The sound that came out of his mouth was not human. It was a mix of a little girl's scream and the cry of some bird of prey. Along with the brush, a huge chunk of hair had been pulled out. Quickly checking his reflection in the mirror to make sure he hadn't just made himself bald, he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that his head was still completely covered. Once he had recovered, he sat straight, staring at his reflection.

“Charles Charming, ready for my quest!”

He rehearsed his smile, showing as much of his teeth as he could. The perfect Charming smile; he had been practising it for years.

“Charles Lame-o more like.” Clay stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, a confident smirk twisting the corner of his mouth. Clay was the class favourite; thirteen, brilliant jet black hair tied back in a ponytail, pale blue eyes and a smile that made the girls melt. Charles thought that his eyes made him look creepy but the girls apparently found it ‘dreamy’.

“Kindly step away from my door,” he said, moving towards Clay.

“Or what? What are you going to do?”

“I'll sing again.”

Clay glared at Charles for a moment before reluctantly moving away from the door frame. As soon as Clay was gone, Charles left his room. He glanced at the doors as he passed, looking at the name plaques that hung on each one. Curtis, Carl, Chris, Cole. *Funny how they all begin with C*, he thought.

Making his way down the stairs, he knocked on a battered brown door that was down a little corridor beside the stairs. Someone shuffled closer on the other side, and a small panel slid open. Tired, wrinkled eyes darted about before settling on him. Charles smiled and waved before the panel slid shut again. A few moments later, the lock on the door clicked open.

“Good morning, Burt.” Charles beamed as he entered the dark room.

Burt moved about in the far corner, fiddling with jars and trinkets while he muttered to himself. Burt was something like the school janitor, except no one had ever seen him actually do anything other than shuffle about in his room.

“Burt?”

“Thieves! You’re all thieves!” Burt suddenly shouted.

Thinning white hair stuck out at odd angles from the old man’s head, he raised a hand to flatten one side whilst licking the end of a spoon. Charles raised a brow, but stayed silent; this was nothing new for Burt.

“Yes, yes we are.” Charles knew better than to argue. “Is it ready yet?”

Burt stopped in his tracks. “Ready?”

“Yes, remember I asked you to do me a favour?”

“Oh, yes, the favour...”

Burt slinked into another corner, disappearing into the shadows for a few moments. Charles hovered where he was. Burt’s room scared him. It was dark, smelled funny, and was full of all sorts of objects that he hadn’t the faintest idea of what they could even be. Burt reappeared with a tall cylinder filled with a glowing, putrid pink liquid. He stepped over to Charles and placed the vial in his hands.

“Is this it?” Charles looked at the liquid uncertainly. “This will help me?”

“Help? Oh, yes!” Burt nodded to himself and went back to looking at his trinkets again.

“Thank you, Burt.”

Burt mumbled something and waved a hand in Charles’ direction. Charles took it as a hint, thinking it best to leave the old man to his devices. He tucked the vial into his bag and left the room. It was almost time for the morning assembly. Making his way down the corridor, he stopped in front of the auditorium, glancing up at the large sign above the doors.

ACADEMY OF CHARMS AND CHARMINGS.

The school was top of its league, teaching both young Prince Charmings and aspiring Fairy Godmothers. It was rivalled only by the Villainous Academy, where the evil in the world started, or at least that was Charles’ opinion. The Villainous Academy was as far from Old Darlingdeen as it was possible to be without leaving Lilantium. It was nestled in the middle of Torbank, a small town enclosed by Fallenbark Forest.

It took half an hour for the students to make their way to the auditorium and find a seat. Charles let his mind wander until he heard the familiar sound of the headmaster’s footsteps crossing the wooden floor of the stage.

“Good morning, students.” The headmaster was a rather short man. A silver beard, that was longer than he was, wound down his front and curled like a snake on the floor in front of him. “Today we announce those special few who have been chosen by the Oracle to tackle quests.”

Charles was now gripping the edge of his chair as he leaned forward, desperate for the headmaster to call his name.

“Christopher Charming, task seven-eight-two. Curt Charming, task seven-eight-three. Jules Fair, task seven-eight-four. Larissa Fair, task seven-eight-five. Finally...”

Charles hovered an inch above his chair, willing the headmaster to say his name. The headmaster glanced around the room for a moment, watching those whose names he had already called coming down the aisles.

“Clay Charming, task seven-eight-six.”

Charles sank back into his chair, watching Clay triumphantly rise from his. While everyone else cheered, Charles refused to participate. Certain students who had stood out were chosen by the Oracle to go on special quests. They were the elite of the school. Charles had been trying to get in the elite group ever since he started at the Academy.

Charles felt a sharp dig at his ribs. “Maybe next year, Charles.” The boy next to him sniggered.

He looked at the boy for a moment, not even knowing who the kid was. He rose from his chair and climbed over the other Charmings sitting between him and the aisle. Pushing past the last boy, he sprinted up the steps and opened the door. Taking a deep breath, he calmly walked away from the auditorium. The cheering and applause got quieter the further he walked.

When he reached his room again, he threw his bag down on his bed and sank to the floor beneath the window, resting his head against the wall. Charles was fourteen. Fourteen meant he should have graduated the previous year. Circumstances being what they were, Charles hadn't had the chance to graduate. He was the first student to ever attend the school for a fourth year. He guessed that was a bad thing.

A faint tapping made him lift his head. He watched as the door handle slowly turned and a thin face poked around the door to peer into the room. It was the librarian.

“Ah, Charles,” she opened the door further upon seeing him. “The headmaster is requesting your presence in his office.”

She pushed her thick-rimmed glasses further up her nose, leaving the room before Charles was able to reply.

“Probably wants to tell me I'll be here till I'm thirty,” he mumbled.

Charles flicked at pieces of fluff on the floor. As he looked up, he noticed something in his bag reflecting the light, and remembered the vial that Burt had given him. He shuffled from his spot and retrieved the tall vial, holding it carefully as he looked it over. He had asked Burt a week ago to brew him a potion that would, hopefully, help him in his endeavours to succeed in his classes.

The liquid shimmered in the light; it looked innocent enough. There was no choice in the matter really. It was drink the liquid or carry on with his ordinary attempts at passing.

“Bottoms up.”

Charles removed the cork from the top of the vial and closed his eyes, tipping the contents down his throat. It tasted strange, like dirt mixed with butter. He gagged a little as the liquid worked its way into his system. Sticking his tongue out, his face contorted as the aftertaste hit him.

He waited. Nothing happened. He was beginning to question whether the potion actually worked when a strange pulsing sensation started in his abdomen... faintly at first, then growing steadily more powerful until it felt like there was a fist punching the inside of his stomach. Charles gingerly lifted his shirt to inspect the area causing the pain. His eyes widened as he saw an actual fist attempting to push its way out. It was small, but growing steadily larger with each passing moment.

Charles wanted to scream, but he could only make small noises like a choking cat. All he could do was watch in horror as a third arm continued to grow. The pulsing sensation dulled as the arm grew fully, the fingers flexing and moving of their own accord. Charles felt light-headed as the arm waved at him. It was too much. He fainted.