

Charlie
saves
Christmas

A Prologue to

The Chronicles of Eridul

DANIEL NICHOLS



Just A Silly Dream

Chapter 1

Outside the tall building, the wind twisted and twirled as it hummed between the building crevices and whistled through the cracks along the window's edge as Charlotte—or Charlie, as she preferred—looked out across the sprawling city. Bright lights streamed away as far as she could see, adding their dim hue to the chilly night scene spread before her. And as the night air brushed against the window, its pulsing caress made its own kind of music that lulled young Charlie back into her bed and under the pile of covers that tried to fend off the disastrous events of the past few weeks.

And then... *scritch, scritch* at the window. And again, *scritch, scritch*.

Rubbing her weary eyes, Charlie rolled toward the wall, willing the intrusive noise to go away.

Scritch, scritch, once more.

Oh, what could it be? Her apartment was so far up, even birds rarely came to visit.

Scritch, scritch.

This time, Charlie pushed the covers back and rolled herself upright in bed, swinging her legs over the side in one motion and

letting her feet come to rest on the soft... *moss?*... that grew thick at the foot of her bed.

Charlie gasped in shock, emitting an involuntary, “Wha... What?” as she rubbed her sleepy eyes to dispel the dream-like images that swam before them.

Scratch, scratch... the sound came again. This time, Charlie opened a single eye in the direction of the sound, which was down toward the nightstand that sat next to her bed. And there, on top of the narrow wooden table next to the white porcelain lamp with its pink shade perched a small bird who was pulling at the little necklace she had set there, as she did every night before going to sleep.

“Oh... oh... Sorry... sorry, there... just need... just need to borrow this!” replied the little bird, trying to pick the necklace up. And with a tremendous jump and furious flapping of wings for such a small thing, it managed to lift the necklace into the air while keeping itself aloft. It seemed as though its eye twinkled at her as it dipped and flipped about under the weight of the necklace as it rose at last and flitted away through a forest of tall trees.

“Hey, stop!” She cut herself off as her round eyes took in the sight before her and all around. Somehow, a dark and misty forest had sprung to life. Even as she took in the deep green of tall forest pines and the dark, damp browns of their thick trunks, the unmistakable scent of evergreen filled her senses. A tiny snowflake drifted down, landing on the very tip of her nose like a soft cold kiss that made her blink in surprise.

“Aunt Nonie?” Her voice was tenuous at first. Then she called again with a little more fervency, “Aunt Nonie!”

Only the faint echo of her voice replied as the last remnants of her room, save for the nightstand and bed, were swallowed up by the damp forest with its thick moss and twisting vines.

“Well, this is just a silly dream,” Charlie said with a firm nod, trying to convince herself of the truth of her assertion before diving back beneath the covers. “I just need to wake up.” And with that, she pulled the soft down comforter around her and closed her eyes tight, drawing her knees up to her chest in an attempt to will the strange dream to go away.

“Just wake up.” The high-pitched voice was preceded by the soft padding of what could only be the tiny feet of some small animal that had jumped onto her bed. For a moment, she remained hidden beneath the pile of covers as she felt the tiny impressions of the creature move cautiously across the comforter toward her pillow.

“Just wake up,” the voice repeated, and then again, “just wake up, just wake up, just waaaaaake up.” Over and over, the strange little voice repeated the phrase, saying it in different ways while prancing atop the comforter until Charlie threw the covers back in frustration—but not before the tiny creature had leapt free.

“You don’t need to keep saying it!” Charlie blurted in a much louder voice than she had intended.

Charlie’s abrupt movement caused the little creature to skitter behind the lamp on the small table. As Charlie looked about for the source of the noise, she spied the small sparkling eyes of a tiny furry creature. Its soft looking coat was brown with darker brown stripes running down its back from its head with a streak of white set in the middle.

“Go ahead... say it again. I dare you,” harrumphed Charlie, causing the little creature to huddle further behind the lamp, though it seemed determined to communicate with her.

“Dare you... Dare you... Daaaaare you... Daaaaare yooooooooou,” again, the little creature repeated the phrase over and over in different ways, growing more and more bold as it did.

