

STRANGE!

The **ADVENTURES** *of*
PHILIP & SOPHIE
The Sword of the Dragon King

\$10

BY DREW ELDRIDGE

Wonderous magic!



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**WESTER
TALES**

No 2

The Adventures of Philip and Sophie
The Sword of the Dragon King

#2

By Drew Eldridge

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*In memory of James Bates
For all your encouragement over the years.*

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Chapter 13

Sophie, the Magical Girl from Nibelheim



In a little village at the foot of a mountain, there lived a young girl named Sophie. She was fast asleep in her soft, warm bed and the sun was just beginning to peek through her window. It would have been a very pleasant morning to sleep in. Unfortunately, there was a cat in the house who felt differently.

“Meow . . .” he muttered. “What is this?” The cat had fluffy white fur and was exceptionally plump. He struggled to pull himself onto the girl’s bed. “The sun’s up and she’s still sleeping? Unbelievable—the things I have to put up with!”

He climbed on top of her and wiggled. The whole bed shook with him. “Girl! Ahem! I say, girl! Awake this instant! I am ready for my breakfast!” But it didn’t work. “Hello? Anyone home?” He crept up to her head and nudged it. Still nothing. “Hmph, very well then . . . you’ve left me no choice. Feel my razor-sharp claws!” He drew them and gently combed them down her cheeks. “There, how do you like that? More? Okay . . .” Finally, she began to stir.

The girl was very pretty. She had long blonde hair,

blue eyes and large, round spectacles. Every morning, she had to reach for them to see.

"Oh, hello Samson!" she sighed dreamily with a yawn. "Good morning!"

"Good morning?" the cat whined. "What's so good about it? It would be a lot better if I had eaten by now. Look at me! I'm practically starved!"

"Hmm . . . did you have strange dreams, too?"

"What? Dreams? No! Are you listening to me? Read my lips, girl! Food!"

"MmmHmm . . . MmmHmm . . . I see," replied Sophie, very interested. She patted him on the head and scratched his chin. Then, she reached forward and gave him a great big hug.

"Ugh! Unhand me! Help!"

"Oh, Samson! I wish I knew what you were really saying," the girl sighed, squeezing him. "Hey, maybe I could finish your portrait today. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She rolled out of bed and picked him up.

"No! NO!"

Then she hauled him across the room and plopped him on a pedestal.

"There, that's better. Alright, now hold still!"

She gave him a treat to distract him while she put on his costume.

"Here is your hat!" she sighed. "And here is your sash! And don't forget your little sword!"

He posed handsomely in the hopes of earning another kibble.

"Perfect!"

The whole bedroom was covered with portraits of Samson. In one, he was dressed as a knight in shining armor. In another, he was a scholar with a monocle. The funniest of all was Samson the king. Beside them, were shelves of books she'd written. Though only ten years old, Sophie had already authored hundreds of stories.

There were mysteries, romances, fairy tales and even scripts for plays. Every year, she put one on at the village festival.



There were two desks she did this at, each with a great bay window. The larger of the two faced the farmyard. The other overlooked the village and ocean. The rest of

her room was buried under props, costumes and even more books.

“There! Finished!” she declared triumphantly. “Well, what do you think?” She turned it around so he could see. “I call it—Samson the Swashbuckler!”

But the cat just glared at her.

“Hideous!” he meowed indignantly. “Look at the double chin you’ve given me! And those beady little eyes! I don’t look like THAT! Why can’t you paint me the other way?”

The only portrait he liked was the one depicting him as a ferocious snow lion. She gave him extra big muscles and laser eyes. Beneath the painting, it read: “The Delight and Terror of the Universe.”

“Now, THAT’s me!” he said pointing. Then he dove off, hitting the ground with a great thud, and waddled away.

But of all the books in Sophie’s room, there was one that was most precious to her. It was precious to everyone in the village. So precious, that it was simply called “The Book.” Her people believed it was written by the Creator of the whole world. It contained descriptions of this Creator, an explanation of how and why He created it, lists of rules He wanted people to follow, as well as biographies, poetry, stories and famous letters of people who had done the best job at following those rules.

It was the tradition of everyone in the village to spend some time in the morning not only reading this book, but singing little songs and praying to the Creator as they made beautiful, decorated copies of it they could share with strangers. Sophie herself had a whole shelf of them which she poured her heart into with every pen and needle stroke. As she worked, she’d daydream about all the people who might read them—and their smiles!

But on this morning, young Sophie couldn’t help feel

a little sad as she approached her desk, for something terrible had recently happened.



An evil king who'd arisen in those lands had made another new law. Book-giving journeys, invitations to Book-giving parties and even mailing them away was now strictly forbidden. No one was allowed in or out of any village. If anyone was caught disobeying, he'd send his armies to destroy them.

Sophie sat down where, out of the corner of her window, she could see his mountain fortress. Black smoke rose from it. Every year, it grew bigger and scarier. She put her hands together and closed her eyes.

"God . . ." she sighed worriedly. "Please help us. Please deliver our people from the Dragon King."

Little did she know, her Creator already had a plan—and she was going to be a part of it!

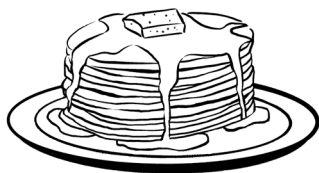
In the last book, we learned about the young hero of our story: the battle in the Life Tree . . . the journey through the treacherous tunnel to Snake Mountain . . . the betrayal of his friend, Henry the Bear . . . and his tragic fall. He had been left broken and battered on an icy cave floor. It was there, he had the idea for his biggest adventure yet—an adventure to the world beyond the horizon. This book is all about our heroine and how she got involved in that adventure too.

Sophie was very different from our hero. Far from being raised by a wolf in the wild, she grew up in a comfortable well-ordered village with a happy family. She never had to eat bugs, fight or kill anyone. Having things like soap, hairbrushes and toothpaste, she looked and smelled much nicer too! But the biggest difference was the power she had. If the hero of our story had “super-strength,” then you could say our heroine had a “super-mind.” A mind that endowed her with certain special abilities.

Unfortunately, these powers were very hard to control and tended to spook people. So, much of her time growing up was spent learning how to conceal them. As *he* was swinging through the branches—galivanting with apes and trying to get stronger—*she* was at home in her armchair doing quite the opposite: practicing how to focus and be sneaky. It wasn’t always easy, but by now she was an expert at it! As we follow her along throughout her day, why don’t we see if she can conceal them from you too? Watch our heroine very closely, reader. See if you can guess what her powers are.

Chapter 14

Perfect Pancakes—and Other Mysteries



Sophie finished her prayers early that morning, for an irresistible smell was coming from the kitchen. She got up from her desk and tiptoed to her bedroom door. Slowly, she opened it and peeked outside.

Her mother was cooking her favorite breakfast. There was batter, blueberries and maple syrup on the counter. Samson was standing on his hind legs trying to reach the bacon. There was also a tray of freshly-baked cookies. They were white, with even whiter icing on top! Gooey strawberry filling dripped down the sides! She licked her lips and wondered how she might acquire one without being caught.

Our heroine peeked up at the clock. It read 8:13. Then she looked at her mother. She was strolling around the kitchen, stirring the batter in a little bowl as she checked all the ingredients. She stirred it seven times every six and a half seconds. Then Sophie closed her eyes and just listened. She heard little birds chirping . . . the wind chimes clinking and clanking. She thought about all the other mornings she'd come out to the kitchen. Then, she thought some more. Somehow, reader, in the span of only a few seconds, our heroine could predict the exact moment her mother's back would be turned. Samson watched in awe and with burning jealousy as she casually strolled up and popped a cookie in her mouth.

"Oh! OH! That blasted girl! Why does SHE always

get away with everything? Hey, down here! I want a cookie too!"

"Good morning, mother," said Sophie picking up a napkin. Her mother's name was Julie. Apart from her being a grown up, the two of them looked almost identical. Even their voices sounded the same.

"Oh, there you are," she replied. "Good morning! Did you sleep well?"

Sophie wandered over to the piano and started playing a little tune.

"I had another odd dream . . ."

"Really? What was it about?"

"I don't know. Something about birds in a nest arguing . . . a grumpy ape . . . a wolf . . . a bear and . . . and . . ."

"And?" asked her mother.

Sophie thought about it and shrugged.

"I guess I forgot."

"You've always had such interesting dreams. Ever since you were little!"

"When I can remember them!"

"Hey, what song is that you're playing? I've never heard it before."

"Hmm. I'm not sure!"

"Is it one you wrote?"

"No, I think it was in the dream."

"Sounds a little sad."

"Yeah, maybe . . ."

"Well, perhaps it would be a good song for one of your plays this year!"

Sophie closed the piano and went over to set the table. Houses were quite a bit smaller and simpler back then. Everything was made of wood, metal or stone. Rooms like the kitchen and dining room were usually joined together. It also took a long time to wash dishes and clothes because everything had to be done by hand. Instead of driving cars, people rode horses or bicycles. But they did have one

thing that we don't. These were special gems called Terra Crystals.

"Can you pass me a yellow, darling? I need to set the timer."

"Sure!"

There were six different kinds. You could find them scattered around the earth, usually deep underground. Each was a distinct color and had a unique power that could be harnessed.

The yellow ones were a little like batteries. You could power a clock, lamp or lighter with them. If you held one in your hand for too long, it would make your hair stand up. If you banged two together, you would see a spark and feel a little shock. Blue Terra Crystals cooled air around them and purified water. The greens made cuts and bruises heal faster. They also made plants grow taller. Red crystals were warm and could catch fire easily. They burned for a very long time without creating any smoke. In winter, people put them in their pockets to keep their hands warm. But you had to be very careful where you left them out. Sophie saw one on her counter that morning a little too close to the sunlight. She hurried over and put it back in the drawer.

Last, there were pink and purple crystals. These were a little different from the others. The purple crystals were called "Chaos Crystals." They were known for causing problems, like mutations and certain kinds of illnesses. This is a part of why no one in Sophie's village ever went over the mountains towards the middle of the continent. Legend had it that a giant Chaos Crystal asteroid once crashed there, giving the continent its strange crater-like shape. The shards in the soil seemed to make the climate more extreme there and attract the most violent, unpredictable storms. It made the trees grow tall and strange, and could make animals unusually strong. As far as anyone on the coast knew,

there weren't any people in the middle. Certainly, no little boys!

Pink crystals didn't really do anything on their own, but they counteracted the purple crystals and could borrow the power of any crystal they were touching. Folks often wore them around their neck for good luck, or slept with them under their pillows for pleasant dreams.

"Expecting someone?" asked Julie, noticing Sophie setting the table for one more.

"Most certainly. Mr. Stanley will be here soon . . ."

Julie looked outside the kitchen window but didn't see anyone. Then she looked out another. Still no one.

"Mail on Sunday?"

