

THE BOY
WHO WENT
MAGIC
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CHAPTER 1

Bert stood watching the crowds gather inside the entrance of Penvellyn National Museum. A procession of horse-drawn carriages dropped off important-looking people in tall hats as a sightseeing airship passed overhead. The voice of the tour guide carried down to the street: *“Below you’ll see a group of children waiting for the first public opening. How lucky they must feel. King Eldred himself sanctioned the exhibit only yesterday, along with the handsome Prince Voss . . .”* The wind rose, and the rest of the commentary was lost to the noise of the street.

Bert shook his head. He wasn’t feeling especially lucky.

Ten years had passed since his arrival at the school. He was thirteen, tall and stern, and carried himself almost like an adult. But he still found the memory of that night creeping into his thoughts from time to time, making him feel like a small child again.

His schoolmates were whispering to one another about the new exhibition. All they knew for certain was that it was about the old land of Ferenor—and that they were missing classes for it. A day off school was exciting enough in itself, even without the added mystery.

“Hey, Bert,” said a boy named Freston.

“What?” said Bert, immediately on his guard.

“Maybe there’ll be something *magical*.” Freston wiggled his fingers in the air as he spoke, and pulled a face. A few of the other children snickered.

Bert chose not to reply.

“Didn’t you say you were going to be an adventurer?” said Freston.

“Maybe, when I was six,” said Bert. He moved away from Freston and his group of cronies and tried to make himself inconspicuous.

A girl called Garnet looked his way and smiled. She was one of the most popular people in his class, which meant she was basically his opposite. She never spoke to him.

He was taken aback for a moment.

“How’s it going?” she said.

Bert blinked. “I—I’m fine, how are you?”

Garnet frowned and looked past him.

Bert realized that she wasn’t talking to him at all, but a girl who was standing over his shoulder. He winced and looked at his feet. It was sort of funny, in a way. But

in another way, it made him want to crawl into a hole in the ground and never speak again. He should have known better, he supposed. The important children weren't accustomed to mixing with orphans.

"Right, children," said Mr. Fitzroy, their teacher. He was an impatient man, with a small mustache and an uneasy way of glancing at people. "Some of you may be wondering why we have come to this place. Well, let me tell you—we have not canceled today's scheduled sword-fighting exams and traveled across town by omnibus without good reason. What you are about to see today, as some of the first visitors to this exhibition, will form a fundamental part of your education. It will help dismiss any fairy-tale notions you might have about magic for good."

Bert winced. *Fairy-tale notions?* He thought again of that night, and the voice of the man in the cloak. Sometimes he wondered if it was just a bad dream. He sensed the other children watching him. Garnet whispered something to her friends, and the snickering began all over again.

"Let us find our tour guide," said Mr. Fitzroy. He put his cane under his arm, and led them into a spacious room where a large window made reflections on the marble floor. There was a statue nearby that showed King Eldred handing over a sword to the first prime minister. The plaque underneath read: KING

ELDRED HANDS THE POWER OF GOVERNANCE TO THE PEOPLE. The date on the plaque was thirty years ago. Bert studied the king's face. The smile didn't seem very sincere.

They passed under a sign that proclaimed: THE MYTH OF MAGIC: HOW MODERN STUDY HAS EXPOSED THE FRAUD OF FERENOR. Bert felt hollow inside. He couldn't admit it openly, but he still possessed a quiet appreciation for the tales of Ferenor—the battles, mages, knights, and ghosts. It had given him comfort whenever he looked out on the bustle of Penvellyn City, with its smokestacks and carriage-filled streets, or whenever he felt the dreariness of school life getting him down.

It felt good to imagine something magical.

The children had already begun to laugh at the exhibits. Freston was making face and pointing at a picture on the wall. The picture showed a man conjuring fire out of the ground and fighting a group of soldiers with his bare hands. The scene looked ridiculous, but that was clearly the idea. "Look at him," said Freston, crossing his eyes. "He's gone magic."

The children giggled until Mr. Fitzroy silenced them. Bert was the only one who wasn't amused. "Going magic" was common slang among the schoolchildren for anyone who didn't fit in with the crowd. It was an insult that Bert was more than familiar with.

"Is this who you wanted to be when you were little,

Bert?” whispered Freston, while Mr. Fitzroy was busy consulting a map on the opposite wall. “Something wizardy?”

“Very funny,” said Bert. He looked at the notice beside the picture.

THE DELUSION OF MAGIC RELIED ON A PREPOSTEROUS BELIEF IN WARRIORS CALLED MAGES. THESE MAGES WERE SUPPOSED TO LIVE IN THE LAND OF FERENOR, WHICH FELL INTO RUIN OVER TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO. IT WAS SAID THAT THEY COULD MOVE FASTER THAN ANY NORMAL PERSON, MAKE MACHINES THAT WORKED FOREVER, PERFORM HUGE FEATS OF STRENGTH, AND DRAW ENERGY OUT OF NOWHERE . . . DOES THAT SOUND REAL TO YOU?

Bert sighed. “Not when you put it like that,” he muttered.

“Where is that guide?” said Mr. Fitzroy. “Excuse me!”

A tall, broad-shouldered man who’d been crossing the room checked his step and turned to face them. He was wearing a black hat and an academic cape. “Yes?” he said.

“Err . . . we were waiting . . .,” said Mr. Fitzroy nervously. He seemed unwilling to address the man directly, and Bert could see why. There was something fierce in the tall man’s gaze.

“Waiting for what?” said the tall man.

“For the tour,” said Mr. Fitzroy.