Forgetting her unease, Charlie shuffled a little closer across the bed toward the nightstand but carefully kept her arms and legs firmly connected to the soft sheet-covered mattress. “You’re a funny little thing, aren’t you?” she asked as her unease began to subside.

“You’re funny... you’re funny... you’re funny,” the little creature yammered from behind the lamp, and Charlie could clearly see that this creature looked an awful lot like a chipmunk. With a sniff, Charlie decided to hop off the bed and onto the cool mossy ground—for just a moment, she wriggled her toes in the soft moss. “But not very bright. Apparently,” she finished this thought as she straightened the long nightgown she was wearing before teasing her hair up into a messy ponytail that she secured with a light blue ribbon. If she were to be getting out of bed, she may as well be presentable.

“Veeery bright... verrrrry bright,” the little creature responded, positioning itself to keep the lamp between them.

“Well, I suppose you don’t know where we are,” said Charlie as she surveyed the thick forest surrounding them. This was a classic fantasy forest, drawn straight from the books her mother read to her when she was much younger. Huge thick trees reached skyward, their heavy limbs intertwining to form a dark canopy far above, but not too thick to allow the errant snowflake or too to drift down toward her. Indeed, there was a light dusting of snow on the ground around her in small patches, and every few moments, a clump of heavy snow would drop from above and splatter wetly to the ground.

As Charlie surveyed the strange landscape, she couldn’t help but comment, “What a silly dream I’m having. Why, the next thing you know, the trees will be talking too.”

“Oh, the trees don’t talk,” spoke another voice from directly behind her. It was so sudden in the silence that Charlie jumped a little as she spun around. In the act of doing so, she slipped on a smooth stone buried in the moss and abruptly fell down with a grunt.

“Hmmm... not very bright apparently,” said the owner of the voice, which Charlie could now see clearly standing on its four legs behind her. The creature looked very much like a deer but was lean, with two long, spiraling horns on the top of its head. Its eyes were large with more than just a hint of intelligence.

“Welcome to Eridul, not that the name of the place will have any significance for you,” the creature noted in bland tones. “Well then, go on and get up,” prodded the creature. “Hopefully, you’re the last of the batch today. And I must say that I’m very glad you are not connected to this large thing,” in saying this the creature tapped the bed with a hooved leg. “You *are* separate from this, aren’t you?” it asked inquisitively.

Charlie found herself at a loss for words, utterly shocked at the prospect of having a very real conversation with not one but three animals in this increasingly silly dream of hers.

“Well, it is much too large to move. If you have a need for your... shell, you’ll just have to come back for it. We can’t be sitting out here all night long after all.” And with that, the creature walked gracefully around the bed, passing Charlie as it headed down what appeared to be a faint path of moss that stretched deep into the forest.

Charlie was still sitting on the ground, the cold and damp forest floor beginning to seep into her nightgown where she sat. As quickly and carefully as she could, she struggled back to her feet, brushing at her nightgown while casting looks back toward the creature that continued to move away from her. “You can’t just leave me!” Again, Charlie was a bit surprised by the emotion in her voice. All of this just seemed too real for a silly old dream, all the way down to her cold bare feet and hands that were now reddened from contact with the forest floor.

“If you follow me, I won’t be leaving you at all. If you decide to just sit there ... well, I suppose you will be on your own,” replied the

creature as it continued its slow plodding along the path into the forest without looking back. Snow continued to trickle down from the dark canopy above as Charlie frantically looked to her bed to find that it, like the rest of her room, was now fading away as if being consumed by the forest itself. In a matter of moments, only the dim light from her lamp remained, its small white bulb creating a dim sphere of light as it fought to hold the shadows at bay.

“Why are you all so mean!” groused Charlie. But, seeing no other choice, she straightened her nightgown one last time, and after a few tenuous steps, she followed barefoot after the strange talking deer down the slick, mossy trail.