Sophie shrugged. She was too focused on making the tea. Mr. Stanley liked it at precisely eighty-seven degrees, with no less than one and three quarters scoops of sugar, except around the holidays. A pretty blue crystal helped Sophie cool it to exactly the right temperature. After she poured the tea, she brought it over to the table. No sooner did it touch the coaster than they heard a knock at the back door.

"That's odd," said Julie.

Our heroine smiled.

Chapter 15

An Unexpected Visit

Mr. Stanley was a tall and thin fellow, dressed all in blue. He had a great big mustache and perfectly white teeth.

“Good morning!” he said, coming in.

Sophie curtsied and welcomed him.

Her mother, however, was still stunned. How did Sophie know he was coming? There were almost never visitors on Sunday mornings. Everyone was too busy getting ready for church. Mr. Stanley never mentioned coming over. Nor had he ever come through the back door before. Yet, at the exact moment Sophie expected him, there he was! But eventually, Julie realized how silly she must have looked standing there. She snapped out of it and welcomed their guest.

“Good morning, Charles! Please, sit down and join us! Sophie made you some tea.”

“Oh,” he said, turning to her. “You knew I was coming?”

The two grown-ups looked at our heroine curiously. The room fell completely silent. Quickly, Sophie had to think of an explanation.

“I . . .” she muttered, “must have seen you out of the window or something.”

That made sense, reader. There were plenty of windows, after all. The grown-ups thought about it for a moment, looked at each other and shrugged. Julie went back to cooking breakfast and Mr. Stanley sat down. A very close call!

Sophie loved to chat with Mr. Stanley in the mornings. She could get all the latest news that way. Who was getting married? Were there any new books? Even little things, like what color someone might have painted their ceiling. Sophie needed to know everything.

"So," she said, sitting down across from him. "Is there any word about the Wilsons?"

"Yes!" he replied, getting excited. "It's a boy!"

Sophie and Julie's eyes lit up. "How wonderful!" they cheered at the same time. Sometimes they seemed more like sisters. It wasn't always clear which of them was more grown up either.

"I wonder what they've named him!" exclaimed Julie, flinging up her mixing spoon. Batter soared through the air and made a big splash. Samson scurried over to lick it up.

"Oh! Can't I run over there now?" Sophie begged. "I'm sure he must be adorable. Eek! I can't wait!"

They both started chattering and giggling hysterically, much to Mr. Stanley's amusement. All of the girls in the village were like that, reader. To the People of the Book, babies were the most lovely and precious gifts.

"Now, be patient you two!" laughed Mr. Stanley heartily. "You'll see him this afternoon! We're having a party after church, remember? There will be a baby shower for the Wilsons—and a wedding for Jonathan and Beth!"

"And we can't forget about Fred and Elizabeth's anniversary," added Julie, finally beginning to calm down. "Fifty years they've been married!"

"Has it been fifty years?" asked Mr. Stanley.

"Indeed!"

"Goodness! Time does fly! Which reminds me—" Mr. Stanley then started digging into his pocket. "It's why I came. I was wondering if you could take a look at this for me, Sophie. It's for my wife."

He pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to our heroine. She opened it eagerly.

"How lovely! A poem!"

"You always were such a romantic, Charles!" remarked Julie, trying not to spill more of the batter.

"Well, it's supposed to be a poem," Mr. Stanley answered. "I know what I want to say. I've got it all there. But, alas, I cannot rhyme! And it just doesn't sound right when I try. It's our anniversary soon too, you see. I want to surprise her! But what a mess it is! Would you take a look at it for me, Sophie, and just—you know—do your thing?"

"I would be honored!" she answered.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

She already had three or four ideas, but she got the feeling like Mr. Stanley still had more to say.

"And," he continued, blushing. He was such a kind man. Sophie liked him a lot. "If I might ask just one more thing of you . . ."

"Anything," she answered.

"Might I take some flowers from your garden? It's why I came through the back door. You always have the best flowers in the village! When I looked, I couldn't believe it. The exact ones my wife likes—all growing together in the same spot! As if someone planted it there just for us and our special day!"

"They're yours," answered Sophie delightedly.

The joy this brought to Mr. Stanley's face made our heroine's heart leap. But she still wasn't finished. She got up and went over to a drawer, where she drew out a bright blue bow to tie them with. The strange thing, reader, was that it was exactly the bow Mr. Stanley had imagined—right down to the smallest detail. His expression turned from joy to the same astonishment Julie had felt that morning. How? How could Sophie have possibly known?

"What's wrong?" Sophie asked, pausing. "You don't like it?"

"No, no! That's not it. It's just—"

He took the bow and examined it. How very odd! Even the little frills on the side—precisely the same! Sophie tilted her head, confused.

"I don't know, Sophie," he answered, starting to chuckle. "Sometimes . . . I think you can read minds!"

Our heroine froze and turned bright red. Her mother froze too. It wasn't the first time someone had made that remark about her daughter. Her mother was curious to see how she'd respond. But Sophie just stood there perfectly still.

"Ah, hah!" she then laughed awkwardly. What else could she do? They were clearly onto her. "Oh, hah! Oh, Mr. Stanley! Please! Mind reading? Everyone knows that's impossible. How silly!" She froze again, waiting to see how they'd react.

What a strange, strange girl Sophie was, Mr. Stanley thought. He adored her, but sometimes she was just so odd! On the other hand, he had indeed made a joke. Maybe he was just really funny? Yes, that must have been it! Upon realizing this, he started to laugh along with her.

"Ah, hah! Ah, hah! Hah, hah, hah! You're right. How silly, indeed!"

Julie joined in. By the end, they'd all nearly giggled themselves to the floor.

"Right," he finally said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Anyways, I'm off! Thanks again, Sophie! You're the best! Julie, it was a pleasure seeing you, as always!"

"You won't stay for breakfast?" she asked.

"We're having pancakes!" exclaimed Sophie. "You'll love them. They're perfect." She slapped her hands on the table. "PERFECT!"

"I'm sure they are!" he replied, standing up and petting her on the head. "But, alas, I must be getting home. We have a big afternoon to prepare for! Please, give my regards to John. Bye everyone! Cheerio!"

Sophie ran up and hugged her dear mailman tightly. Then he left out the back door to collect the flowers.

"He's so wonderful, isn't he?" remarked Sophie, looking down at the poem. "He loves her very much . . ."

"Yes, he certainly does," sighed Julie.

Chapter 16

The Man from the Sea

Sophie sometimes wondered why she had her powers. Was she born with them? Did she acquire them somehow? Why her? Maybe it would remain a mystery forever. She wondered it again that morning as she continued helping her mother set the table. Fortunately, a clue presented itself that would get her one step closer to discovering the answer.

"Have I ever told you, Sophie," her mother suddenly remarked, "about how Mr. Stanley and I were once engaged to be married?"

Sophie dropped the dishes she was carrying—making a large clank on the table—and gasped in amazement.

"No! You never told me **THAT!**"

"Well . . . 'tis true . . ."

Our heroine dragged a chair into the kitchen and placed it in front of her mother. She plopped down in it and gazed up with a big smile on her face, like a student sitting at a desk, eager to receive the day's lesson.

"I'm guessing you want to hear about it," said Julie.

Sophie didn't even have to answer.

"Very well then," her mother sighed. "If you insist." And she told her the story. "Where shall I start?" She slowly paced back and forth, blushing. "Well, I was just a little older than you are when it happened. I was living at home with my mother and father. Charles was the boy next door. We were very close friends. We played together . . . studied together . . . helped on each other's farms. He was terribly handsome! And I knew he liked me . . ."

"Go on . . ." urged Sophie, very interested.

"Well, one afternoon, we went for a walk in a little wood. I remember it like it was yesterday. The sun was out. There were bright flowers everywhere! We found a little field full of bunnies, and started feeding them. Sud-

denly, he got down on one knee. He said, 'Dearest Julie, you are the fairest creature in all the land! And have the purest heart! I should very much like you to be my wife. I love you—and promise to love you forever!'"

"Really!?" exclaimed Sophie. Her spectacles nearly flung off. She had to push them back into place. "And what did you say?"

"Well, I didn't know what to say. So . . . I said yes!"

Sophie laughed and laughed—nearly falling out of her chair.

"I know!" giggled Julie along with her. "Believe me, I was as shocked as you are. But why wouldn't I say yes? It made perfect sense! He was a wonderful boy—kind, polite . . ."

"Handsome . . ." teased Sophie.

"Our families were thrilled. We both knew they'd been planning it. But . . . I started feeling nervous. Something just wasn't right."

"You weren't in love with him."

"No . . . I'm afraid I wasn't. But how could I tell him? He was so sweet. Oh, you should have seen him."

Our heroine kept listening eagerly.

"So, what did you do?"

"Well, I don't think I realized it at the time. Or at least not right away. It was all so confusing. I was only thirteen. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before! One day I saw him coming over with his family to make wedding plans. Everyone was excited. My sisters had designed the dress, shoes—everything! We just needed to set the date and talk about living arrangements. Was I going to move in with them? Were we going to build our own house? Did I even feel ready to leave yet? I was so young! I was happy where I was. I didn't want things to change. It was all happening so fast! Well, I began to feel terribly frightened by it all. So, just as I heard them knocking on the door, I jumped out the window and ran away!"

Sophie was really enjoying this story. Her mother was so embarrassed. She'd never seen her so red before.

"How ridiculous! Wherever did you run off to?" she asked, trying not to laugh too much.

"Nowhere! I just ran! I didn't know what else to do. I ran and ran until I got to the sea. I cried. I prayed. I laughed—because of how silly it all was! What was I doing? Charles was such a sweet young man. What was wrong with me? I stood there gazing out at the ocean. The sun was setting. I cried out to God and begged he'd send a ship to come take me away—or to give me some kind of sign about what I should do. If marrying Charles was what God wanted, I would. I just needed to know first, that's all! And that's when I saw it . . ."

"Oh! OH! Father's ship!" Sophie shouted, slamming her fists on her thighs. She recognized this story now.

"Yes!"

She knew her parents met near the sea that way. She had heard it many times. But she never knew the reason her mother had been there in the first place.

"How romantic!" Sophie sighed.

"I suppose," chuckled Julie. "But I promise you, it wasn't very exciting at the time! No, it wasn't a ship. It was a shipwreck. Someone had crashed there! I still remember it. Just as I finished praying, I saw it scattered across the rocks. The wind suddenly picked up. A great wave came and washed it to shore. A man tumbled out. He fell into the water. I had to dive under to save him. And, well, you know the rest. I dragged him ashore and revived him . . ."

"So, you kissed him?" Sophie teased.

"Heavens, no!" answered Julie. "What do you take me for? I had no choice! He wasn't breathing. I had to resuscitate him." Sophie felt like teasing her mother some more, but let it go. "When he came to, he couldn't walk. He had no memory of what had happened or even who he was. I asked him to wait while I went to find help, but he begged

me not to tell anyone. He looked like he was in some kind of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Sophie asked.

“I didn’t know. But it looked serious. Oh, he was so handsome! And such power in his voice. How could I resist? I obeyed his every word. Instead of telling anyone, I dragged him to a nearby cave on the beach and stayed until nightfall, nursing his wounds. I visited every evening in secret—sneaking him meals, reading him stories, teaching him all about God and the Book. He taught me about the world beyond the sea, science and strange new music. We fell in love that summer. By the end, he was fully healed and had rebuilt his ship to leave. But we couldn’t part! I brought him back to our village, introduced him, and taught him our ways here. Charles saw right away how I felt. He understood why I’d been acting so silly all summer. He forgave me and bestowed his blessing on us. Soon after that, your father and I were married.”

Sophie loved hearing the tale of her parents meeting. It had always been her favorite. But now that she was getting older and closer to that age herself, it sometimes made her feel worried. Especially the part about marriage, for one day she would be married, too. What if the man she married wanted her to leave her house? What if he lived on the other side of the village? What if it happened early like it did for her mother? Sophie was only ten. That was just a few years away! And, most worrying of all, what if she married someone who discovered her powers and didn’t like them? Maybe they would think she was some kind of— Well, she didn’t like to think about it.

“Mother,” Sophie asked then, solemnly. “Where did father come from?”

She already knew what her mother was going to say, but couldn’t help asking.

"Well, that's the great mystery," Julie sighed. "No one knows . . ."

Sophie sighed too.

But then our heroine suddenly got an idea. Maybe she inherited her powers from her father! Yes—he was very strange, after all. Come to think of it, some of the strange things that happened around her sometimes seemed to happen around him. Or did they? It was hard to tell. Maybe he was good at hiding them too. He was also the only one in the village her powers never seemed to work on. If only she could find out where he came from, then maybe she could discover the answer. Her mother noticed how worried she was and tried to cheer her up.

"But we can guess where he's from . . ." she said.

"Hmm?"

Sophie looked up curiously.

"I think your father was a pirate!" said Julie. She drew up her mixing spoon like a sword. "Maybe he was in a great battle with a monster—a kraken!—and was flung overboard! Pow, like that!" More batter flew through the air. Samson was very happy. "He hit his head and forgot!"

Sophie liked this game. But what an awful suggestion! A pirate?

"No!" she answered, defending his honor. Sophie loathed pirates. Sometimes, she saw them around the village border. They were dirty, smelly and rude. "No, if that were true, he'd have bad teeth!"

"Well, what do you think, then?" Julie asked, challenging her.

Sophie thought about it.

"I think . . . I think he might have been a knight," she said, grabbing the roller. Now, she had a sword too. "Or maybe a musketeer. He was in the middle of rescuing a princess, but had a spell cast on him by the evil sorcerer, Kalthazar." Our heroine was a very talented actress: "'On guard, yee fool' said he. 'I should have known t'was you.

You are the man who killed my brother! And now, I am the man who is going to kill you!”

Julie was quite the actress also. They often starred together in the plays Sophie wrote for the village festival. “So, you think! But you are deceived! I am not Kalthazar, but his twin sister. And my power is even greater. Hazzza!”

Sophie and her mother chased each other around, giggling, making swishing sounds and an even greater mess of the kitchen. Neither of them noticed that Sophie’s father had been standing in the doorway watching the whole time. When they finally did, they both froze and turned bright red.

Sophie’s father was a tall and powerful looking man. He had broad shoulders and a perfectly straight posture, like an army commander. His eyes were deep blue, like Sophie’s, and his gaze was piercing. But the expression on his face was soft and gentle. Even gentler, was his voice.

“Good morning,” he said plainly.

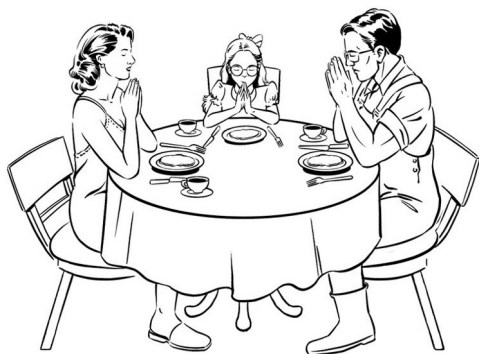
Was he upset? Was he angry? Did he even notice the mess they’d made? With him, it was so hard to tell. He always looked so calm and steady. Sophie curtsied and greeted him.

“Good morning, Father.”

She bowed her head extra low and for a much longer time than usual. Then her father started to smile. The man didn’t smile much, reader, but when he did, it was a grand, kingly smile. But he couldn’t hold back any longer—and broke into laughter. What a mess they’d made, indeed! Sophie laughed too and charged into his arms. He picked her up and hugged her tightly.

Chapter 17

The Escape Plan



It was the custom of the People of the Book to hold hands and pray before meals, thanking the Creator for their food, health and friends. “O Heavenly King,” said her father in his deep, gentle voice. “Lord of the universe, we thank You humbly for all your blessings. We love You and pray that this food may sustain us in our pursuit of wisdom, courage and temperance as we strive to do Your divine will. In the name of the holy and sacred One, we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” responded Sophie and Julie together. Then they picked up their forks and started eating.

“Well,” said her father. “This is quite the breakfast. Thank you as well, my dear, for preparing it.”

Even after many years of marriage, Julie couldn’t help gazing and blushing when her husband spoke to her—like no time at all had passed since the day she’d first met and fell in love with him. Sophie noticed this and liked it.

“And you,” he continued, turning his attention to our heroine. “Are you eating breakfast or conducting one of your experiments?”

“Both!” she replied. Sophie had it all set up perfectly:

whipped cream . . . maple syrup . . . cinnamon . . . and every kind of berry . . . all in separate miniature goblets. "One day, I will make the perfect combination."

"That's my little scientist. Speaking of perfection, I heard you got a perfect score on one of Mr. Knox's surprise math tests the other day."

"Mmmhmm," agreed Sophie with her mouth full.

"He told me all about it. Quite an amazing achievement. Especially considering you didn't show any of your work . . ."

Sophie froze and slowly gulped.

"Yeah, I guess," she chuckled. "Must have got lucky . . ."

"Indeed."

Her father was always so calm and soft-spoken. Throughout Sophie's whole life, she had never once heard him raise his voice or even get frustrated. He took a sip of his coffee. Sophie used it as an opportunity to change the subject.

"Did you know," she quickly blurted out, "that Mr. Stanley and mother almost got married?"

Her parents both looked at each other amused.

"I did," he replied.

Sophie started getting excited.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if they had? She wouldn't have felt nervous and run to the beach like that! She would never have seen you! You would have drowned! None of it would have happened! I wouldn't even be born!"

"Yeah, it's quite something," he remarked.

"It's more than just something!"

"It was a miracle," said Julie.

"Perhaps."

Her father started eating his pancakes. He had them plain, with nothing on the side. His coffee was plain. Even the way he sat and dressed was plain. A red checkered

shirt and blue overalls? Less like a farmer, and more like someone trying to look like a farmer! Sophie couldn't tell what it was, but there was something very suspicious about him. He was just too normal!

"Pass the salt please," he asked.

Sophie wondered if he really had forgotten who he was. Maybe he was pretending. But why?

"Sure, John," answered Julie, handing it to him.

And that name, reader! John? He did NOT look like a "John"!

"Thank you," he answered. "Pass the pepper, please," he said next, looking at Sophie this time. He smiled.

"Who puts pepper on pancakes?" she asked.

"Well, there is a first time for everything," he said adventurously. "Perhaps it's time I try something new. Don't you think?"

She slid it to him suspiciously. Maybe he was an alien from another world! His ship had crash-landed. Now, he was trying to blend in with the humans. A ridiculous idea, of course. But if you had met Sophie's father, reader, it would have certainly seemed more likely than the story he usually suggested.

"I'm probably just an ordinary man who got caught in a storm while fishing or something."

He'd say it as casually as if he were commenting on the weather. But Sophie never bought it.

"Father, can't you remember anything?" said Sophie. "Even something small? You know, about who you were before you arrived. Your mother? Your old home? Not even your favorite color?"

He stopped and thought about it very, very hard.

"Hmm . . . no. I can't. Sorry."

"What about a crest?"

"A crest?"

"Well," said Sophie, turning red. "I was suggesting to

mother that . . . maybe . . . you were once a knight . . . or something.”

Her father laughed.

“Good one . . .”

But his laughter only made Sophie more suspicious.

“Well, you could be!”

“Like I’ve always said, I was probably just a fisherman. One day, I got too much sun and fainted. The ocean carried me away.”

“Oh, please!” said Sophie, much to his amusement. “Do fisherman know how to use swords?”

Julie loved watching their debates.

“There are some pretty aggressive fish out there, Sophie . . .” he replied. “A little sword training would be wise of a fisherman to undertake.”

“So, you WERE trained with a sword then?”

“I never said that.”

“And are there any fish as aggressive as the Dragon King?”

“Possibly.”

Sophie’s father joined the People of the Book precisely around the time the Dragon King had risen to power. When the Dragon King discovered their village, he came to destroy it and take girls, like young Julie, as captives. But her father stood up to them. It was a fight that the People of the Book still whispered about to that day. The mysterious man from the sea who saved them! It was because of him they now lived in relative peace. Instead of killing the evil king—something forbidden by the religion of the People of the Book—he struck a deal. The village would make food for his army and the king would leave them alone.

“Doesn’t sound like the feat of an ordinary fisherman to me!” said Sophie after reminding him. She crossed her arms triumphantly and smiled. For once, she seemed to have stumped her father. But her triumph was short-lived.

"Must have got lucky," he answered—in the same tone she had used about her math test. Then, he winked at her. Our heroine froze and gulped. She didn't dare pursue the matter any further. She averted her eyes and went back to eating her breakfast.

"In other news," he continued, changing the subject. "I've nearly finished drawing up the plans for the ship." He made some space on the table and took out a blueprint. "If everything goes well, I'll have it built by this fall. We'll have enough food to give the Dragon King over the summer, as well as enough for the journey."

"Exquisite!" said Julie. "Finally, we'll be free! And you're sure there will be enough room for everyone? The whole village?"

"Yes. I'll be meeting Jean-Pierre this afternoon to show him. It will hold everyone. I'm certain."

"And you don't think the Dragon King suspects anything?"

"No, I don't think so. Everything's been normal. As long as everyone just keeps doing what we've always done, and nothing unexpected happens this summer, everything should go exactly as planned."

Sophie wasn't very interested in talking about the voyage. She loved her home and didn't want to leave. Why couldn't the Dragon King just leave them alone? They didn't bother him. Sometimes she felt like going up there and speaking with him herself. Surely, if it was just explained to him, and she showed him they meant him no harm, he would understand. But no one was allowed.

"Sophie," said her mother. "You haven't even touched your strawberries yet. Is something wrong?"

"No . . ." she sighed disappointedly. But her mother didn't believe her.

"I know. How about we take the long way home tonight?"

Sophie's eyes lit up. It was one of her favorite things in

the whole world to do! But she could hardly remember the last time they'd gone together.

"I don't know . . ." said her father, sounding worried. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Of course, it is!" cried Sophie. "It's a marvelous idea! Come on! Can we please take the long way home tonight?" she begged. "Please! Please! Can we?"