Just behind her, the little brown creature that looked very much like a chipmunk scampered down from its perch by the lamp. As she turned her gaze to it, the creature looked up and offered... “Very bright!” in reply before skittering into a clump of ferns along the path where telltale rustling hinted at its whereabouts. As Charlie continued down the path, the light from the lamp began to fade in the distance. As the shadows pressed in all around, the sounds of the wild forest seemed to grow more prominent in her ears.

Chapter 2

Joan Willard-Stewart, or Nonie, as the children called her, was exhausted as she stooped over the pile of dishes from the evening meal. The small two-bedroom apartment was freezing in the late autumn chill with leaky seals around the windows and poor air circulation in the building. There was no hope of getting maintenance to do anything with the place, as it was the last resort for struggling families, situated on the outskirts of the city near the rail line in a forgotten place known as the Eastern Flats.

The Eastern Flats had once been a busy industrial sector full of the bustle of large manufacturing yards that abutted the massive rail yard where countless tons of materials and goods flowed in and out on a daily basis. With the economic downturn over the last decade, however, the whole area had been converted to public housing, and its manufacturing facilities abandoned and boarded up, and along with them the jobs and hopes of tens of thousands of families.

But these were things of the past, long before Joan had moved in with young Cassie and Charlie. There were just a few minutes left before Joan would need to head down the hallway to the elevator to catch the train for the late cleaning shift in the city. She was happy

for steady work, which was more than many could say in these lean times. Or at least, that's what she kept telling herself. Yet, she wished she could spend more time at home with Charlie, especially in light of recent events.

"Someday we'll get out of here," she whispered to no one in particular. At least Charlie's older sister Cassandra, or Cassie as they called her, had escaped, having been accepted into a private boarding school for the arts and been awarded enough financial aid to live on campus. "Well, some of us will get out of here," she whispered again with a wry smile. She fervently wished there could have been some way to keep the girls together, or at least nearby, but she couldn't afford to move closer to the school, and this was too good an opportunity for Cassie to let pass by.

But Charlie would never forgive her.

It was just she and Charlotte now, and Charlotte was entering the sixth grade. Charlie, as she preferred, was normally a sweet and active little girl, but once the semester had started and her sister left, Charlie had closed herself off. Now, all that Joan got out of her was an angry frown.

"Janet... what would you do," she muttered with a shake of her head, the memories of her sister stirring deep feelings that she didn't need on her plate right now. Joan had gladly taken the girls in after her sister Janet had disappeared in the aftermath of a terrible accident several years ago. After the authorities had declared Janet dead, Joan had been permitted to move forward with their adoption. And while at first, there had been a small amount of insurance money to support them in a little house in the suburbs, the continual downturn and lack of job availability had forced Joan to seek subsidized housing closer to public transportation that would be closer to the few available service jobs that were left in the city.

Having finished the remaining dishes, Joan dried her hands on a towel, took one last look at Charlie's closed bedroom door, and with a regretful knot in her throat, exited the small flat, locking the door behind her and leaving a note for Ms. Oldmire who lived across the hall before taking the elevators to the lobby and making the long trek back into the city.



Lingering unnoticed near the maintenance closet down an adjoining hall, the chief maintenance technician fumbled through his tool bag before withdrawing a pair of needle-nose pliers. The blue rubber on the handle was nearly worn through, looking much like he felt. Keeping this old building working was fighting a losing battle. The building owner, a despicable man named Kettle, invested next to nothing on improvements, and it was all Brian could do to keep the building up to code, especially with his maintenance team cut in half.

The work wasn't glamorous, but it was steady. The people who found themselves here were generally of two types, the unlucky and the unsavory. Differentiating between the two wasn't always as straight-forward as it should be. But here on the forty-third floor were a number of families, which was why he spent as much time as he could spare here. While he had no children of his own, surprisingly, he found the sound of kids around to be reassuring.

With a final twist to the wires, he finished his work and offered a brief prayer that this patchwork would hold for a few more weeks. Then, he dropped the pliers into his tool bag, closed and locked the door and made his way to the set of elevators just as they were closing. "Joan going back to work I'll bet," he mused aloud before clicking the down button on the console. That one was just unlucky.