"It's a pretty long walk," said her father. "Maybe you and I could go? We can let your mother rest."

"No! All three of us! Like we used to! Come on! Please?"

"I'm alright," said Julie softly.

"You're sure? You have the energy for it?"

"Yes," she answered. "I want to. I'll be fine . . ."

"You see?" said Sophie, slapping her hand on the table. "She'll be fine! What else more is there to discuss? Come on!"

"Alright . . ." her father relented. "Okay. Let's do it."

Chapter 18

Getting Ready for Church

After breakfast, Sophie brushed her teeth, had a nice long bath and attempted some fancy stretches in the sunlight. Then she went into her closet to get dressed. Sophie had a much bigger closet than most girls. Ever since she started sewing, it needed to be.

"What is it?" she remembered her father asking her. She was even littler back then.

"I can't . . ." *sniffle, sniffle*, "fit . . ." *sniffle, sniffle*, "anymo' of my cos-tooms . . ."

"Is that so?"

Without warning, he opened the closet door and kicked the whole back wall down!

"Eek!"

"There, that's better. Isn't it?"

Behind the wall was their den.

"Yes, I think this will do quite nicely," he said, looking around. "It's all yours now. Make as many costumes as you'd like."

He even blocked off the other doorways too, so the only entrance would be her bedroom. It wasn't long before it was completely filled up again.

Nowadays, going into her closet felt more like wandering backstage at a circus. There were hanging linens, spools of string, a wall of strange hats, funny masks and old trunks full of props. In the middle, there was a large spinning wheel and two sewing tables, each with a great jar of candy on it. One for her and one for her mother. But the best part were all the rows of dresses she could choose from.

"Hmm . . ." she sighed as she skipped through that morning. "I wonder what I should wear to church today . . ."

Whenever Sophie got dressed, her goal was always to try and look on the outside the way she was on the inside—using people’s reactions as a way of gauging whether she got it right. If someone told her she looked “pretty” or “nice,” she took it as a sign that she’d chosen wrongly. “Oh, Sophie! That’s so YOU!” or “Only YOU would wear it that way!” Now this is what our heroine liked to hear!

How then did she dress, you ask? Well, it was really quite simple. She was warm and soft-hearted. Therefore, the materials and colors she chose were warm and soft-looking. She was neat and clean. Therefore, her dresses were always spotless and constant, with no loose threads. Sophie also loved to stop and chat with people. So, she always chose accessories that made her look extra friendly and approachable, like a basket under her arm full of goodies. She wore no watch and carried no purse, for she never wanted to appear busy or short on time. If there was to be any message in appearance, she wanted it to be “Hello! Come and talk to me. I have all the time in the world!” And it worked very well. Wherever she went, people were always approaching her.

But Sophie was also a very odd girl—and she knew it. So, she always tended to sew or wear things a tad unevenly or inexplicably. Many of her pockets, for instance, were crooked. Buttons and zippers were sewn in silly places. Places which had no function whatsoever. It wasn’t because she liked the way it looked. Rather, she viewed it more like a common courtesy. People who talked to her were bound to find out she was a little weird sooner or later. Dressing that way helped save them the time and trouble. And this worked very well too! Sophie looked exactly like the kind of girl who would say something odd. Many were shocked when they talked to her. But because of the way she dressed, no one was ever surprised.

All of this led, of course, to the common view that So-

phie Tousaint didn't care about the way she looked—and that she just threw things on at random. But nothing could have been further from the truth. To the contrary, reader, no little girl in the village spent more time designing and planning her outfits. Every stroke of every needle she sewed, especially the little imperfections, was scrupulously and painstakingly planned, sometimes months in advance.

After she was done getting dressed that morning, she did her chores—sweeping, dusting, folding clothes and brushing Samson's snowy white fur. Next, she did her outdoor chores—watering plants, trimming vines and feeding the farm animals.

Their little house was light brown with bright blue trimmings and a brick chimney. All of the windowsills had pink flowers beneath them. There were bird feeders and bird baths wherever they could fit them in the yard. Samson liked to sit outside in the grass and plot war against them. "Be afraid!" he'd roar. "Meow! Be afraid! Samson is nigh! Dreadful as the storm and lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth!" But at the end of the day, it was always too much work for him. He wasn't nearly as dangerous as he pretended to be and spent most hours sprawled out on the porch, fast asleep. Birds and bunnies could hop right up to him and eat the crumbs of his breakfast off his whiskers. He had a hard-enough time lifting his arms, let alone hurting anything.

The farm was about as big as a schoolyard. A white picket fence encircled it. As Sophie worked, she hummed and sang little songs, saying hello to all the animals.

But there was one chore that our heroine dreaded every morning. So much so, that she often went to great lengths to avoid it. After putting it off as long as she could that morning, Sophie went into the barn to feed the pigs. Suddenly, a funny-looking man appeared from the pen.

He was giant, dark-skinned and had a great big bushy beard, crawling on all fours like he was one of them.

“Snort, snort, snort! Squee! Squee!” he bellowed.
“Snort, snort, snort! SQUEE!”

Sophie shrieked.

Chapter 19

The Stranger in the Manger



Of all our heroine's powers, this one was by far the strangest. It happened late at night when she fell into her deepest sleeps. For the longest time, she thought they were just funny dreams. Until one day something extraordinary happened. Upon awaking, she heard some snoring next to her. Slowly, she rolled over and peeked over the side of her bed. The stranger she had seen in her dreams that night had followed her home!

She reacted exactly the way you would, reader. As loud as she could, she shrieked. The stranger woke up and started shrieking too. So did Samson, who nearly jumped up onto the chandeliers. But the funniest reaction of all came from Sophie's father who, upon hearing them, casually strolled in holding his plain cup of coffee. Far from panicking, he just stood there and said, "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." Then, he took a sip, turned around and calmly walked away like nothing had happened.

Shortly after, the sharp-featured gentleman discovered our heroine's barn. Finding it to his liking, he decided to move in. Sophie's father warmly welcomed him there, telling Sophie it would be her job to take care of him.

From that day onward, her morning chores would never be the same again.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” laughed the stranger heartily. “Good day, good Mistress Sophie!”

He stood up tall and smiled.

“Good morning, Motumbo . . .” our heroine squeaked.

The giant man stepped forward, but then suddenly started losing his balance.

“Wo!” he cried, wobbling. “Wo! WoOoOo!”

He began falling backwards. Our heroine had to run to save him.

“Oh, Motumbo! Be careful!” she shrieked.

“WoOoOo! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

She got there just in time—right before he fell on a pitchfork! With all her might, she shoved him in the opposite direction. But that only ended up making things worse.

“WoOoOo!” he kept wailing again, this time falling sideways. “WoOoOo!” Sophie had to run and push him again . . . and again! Back and forth they went, turning the barn into an even greater mess! If she hadn’t grabbed onto his beard, he would have tumbled right into the trough.

“Hold . . . on . . . Motumbo!” she cried. “I . . . got . . . you!”

It was working! He was almost standing upright. But then the unthinkable happened. He teetered and fell straight towards her!

“UH OH!” he bellowed.

“Motumbo!” she shrieked. “MOTUMBOOO!”

She tried to get out of the way, but it was too late. He tumbled right on top of her.

“Oof!”

Fortunately, the hay broke their fall and neither of them got hurt. They stood up and brushed off the straw.

“Goodness!” sighed Sophie. “What a fright!”

It was a power our heroine would never get used to

because of how much chaos it introduced into her life. Motumbo was so silly! So different! So wild! Sophie used to enjoy doing her morning chores, but now they always felt like a nightmare.

“WwWwoof!” the man started growling next. “WwWwoof!”

He lowered his head and began kicking up hay like a bull.

“Eek!”

Then he started chasing her.

“Snort, snort! WwWwa! Snort, snort, snort! WwWwa! WwWwa!”

“Eek! Eek!”

The only good thing about this chaos was that it made our heroine much more patient than she would otherwise have been. As frustrating as these trips to the barn could be, they were perfect practice for all her adventures. Believe me when I say, reader, that patience more than anything is something our heroine will need!

Speaking of which, let us see if she is finally ready to begin those adventures. We’ve awoken our heroine. You’ve gotten to know her. You’ve seen her powers and how she can control them. But can she control herself? Can she remain calm and steady, as she’ll need to be? Can she listen, even when it’s hard? There is only one way to find out. Let us frustrate her even more this morning, reader! We’ll put our heroine’s patience to the test!

Suddenly, Motumbo started chasing her even faster! He threw hay up into the air! He beat his chest like an ape! He made sillier and sillier sounds!

“Whoop, whoop, whoop, WHOOP, WHOOP! Whoop, whoop, whoop, WHOOP, WHOOP!”

He tickled her heels as she ran! He poked her sides! He bent his face into funny, but frightening shapes! How red Sophie turned! How she shrieked! Her little heart beat faster and faster!

“Whoop, whoop, whoop, WHOOP, WHOOP! Hee, haw! Hee, haw! Whoop, whoop, whoop! Snort, snort!”

“EeEeEek!”

The barn got even messier. Sophie’s shoes were ruined! Her dress got a big, ugly tear in it! Soon, the poor girl could run no more. Motumbo had her cornered. There was nowhere else to go.

“WwWwoof! WwWwoof! WwWwWwWwWwoof!”

Finally, she lost her temper and wailed at the top of her lungs. “That’s it . . . STOP THIS INSTANT, SIR!”

Immediately, Motumbo halted. He scrambled backward to the middle of the room like an excited puppy and sat down nicely.

“Heavens to Betsy! Aren’t you frisky today!” Sophie exclaimed. Then she felt tears build up. She couldn’t hold back any longer and started crying.

This was all it took, reader, to bring our poor heroine to her knees. Already, she wanted to give up. Looking at the door, she felt tempted to storm out—the same way she’d done so many other times. But on this morning, something was different. After all that running away, she was finally beginning to realize that running wasn’t going to solve her problem. Sophie had only one choice. She had to get back up on her feet and try reasoning with him. But this only proved to be even more frustrating.

Slowly, Motumbo started shuffling back towards the sobbing girl. He patted her gently on the head and apologized.

“Aww, Motumbo sorry for frightening good Mistress Sophie. Motumbo not mean to. Motumbo just playing, that’s all.”

Then he gave her a great big, long, tight hug—and kissed her little hand.

“Eek!” she screeched, jumping up. His beard was so tickly!

“Motumbo won’t do it again,” he answered. “Mo-

tumbo promise! Motumbo LOVE Mistress Sophie. Motumbo love SO MUCH.”

Our heroine took a deep breath, just like her father had taught her. She sighed and did her best to remain calm.

“Oh, Motumbo!” she began. “I just can’t take this anymore! You . . . your behavior . . . calling me . . . calling me . . .” Sophie could hardly say the word, it was so upsetting. “Mistress . . .” She cringed and squirmed. “Won’t you stop all this silliness and come inside already? You’re a man, not an animal. I’m not your master. I’m just a girl! Please, please . . .” she begged, seizing his hands. They were so big. It felt like holding two bunches of bananas. “Please, come inside. We can build you a proper house. Or you can live with us! There is so much I could teach you.”

Motumbo listened very politely and sensitively as she spoke. His eyes were so full of affection, like he’d do anything for her. She began to think that maybe she’d finally gotten through to him. But that hope was shattered the moment she mentioned a house. He let go of her hands and burst into laughter.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! HO! HO! HO!” he chuckled. “Motumbo? Live in a house? But why would Motumbo do that? House too small for Motumbo!” He beat his chest again. “Besides, Motumbo love his barn. Barn Motumbo’s favorite place in WHOLE WORLD! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

“But . . . why?” our heroine moaned in pain. It felt like a knife was being plunged into her heart—and then twisted. Nothing frustrated our heroine more than absurdity and obscenity. “WHY!?” She seized him by the hand again, this time squeezing very hard. Now, she looked like the crazy one. “Look around! It’s a barn! A BARN! It’s cold . . . and FILTHY in here! Are you mad? What’s wrong with you? Don’t you want a bed to sleep in!? A nice, cozy blanket!?”

"Hmm . . ." thought Motumbo, scratching his chin. Then he burst out laughing again. "No! Motumbo don't! Ho! Ho! Ho! Motumbo already have bed, see? Behold, Motumbo's bed of straw! And as for blanket—who needs blanket who has friends?" He pointed to the wooly sheep—and big fat muddy pig he liked to cuddle with.

"Squee!" it seemed to croak in agreement. Motumbo started squealing again too. "Squee! Snort, snort, snort. Squee! WeEeEe!"

There was that feeling again, reader—like a second knife. Only this time, in her stomach! "Oh!" she gagged. "How . . . how . . . how revolting!" Every heroine has a weakness, reader. Hers was mud. It took every ounce of her strength just to stop herself from fainting. "But there must be SOMETHING we can do, Motumbo!" she begged. "Surely, we could at least make a few changes around here!"

Motumbo looked at her with a very doubtful expression on his face, but decided to hear her out. As she paced around the room pitching him some ideas, he followed along and listened.

"Why—how about some candles, Motumbo? Brighten up the place a bit! How does that sound?"

"Hmm. No, thank you!" he answered politely. "Motumbo afraid of fire . . ."

"Oh . . . I see," said Sophie. "Well, what about a bookshelf, then? Look! Here's a nice spot! What do you say?"

But he just kept shaking his head.

"No—reading make Motumbo sleepy."

He stretched and yawned just thinking about it.

"O-kay . . ." she answered. "How about a grandfather clock? My father builds them, you know. He could make one just for you! We could put it in the corner here."

"Oh, no! No!" he pleaded. "Clocks make Motumbo late!"

“W-w-well . . .” Sophie stuttered. “Would you at least consider wearing some clothes?”

Sophie looked down and gulped. All Motumbo wore was a loincloth—one which was far too small.

“Nah!” he grunted, dismissively. “Too constricting. Motumbo prefer to be freeee!”

He started swaying back and forth, dancing again.

“Eek!”

Quickly, Sophie covered her eyes.

“Well, how about a proper education, then!” she shouted next.

Surely, Motumbo would want that. But once again, she was surprised.

“Edu-cation?” he asked. “What is edu-cation?”

Sophie sighed.

“You know—learning things!”

“Like what?”

“Things you might be curious about. I’m terribly curious about a lot of things, Motumbo! Aren’t you?”

Motumbo thought about it and shrugged.

“No, not really. Motumbo know how to love! Motumbo know how to serve! Motumbo know way to church! If edu-cation not teach Motumbo how do these things bett-ah, then Motumbo not interested.”

When all her heroic efforts failed, Sophie then asked Motumbo to close his eyes and describe what he thought would be the perfect home. She ran to a cupboard where there were pencils and paper. She would draw it! Then, her father and her would build it for him! Motumbo paced back and forth and gave a very detailed account—everything from the way the walls would be, to the kinds of toys he liked and the perfect bed. Sophie started getting very, very excited! “MmmHmm!” she’d say with a great big smile, “MmmHmm! What else!?” But when she was finished and looked down at the page, she realized that she had drawn a giant hamster cage. Motumbo laughed heartily and approved. So did the muddy pig. By the end,

our heroine was completely exhausted and had run out of all the patience she had left. She gave up and collapsed onto her knees before him.

"Oh, Motumbo. . ." she sighed, seizing him by his enormous hands again. "Motumbo! Whatever am I going to do with you? "What is it that I can do? Please just tell me. I beg you!"

This time, Motumbo was the one who sighed.

"Hmm . . . you really want to know?" he asked with a great big smile spreading across his face.

"Yes. Yes!" she pleaded.

"Okay. Then, Motumbo tell you." He went down on one knee and got as close to her as he could. "All Motumbo want from good Mistress Sophie is to let Motumbo be Motumbo—like good Sophie's fatha' does. Let Motumbo love. Let Motumbo serve. Let Motumbo come to church. Let Motumbo . . . be free."

Just then, our heroine began to realize how she must have been making Motumbo feel all that time. She was always marching in there with the intention of changing him, avoiding him or wishing he were different. Did she ever once stop and think about whether Motumbo was just fine the way he was? Maybe she was the one who needed to change a little.

Sophie always lost her patience with Motumbo because she made the mistake of thinking she could control him—like she could control so many other things. But before she started her adventure, she had to learn that some things would always be out of her control. When she finally realized the truth that morning, all that worry and frustration suddenly melted away.

"Okay. . . okay. . ." she said sniffing and holding back her tears. "I'll try. . ." She gave her friend a great big hug. "I'm sorry, Motumbo! Can you ever forgive me?"

Motumbo nodded and hugged her back.

They got along much better after that. Sophie didn't

mind being chased as much. She even found it fun sometimes. And if she ever didn't want him to chase her, all she had to do was calmly raise her hand as he approached. Motumbo would stop dead in his tracks and behave like a perfect gentleman. She taught him how to tap dance, have tea parties and even how to play the banjo. Motumbo taught Sophie fun new games. I wouldn't say these mornings became any less chaotic, reader—but they were certainly more fun. Instead of her morning chores ending in shrieking and crying, they concluded with hoedowns, rodeos and gales upon gales of laughter.

When our heroine came out of the barn that day, the sun was extra bright. The air smelled fresh. With just one conversation, her patience had tripled. She felt like she could get along with just about anyone now.

Around the corner, she found her father. He was sitting on the fence, tinkering with one of his tools.

"Oh," he muttered, as if not expecting her. "So, how did it go this time?"

He was pleasantly surprised by Sophie's answer.

"You know," she said, "I really like that Motumbo."

"Is that so?"

"MmmHm! I think he's right where he should be."

"Good," he nodded approvingly.

She turned around and he watched her head back to the house whistling and humming.

"...That's good."

Chapter 20

Queer Happenings

Sometimes being magical was fun. You could sneak extra cookies. You could know when a guest was coming. You could do nice things for your friends. Other times, being magical was frustrating. You could wander far beyond what people called “boundaries” and meet the funniest sorts of folks. Though you never knew who might follow you home! However, being magical could also be a little scary. Queer things would happen to you. Spooky things! Sometimes all day long.

Once, Sophie had been alone in her room sewing a new dress. Suddenly, all the buttons and beads in her kit started floating around her! On another occasion, she was planning a scene in one of her plays. She thought of the fireworks she might use. “Pow! Bam!” she had said, imagining it. All of the sudden, one of her props caught on fire. “Eek!” She nearly burned down the house! The spookiest of all was the time she wandered a little too far in one of her “dreams” and ended up getting lost. She was asleep for days and many began to worry that she might never wake up.

Because of this, our heroine often wished she didn’t have her powers. What if she accidentally hurt someone? What if she got her village in trouble one day? Sometimes she felt so worried and scared that she would be sad for hours on end. It was a good thing she had a best friend she could talk to. Someone who was just as skilled at keeping secrets.

“Narissa!” she yelled, banging on her friend’s door. Something spooky had happened again that morning, just after she’d visited Motumbo. It sent Sophie running as fast as she could to tell her about it. “Narissa! Hello!” she continued, banging some more. “Are you there? It’s important!”

“Just a minute!” a voice from the other side called back.

Their farms were right next to each other. Ever since they were little, their families had walked to church together.

Sophie tried her best to wait patiently. What was taking her so long? She put her ear to the door and listened. It sounded like Narissa was rustling through her closet.

“I’m coming! Hold on!”

Then Sophie heard some stomping. It got louder and louder—and closer! A moment later, the door swung open, nearly knocking her right off the steps. A girl with a big, bright smile and rosy cheeks emerged. She was a little taller than Sophie and had fabulous, bouncy blue hair.

“O-kay! I’m ready!” she yelled, posing in the doorway.

“Golly,” sighed Sophie regaining her balance. “That was a close one! Good morning, Narissa.”

Then the girl froze. Her eyes fell to Sophie’s dress. She just stood there, staring at it. The smile slowly started to disappear.

“Umm . . .” Sophie stammered, feeling a little nervous. “Narissa?” She glanced down at herself, wondering what the problem was. But she didn’t see anything. “Is . . . there something wrong?”

The girl groaned.

“Yes, there is,” she answered, crossing her arms. “Look! Your dress! It’s completely different from mine!



We're supposed to be matching today! Don't you remember?"

Sophie paused and thought about it. "Oh . . ." she sighed. "No, I don't think I do. Sorry!" She could be so forgetful sometimes. But then she thought a little more and—"Hey, wait a minute . . . Are you sure we agreed to—"

But thankfully Narissa had already forgiven her.

"Yep!" she interrupted, rushing forward and covering Sophie's mouth.

"Mmm!" was all that came out.

"But don't worry! I can fix it! I just have to get changed, that's all!"

"MmMmMm!"

Then, without warning, Narissa seized Sophie by the arm and started hauling her around the corner.

"Come on! Around back! Yesterday was laundry day. My dresses are all out on the clothesline, drying."

"But . . ." whimpered Sophie, struggling free. "I need to tell you something!"

"Then you can tell me on the way. LET'S GO!"

The only problem with our heroine's best friend, reader, was how rough she could sometimes be. She was always pinching, prodding and grabbing her. When she hugged Sophie, she'd pick her right off the ground and squeeze her so tight she couldn't breathe. When she held her hand, she'd almost never let go. Sophie's favorite game was "dress-up." But with Narissa, it felt more like wrestling. During their sleepovers, she would raid Sophie's closet and handle her like a rag doll . . . bending her this way . . . contorting her that way . . . and stretching her into all kinds of uncomfortable positions. She'd pin Sophie down and tickle her until it wasn't fun anymore, break into her house at night to kidnap her for midnight swims, and chase her with a towel at the village bathhouse, whipping her like a race-

horse. Sophie loved her best friend dearly, but sometimes it could be so painful! She was no less rough with her that morning.

“Hey, quit pulling so hard, Narissa!” she squeaked. “You’re going to tug my arm off.”

“You’re walking too slow!”

“But this is as fast as I can go . . .”

“Okay,” she answered, smiling. “Then I’ll have to carry you!”

She turned to Sophie and scooped her up.

“Eek!”

“There! That’s better! Now, what was it you wanted to say?”

Sophie had learned that being in Narissa’s clutches was a little like being in quicksand. The more you struggled, the tighter she squeezed. The more you squirmed, the more her hands would look for other, ticklier places to hold onto. It was safer to just relax and let her have her way.

“Well . . .” she began, doing her best to talk. It was hard with all the bouncing and jostling. “After visiting Motumbo this morning . . . oof! . . . I went into the bathroom to fix my hair. Oof! I looked in the mirror and no one was there, but me. But after I put away my brush, I looked again—and saw someone standing behind me!”

“Wow! Really?” asked Narissa, excited.

“Yeah!”

“Cool!”

“Cool?” Sophie gasped. “How is that cool!? It scared the life out of me, Narissa! Just thinking about it gives me the creeps!”

“So, what happened? Who were they?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know! They vanished the moment I saw them. I don’t even remember their face. Only . . . their eyes . . .”

“Maybe it was a ghost.”

"Agh! A ghost!?" Sophie squeezed up close to Narissa and trembled in her arms.

"Maybe!" her friend smiled. "After all, it wouldn't be the first time you saw one, would it?"

Sophie gulped.

"Well . . . regardless, I've come to tell you that I've made a decision, Narissa. I'm not going to use my powers anymore! Not even to help people. It's too dangerous! And frightful!"

"What!?"

Narissa plopped Sophie down next to the clothesline.

"They're not powers," said Sophie. "They're a curse! I just want to be normal. I can't always control them . . . but if I try really hard, maybe they'll just go away."

"Hey, come on. Don't say that. You're not cursed. You're just different, that's all. I like your powers!"

"But what if God doesn't want me using them? What if it makes him angry . . . or disappointed . . . or worse . . . what if it makes him . . ." Sophie gulped and started tearing up. ". . .not like me anymore . . ."

But sometimes a little of Narissa's roughness was exactly what our heroine needed. She may have been bossy to Sophie. She may have been stubborn, manipulative and nosey. She may even have been a tad abusive at times. But she was also brutally honest, impossible to deceive and fearless of all things strange. Sophie could tell her absolutely anything. Narissa wouldn't get spooked, disbelieve her, or look at her any differently after. She encouraged Sophie, loved her fiercely (perhaps a little too fiercely at times) and was always there for her. Many people in the village wondered how they could possibly be friends, given how different they were. Often, Sophie wondered it herself. But it was times like this, when our heroine was feeling blue, that she always remembered.

"What!? No way!" said Narissa. She grabbed Sophie by the shoulders and pulled her close. "God loves you, Sophie! He made you just the way you are! Don't listen to

any bad feelings like that. He has a plan for your powers, just as He has a plan for everything else. There is a reason He gave them to you. We just . . . don't know what it is yet . . . that's all."

"Really?" sighed our heroine, sniffing more. "You really think so?"

"Yeah!" Narissa let Sophie go. "So, don't give up! Okay?" She smiled and winked at her. Then she pushed Sophie's spectacles back into place and dried her tears with her cuff.

"Well," Sophie replied, feeling a little better. "Maybe . . . maybe you're right."

"Of course, I am!"

"I just wish I knew what it was, that's all. If only I knew . . . then maybe it wouldn't be so scary."

"Well, maybe there's a way to find out."

"You think?"

"Maybe." Narissa shrugged.

"I hope so. I don't know how much more of this I can take. At this point, I think I'd do just about anything to find out."

And that's when Narissa suddenly got her brilliant idea.

"Hey, wait a minute. I know!" she shouted.

Sophie looked at her curiously.

"Why don't you ask Jean-Pierre today!? He knows lots about God, right?"

Jean-Pierre was the village priest. He lived in the temple at the village square.

"Oh, yeah . . ." Sophie remembered. "That's right!"

"He's who I talk to whenever I feel confused. He gives marvelous advice!"

"But . . ." stammered Sophie, "you never take his advice, Narissa . . ."

"So? It's still good advice! Well, come on. What do you say? It's a worth a try, right? We can go right now!"

But Sophie wasn't yet sure.

"Golly . . ." she sighed nervously. She never really thought about asking Jean-Pierre before. But Narissa was right. If there was anyone in the village who could help her figure that out, it was him. But did they have time that morning? She pulled out her pocket watch to check. Fortunately, Narissa snatched it out of her hand before she could see and threw it into the bushes.

"Yes, now!" she ordered. "Trust me, we can make it! I know a shortcut!"

Sophie thought and thought.

"Hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . ."

She was never was very good at making decisions.

"Hey! Don't make me twist your arm!"

"Eek!"

Finally, she made up her mind.

"Okay!" our heroine cheered. "Let's do it!"

"Really?"

"Yes! I want to! Let's go!"

The two friends held hands and started jumping up and down. It was settled. They would go to the temple at the village square. The only problem was getting there.

"Okay, which way?" said Sophie pulling her.

But Narissa wouldn't budge until she did something first. She hurried over to the clothesline.

"H-hey . . . wait . . . what are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm getting changed."

"But . . . out here?"

"Why not? Don't worry." Narissa winked at her. "It will only take a minute." Then she started undressing.

"Eek! Are you crazy!?"

And now you see, reader, why it was so good that Narissa had a friend like Sophie too. With lightning-fast reflexes and gallant speed, our heroine dashed to the nearest bedsheet. She tore it off and used it as a wall to cover her.

“Jiminy crickets!” she yelled chasing Narissa, who kept running away. “Get back here! Someone might see you!”

Who knows what would have happened to this girl without Sophie? At the very least, I think you would agree—she wouldn’t have had nearly as much fun.

“Come on, Sophie!” she teased. “You’re going to have to be faster than that.”

“Goodness gracious!” Sophie kept exclaiming. “Heavens to Betsy! Great Scott!”

Chapter 21

Shortcut to the Village Square

Sophie liked walking along the roads to church, but Narissa preferred the bumpier, more adventurous paths.

"Where are you taking me, Narissa?" she asked. "This isn't the right way, is it?"

"Of course it is!" she answered.

"But—are you sure?"

"Hey! Do you want to find out what your powers are for, or not? Trust me! I know the way. This is a shortcut! I think . . ."

Sophie gulped.

Nibelheim was no ordinary village. It was built upon the ruins of an ancient city. There were statues, tombstones and fallen temples just about everywhere you looked. Especially in the wilder, wooded parts that were too steep and rocky to farm. Narissa was quick and nimble. She dashed through these trails with ease. But Sophie was lousy at it. She got stuck in every bush . . . "Agh!" . . . tripped over every tree root . . . "Eek!" . . . and slipped on just about every single rock . . . "Oof!" It was a good thing her friend was there to catch her, or she may have never made it out.

"Narissa! Help!"

"Gotcha!" she answered with her big smile.

Often, they found old trinkets, coins and runes in the soil. They had lots of fun collecting and deciphering the symbols on them. Many were the late nights they'd spent trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle. Who were the people who dwelt there before them? What happened to them? "Nibelheim" wasn't the name Sophie's village chose for itself. It was the name inscribed on an ancient stone tablet they discovered when they arrived on the shores. It meant "Home of the Mist." The People of the Book kept it in honor of them.

Sophie and Narissa also found crystals in the soil. The coast of the continent was rich with blues and greens. Reds were a little less common in that part of the world, except around the volcanos. Yellows seemed to appear more after thunderstorms. By the end of their little excursions, their pockets would be stuffed.



But the most exciting part was the buried treasure chests they'd find! All Sophie would have to do is close her eyes and think about them. Somehow, she'd know exactly where they were. She did the tracking and Narissa did the digging. With all the artifacts they discovered, they could have probably opened their own museum.

"O-kay," said Narissa, coming to her favorite part of the woods. There was a deep ravine called "Snake Pit." All the children were afraid of it. But not Narissa! She had climbed up a tree one day and built a rope swing over it. "Come on!" she said, holding on. "Let's GO!" With her brilliant blue hair flowing in the wind, she swung across effortlessly. Sophie gasped in astonishment as she landed

on the other side. “Hi-ya! There! You see? It’s easy!” Sophie looked doubtful. Then Narissa threw the rope back. “Okay . . . now it’s YOUR turn!”

“What! Me?” our heroine squeaked. She looked around to see if there was anyone else, but there wasn’t.

“Yes! You!”

Sophie had never dared try before. When Narissa swung over, she always took the long way around. But today there was no time.

“Hey, I thought you said you’d do anything,” Narissa teased.

“I did?” answered Sophie, trembling.

“MmmHm! So, prove it!”

Sophie hopped up onto the ledge. She felt a cold gust of wind. The sun’s bright beams nearly blinded her. It shone behind Narissa, making her blue hair glitter with gold. She looked down at the snakes and started to feel scared. But then Sophie saw the Dragon King’s mountain fortress in the distance. That black smoke rising! Those horrible, ugly ships patrolling the seas! For some reason, it made her feel braver and more determined.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll do it.” She closed her eyes and took a very deep breath, almost like she was getting ready to dive under water. Her cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk’s. Narissa tried her best not to laugh. Then Sophie bent her little knees, gripped the rope tightly and counted down backwards from three—“Mmm! Mmm! MMM!”—before jumping. “EeEeEeEk!” she squealed all the way across. Narissa couldn’t hold back her laughter any longer. Sophie was as stiff as board, twirling around in circles. But then Narissa realized she wasn’t going to make it. She dashed towards the edge, reached out and caught our heroine by the hand just in time. “Gotcha!”

When they finally arrived at the village square, their hair and dresses were full of twigs. They took turns dusting each other off. Nibelheim was bright and colorful.

There were flowers on every windowsill, children laughing on every corner, kittens, puppies, pony rides and a band who played the most cheerful, delightful music you can imagine. The air smelled like fresh cinnamon buns and apple pie. You could hardly take a step without being offered some. But the best part, at least in our heroine's opinion, was how squeaky clean and friendly everyone was. As she skipped and hummed, she tried her best to greet each and every one of them.

"Good morning! How do you do?" she said curtsying.

"Very well, thank you," they'd reply. The women curtsied back to her. The men smiled and tipped their hats. "And you?"

"Very well! Thank you!"

Sometimes Sophie would get a little too excited and send herself spinning.

"And how do YOU do? And how do YOU do?" There were so many. She couldn't keep up. "And how do YOU and YOU and YOU do? Eek!"

"Sophie," said Narissa, holding her up. "You can't say good morning to everyone, or you're going to get dizzy and fall over again. Don't you remember what the doctor said?"

"Sorry, Narissa! But I can't help it. Everyone is so charming! Oh, look! Fresh strawberries!"

Farmers brought in their best crops on Sundays. They parked their carts in a big circle. People came and took what they pleased. Everything was free in Nibelheim. Instead of using money, people just shared. Nor were there any police or mayors. Why would there be when everyone got along? The only rule the People of the Book followed was "do what the Book says." As long as everyone did that, there was no need for any more. On Sundays, you would always hear at least one person standing up tall, passionately reading from It.

"Be kind . . . treat others fairly . . . say you're sorry if

you do something wrong . . . always forgive . . . share everything . . . do good deeds . . . shower everyone you see with affection . . .” And so on and so forth.

Sophie loved her village so much that sometimes she’d climb up onto the fountain in the middle and just sit there with a big smile on her face, watching everyone as they did these things. It was her favorite thing to do in the whole world.

But our heroine was on a mission that morning. She needed to find the village priest before church started. Quickly, she handed her basket to Narissa and ran up the stairs into the temple.

Chapter 22

A Place of Light and Song

Temples were places where the People of the Book gathered to read, pray and sing together. There were rows and rows of wooden benches to sit on, elegantly engraved stone walls and bright stained-glass windows. Further in, was a staircase that led up to a kind of stage where the sacred Ceremony of Light was held.

The Ceremony of Light was the most important part of going to church. When the reading, singing and speeches were over, the priest would walk to an alter and drop a special blue and yellow crystal into a pitcher of water. The blue in it would cleanse and cool the water. The yellow would make it sparkle and shine. Then, he'd say a prayer and pour the water into a pink crystal chalice that everyone would take turns drinking from. The person who helped him hold and serve the sacred water was called "the Light Bearer." Only a little girl was allowed to do it.

When Sophie entered, she lowered her eyes, put her hands together and whispered a little prayer. That was how the People of the Book said hello to God. Then she looked up at the alter and bowed to the big, fancy golden copy of the Book, which sat upon a silver pedestal.

"Welcome, my child," said a man dressed in long white robes. He had a short grey beard and a gentle smile. His voice was soft, deep and slow—like the tone of someone reading you a pleasant bedtime story. "Please, come in!" he said, extending his even whiter staff.

"Jean-Pierre!" our heroine whispered.

Sophie bowed to the man just as low as she had to the alter. Then she took him by the hand and kissed his ring. That was where he kept that special blue and yellow crystal when it wasn't being used. It chilled and tickled her lips.

"Sorry I'm a little early!" she continued. "But I wanted to talk to you about something—if you have time."

"Certainly," he replied, putting his arm around her shoulders.

Jean-Pierre was such a kind man. The way he looked at people made them feel so special. Sophie loved the feel of his soft, warm robes. She couldn't help curling up in them as they walked.

Slowly, he led our heroine up the stairs. They made sure to bow together in perfect unison every time they passed a holy relic. There were scrolls, sculptures and the prettiest, sweetest-smelling candles all the way up. When they reached the top, they pulled up two fancy chairs and sat across from one another.

"Some tea?" he whispered.

"Oh, yes please!"

He poured her a little cup from the sacred teapot.

"Thank you!"

Then he reached into a cupboard and pulled out a small silver tin.

"Turkish delight?" he asked next, opening it. Sophie gasped. Her favorite!

"How lovely!"

He had licorice and some chocolate marshmallow squares too. They sat together nibbling, chatting about recipes and making yummy sounds for several minutes before starting. The People of the Book rarely did anything without eating or drinking first.

"So," said Jean-Pierre finally, leaning back in his chair, wiping all the powdery sugar from his beard. "What's on your mind?"

Sophie was now feeling so comfortable that she almost forgot. She had to think for a moment before remembering.

"I wanted to ask you a question. It's about God."

"Oh? Well, you've certainly come to the right place."

What is your question, my child? If I know the answer, I shall surely tell you."

Sophie tried to think of the best way of asking but couldn't make up her mind. So, instead, she just blurted it out.

"Jean-Pierre," she sighed. "How do you know what God wants you to do?"

The priest paused and began stroking his beard in deep thought. "Ah, a very good question," he said, hemming and hawing. "Hmm . . . Mmm . . . a very good question indeed." He took out his pipe and lit it, taking two or three big puffs before answering. In Sophie's experience, that was always a sign he was about to give a really good answer. She waited patiently.

"Well," he said finally. "There are lots of ways. You know, it's a little like those stories you're always writing. You're an author, aren't you? A creator . . . designer . . . You have characters who you want to do things. Well, how do they figure it out?"

What a funny question! Sophie had never really thought about her books that way before. She just wrote whatever came to mind. How did she get her characters to know what to do? Sophie thought about them and did her best to remember.

"I suppose I give them clues," she answered.

"Go on . . ." he said, taking another puff of his pipe.

"Things happening around them . . . people in their lives . . . being in the right place at the right time."

"Only around them?"

She thought some more.

"No—on the inside too."

"What do you mean?"

"I create them a certain way. If I want them to do something, I put a deep, deep desire for it in their hearts, or maybe a special talent just for that purpose. There are no coincidences. No, sir! Everything happens for a reason!

Even little things. Especially little things! These, I think, are the most common ways they learn what to do."

"Well," answered Jean-Pierre. "It's the same with God." He stood up and walked to the altar, lifting the Golden Book from the pedestal. "Here," he said, gently placing it in her lap. Then he pulled up his chair and sat next to her. "Go on. Open it and see."

The Book was heavy and beautifully ornamented. It took both hands to lift open the cover. The words inside were written using very rare crystal ink. The pages were special too. As she turned them, they glittered and glowed like the book was alive.

"God did the same things with the characters in His Book. The same hints . . . the same clues . . . inside and outside, as you say. Often, learning what He wanted them to do was simply a case of opening their eyes and looking for it."

"But that was then," answered Sophie. "This is now. I'm not a character in the Book."

"No, that's true. But just because a book is over, it doesn't mean the story is. The God who provided us with this Book is the same God who exists today. He is everywhere—at all times—both inside and around us. The Book may be over," he said gently closing it. "But His story is still going on, even right now as we speak—in this very room. Look around. Think back and try to remember, as if you were a character in His next book. What clues might He be giving you, Sophie? What people might He have put into your life? What special desires . . . or gifts?"

"Hmm," she thought.

I would encourage you to look back and do the same, reader. Can you find any clues?

First, Sophie thought of her prayer that morning. Then, she thought of her conversation with her mother and Mr. Stanley. Next, she thought of her mysterious father . . . and Motumbo . . . and Narissa. That feeling she

got when looking at the Dragon King's mountain! That feeling she got when watching everyone in the village square! Last, she thought about her powers. What could they be for? She looked up and out of the window and saw the mountain once again . . . the third time that day. Suddenly our heroine started feeling very, very worried.

"OoOoOo . . ." she sighed, holding her belly. "I don't feel so good . . ."

"Of course, the easiest way," added the priest next, shrugging, "is just to ask God."

"Hmm!?"

Sophie's eyes shot up at him. He said it as casually as if he were commenting on the tea he was sipping.

"Oh, yes. Why not? He is here after all. Come on, give it a try."

"Uh," muttered Sophie hesitantly. "You mean . . . right now?"

She looked back down towards the entrance way. That was odd! People should have been coming in by then. Their time was up. She could see the shapes and shadows of them through the window, but no one entered. Narissa must have been distracting them.

"Sure!" said the priest. "What better time?"

But Sophie wasn't so sure she wanted to anymore.

"OoOoOo . . ." she groaned again, holding her belly.

"I hope the Turkish delight is alright. I was told it was fresh. Are you sure you're okay? You look a little under the weather."

"No . . . it's not that," she sighed.

"Well then, come on. You do want to know, don't you? For He will only answer if you're sure. When you ask Him, you must do so with a full heart . . . an open mind . . . ready and willing to do whatever it is . . . even if its something uncomfortable or dangerous. God speaks to the patient . . . to good listeners . . . to those who are brave enough to trust. Do you really want to know what God

wants you to do, Sophie? Do you trust Him? Are you willing to say yes?"

"Yes!" she answered, remembering. "I do! I am! I'm just . . . a little scared . . . that's all."

"It's okay to be scared," replied Jean-Pierre, taking her by the hand and leading her to the altar. He helped her to her knees and placed her hands together. "If you weren't, you wouldn't be ready. Focus now, my child. Think of the exact question you wish to ask. Try to relax, so you'll be able to hear. Sometimes, He speaks in words. Sometimes, in pictures, like a dream. Remember, He created you. He knows your every thought, feeling and deepest desire. If you reach out to Him, you must trust He will respond in a way you will understand."

Sophie felt the warm sunlight on her face. She took a deep breath and did her best to relax her whole body. "Okay," she sighed as he backed away. "Here it goes." She focused with all her heart, and all her mind, on the one she'd be addressing. "God . . . Sir . . . please tell me. What is it you want me to do? I'll do it. I'll do anything—if you tell me."

Chapter 23

Visions

She was expecting to hear a voice, but it felt more like waking from a dream. Sophie gasped, winced and jostled! When she looked around, she realized she was no longer in the temple. Instead, she was hovering high up above it. From here, she was shown a glimpse into the future.

First, she saw the Dragon King's army. It had grown even larger. They marched into every village along the coast, burned them down and loaded all the survivors onto slave ships. Sophie watched helplessly as her mother, Motumbo and Narissa were dragged away in chains. Never had she felt so heartbroken before! Her precious village square, which was once so lively and beautiful, was now a desolate wasteland.

Next, in the blink of an eye, she was transported to another place. This time, to a battlefield! The Dragon King's army had travelled over the sea. One by one, they raided and plundered the kingdoms of the world.

It was always the same strategy. First, he'd send his dragon to scorch everything. Then, he'd send his soldiers. Sometimes, the Dragon King didn't even have to attack. He'd just pay the other kings for their crowns. Or, he would pay their armies to switch sides. It wasn't long until there were no kingdoms left at all. They all belonged to him. The Dragon King sat on the throne of the whole world!

But then Sophie began to wonder. Something just



didn't seem right. Why was God showing her this? She wasn't a queen. She wasn't a soldier. What did this have to do with her question? And that's when she was given the third part of her vision.

Suddenly, the Dragon King and his armies vanished. She was transported back in time to her island, before the invasion. Now she realized that God hadn't really been showing her the future. He'd been showing her a possible future—what would happen if she didn't do the thing He wanted. What then did He want her to do? She looked around curiously for the clues . . . until she noticed where she was standing.

"OoOoh . . ." she thought, holding her belly. Suddenly, she wasn't feeling so well again. She was right at the entrance of the Dragon King's mountain fortress! The black gates started creaking open. A lantern with a sparkly white flame appeared in her hand.

"OoOoh . . . I have a bad feeling about this." She took a deep breath and gulped. Slowly, she tip-toed inside.

The corridors of the fortress were dark and eerie. Worse, they were full of traps, trip wires and armed guards. But our heroine saw the traps. She slipped past every trip wire. Calmly and patiently, she waited until exactly the right moments when the guards' backs would be turned. As quiet as a mouse, she scurried by. Even when she came to the courtyard, which was full of soldiers, she walked right across without being noticed and up the stairs.

Last was the door to the throne room. There were two guards this time. Next to them, was a wall of keys. Choosing the wrong one would set off an alarm. How could she possibly get by? But our heroine solved this puzzle too. She distracted the guards, found the key and quietly snuck in.



“So that’s what my powers are for,” she realized. “I’m supposed to use them to get inside. But once I’m in, what do I do?” She took another deep breath and kept going.

The Dragon King’s throne room reminded her of the temple—only, everything was backwards. Instead of sunlight, beautiful things and comfortable places to pray, it was black, gloomy and full of torture devices. Instead of a golden book upon an altar, there was a giant golden chair next to a most unholy-looking dinner table. The only light coming in was from a small hole in the middle of the ceiling. Sophie walked directly into the beam and planted her feet there, firmly. She looked up at the Dragon King, who suddenly took notice of her.

He was the scariest man she had ever seen. His armor was thick, spikey and dyed red with blood. His helmet flared out with two bull horns coming out the sides. It was too dark to see his eyes, but she could feel them glaring



hatefully on her. Then, he stood up and slowly started walking down the stairs. Sophie felt like running away, but she didn't. Instead, she tightened her grip around the lantern and stood her ground. Little did she know, it was about to get even scarier. From

the shadows, three more villains emerged.

The first of the three was a troll named Choad. He looked like a giant toad, walking on hind legs. His mouth was enormous, with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth. He had a long tongue inside that could snap out, quickly wrap around his enemies, and pull them in. Choad was in



charge of the Dragon King's slaves. As he followed him down the stairs, he drew a whip and scowled at Sophie like he was going to lash her with it. Again, Sophie felt like running. But she still didn't move.



Next came Kanga Kang—a mutant kangaroo with attitude! He was in charge of weighing and selling all the drugs the slaves produced. He wore black sunglasses, a long gold chain and two bright red boxing gloves with barbed wire wrapped around them. The way he kept smiling down at Sophie as he walked, pounding his fists together, made her heart race even faster.

Zeetan was the last of the three. By all appearances, he seemed like an ordinary gorilla. But if you looked carefully, you could see something was very, very wrong. His eyes were crossed. His tongue was hanging from his mouth, along with heaps of drool. That meant a Klandeathuan Brainworm had gotten into its head. Sophie had read about them once. They entered through the nose or ear and lodged themselves behind their vic-



tim's eyes. From there, they could control someone like a puppet. Zeetan was the Dragon King's head interrogator and torturer. He carried a mallet and sickle. Did he want to hurt Sophie? Or did he want to slither into her brain next? She didn't know which would be worse!

Our heroine stood quivering and shivering, clinging to the lantern the same way she had the rope swing that afternoon. What was she supposed to do now? Give them the lantern? They didn't seem interested. Fight them? Sophie had never been in a fight before. She wasn't prepared for that. They closed in on her. The Dragon King drew his big sword! He raised it above his head, ready to strike! Sophie panicked. Was this it? Was this the end? She closed her eyes and braced herself for her doom!

Just then, the most surprising thing of all happened. The four villains suddenly froze and turned their attention to something else. A horn sounded in the distance! She heard footsteps hurrying behind her! She wasn't alone after all! Someone was coming to help! But who? Before it occurred to her to turn and look, he was already there, fearlessly at her side. It was a boy! And he had a

sword of his own! Drawing it, he got between the villains and Sophie. They all took a step back, feeling just as surprised as she was.



“Who was this boy?” our heroine wondered. It was too dark to see his face under his hood. She felt like she knew him from somewhere.

Then everything clouded over. Sophie started feeling sleepy and dizzy. The next thing she knew, she was back in her church again, kneeling before the altar. It took her a moment to realize what had just happened. But when she did, she spun around and called out to her priest.

“Jean-Pierre! Jean-Pierre! Guess what! You’ll never believe what—”

However, the priest was gone. She looked down the staircase. The front doors were open. Everyone was coming in. Jean-Pierre was busy greeting them.

“Oh . . .”

Then Sophie noticed the music playing. She twirled around once more and saw her father sitting at the organ. He smiled and waved. She waved back awkwardly. It made her wonder how long she must have been out for.

“Hey!” cried Narissa. She came from behind Sophie, spooking her.

“Eek!”

“What are you doing!?”

“Hmm?”

Sophie was still a little dreamy.

“Here! Put this on!” Narissa was holding a pretty, pink cloak. “It’s your turn to be the Light Bearer today, remember!?”

“It is?”

Narissa put it on her without even answering.

“You must have forgotten!”

She took her hand and hauled her down the stairs.

“But . . . Narissa . . . I need to tell you something. Something happened! I need to tell you! I—”

“Hush!” answered her friend, covering her mouth. “Whatever it is, you can tell me later. It’s going to start any moment.”

“MmMmMm!”

“Now, move it! Let’s go!”

Chapter 24

Sophie's New Enterprise

It was hard for Sophie to help Jean-Pierre that day. All she could think about was her vision. When the time came to pick up the crystal chalice, she nearly knocked it over. As she tipped it into people's mouths, she'd spill some down their shirts.

"O-o-oops," she said, trembling. "S-s-sorry."

It was even harder at Jonathan and Beth's wedding. Forgetting that she'd volunteered to be the singer, the procession ended up being severely delayed. Any longer, and it might have been cancelled. Fortunately, Narissa found Sophie just in time and hurried her on stage. But as she sang, her voice kept cracking. She stuttered, caught the hiccups and even forgot some of the words. Embarrassed, our heroine pointed to her cup and pretended to giggle, suggesting that it must have been something in Mr. Stanley's famous fruit punch. Everyone listening giggled along with her. But not Narissa. She knew her friend too well. Sophie would never forget the words like that. Not at a wedding. Something had to have been very wrong.

As soon as Sophie was free, Narissa pulled her aside. They went behind the temple and sat in the grass. Sophie told her everything, and Narissa believed every word without question. They agreed she should tell her father and Jean-Pierre right away.

They spent the rest of the afternoon trying to get them together to talk. But with the wedding party, baby shower and anniversary going on, at least one of them was always too busy. Eventually, they realized they'd just have to wait.

The villagers partied late into the night. There were games, prizes and even fireworks. When the music started, all the little boys lined up to ask our heroine for a dance.

But she wasn't in the mood. Narissa grabbed a broom and chased them away.

Of course, the party only really got started when Motumbo arrived, for he was the best dancer of all. Everyone cheered and chanted his name. Wives took turns getting lifted up and spun around by him. The children begged for lessons.

There were many funny songs sung and speeches given. Everyone was falling sideways and backwards in gales of laughter. In her heart, our heroine felt like laughing along with them. But she couldn't. Instead, she kept looking at the clock, praying desperate little prayers under her breath, waiting as patiently as she could for the two men to be free.

Finally, it happened. She saw them sit down to relax. They were even at the same table. Quickly, she dashed over to meet them. "Father!" she cried. "Jean-Pierre! I need to talk to you, right away!" Unfortunately, a dark cloud formed the moment she arrived. Lightning flashed. Thunder covered the sound of her voice. Then it started pouring rain, and the villagers all scattered. She lost Jean-Pierre in the crowd. Standing there soaking wet, she realized she had no choice. She would have to tell them one at a time for now, beginning with her father.

The clock struck midnight when they were finally alone. As usual, they were up way past their bed times in his workshop together. Sophie sat in deep thought, wondering how to begin.

"Everything okay over there?" her father asked, peeking his head up over his science books. "You've been staring out that window for quite some time now. Even on the way home, you were quiet." He closed the books. Then he put them down on his desk. "Something troubling you?"

"I didn't want to tire out Mother more, that's all . . ." she sighed.

"Ah, I see . . ."

Sophie looked back out the window. It was still raining. She could see the candle in her mother's bedroom flickering. Slowly, it was getting dimmer and dimmer. Suddenly, she didn't feel like talking about her vision anymore.

"We didn't have to take the long way home tonight, you know," she continued. "It was pouring. We shouldn't have gone."

"Well," her father answered. "You know how stubborn your mother can be."

"I just don't understand," said Sophie. "We've tried everything. But her illness . . . it keeps getting worse. Every day, she seems to be getting tireder. If you hadn't been there to carry her tonight, she might not have made it back home."

Sophie's father lit his pipe and poured a cup of red wine. He took a puff and sip. Then he leaned back in his chair, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Yeah . . ." he sighed sadly. "But there is still hope. I just need a little more time, that's all. Until then, we'll just have to be there to carry her sometimes, won't we?"

Sophie nodded.

Now Sophie was sure she didn't want to talk about her vision, for if she did, she knew she would just start crying. Besides, it was getting late. Her father probably wanted to go to bed soon. She looked down at her feet and frowned. Maybe she should just wait until morning . . .

"I know," said her father, trying to cheer her up. Quickly, he finished his wine and put away his pipe. "Why don't you come over here? I can show you what I've been working on." He sprung out of his chair and threw on his lab coat. But Sophie didn't seem interested.

"I may not have found the cure yet," he continued. "But I've made some very interesting discoveries along the way." Reaching under the table, he pulled out a rack of

test tubes. "The answer, I believe, is in somehow combining these four. The only problem is how . . ." He peeked over again, but she still hadn't moved. "Who knows . . ." he added, "if we put our heads together . . . we might just be able to solve it . . ."

Very, very slowly, reader, our heroine started sagging off her stool. Dragging her feet, she wallowed over, put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her fists, pouting like a sad, wet puppy.

"That's the spirit," he answered. "Now, take a look at this one . . ."

Her father handed her the first test tube. Inside was a dark blue liquid. The glass was so cold, she could hardly hold it.

"What is it?" she asked, peering inside. But he didn't answer. "Some kind of . . . blueberry slushy?"

"Well, there is only one way to find out."

Sophie looked at him suspiciously and sniffed it. Then she took a small sip. Whatever it was, it tasted just like one. But shortly after, Sophie started to feel odd. A strange sensation fell over her. A shiver went down her spine. She felt cool all over, like she had just jumped into a lake. Yet she was completely dry. The only other time she felt that was when touching a blue crystal. But this was different. It seemed to be spreading throughout her whole body.

"Can you guess the secret ingredient?" her father asked, smiling.

Sophie was so amazed her spectacles nearly flew off her face.

"I say! How did you do that?" she exclaimed. "Somehow . . . you made the crystals digestible!"

"Oh, it wasn't so difficult," her father answered. "A little of this. A sprinkle of that. Counter-reverse the polarities—and voila—you've got yourself a blue crystal potion. Doesn't taste so bad either," he continued, taking a sip

himself. "This will cure sunstroke, heat exhaustion and reduce scarring if you put it on a burn. Not only that, but just one sip will hydrate you for hours."

Sophie felt refreshed and replenished, like she'd just drunk a big glass of cool water. Her father carefully put it back. She couldn't help wondering what the others would do.

"How about this one?" she asked next, picking up the red. It was warm to the touch.

"That cures hypothermia and frostbite."

Sophie sniffed no less cautiously before trying some.

"Why . . . that tastes like . . . apple-cinnamon tea!"

"It was either going to be that or cherry pie," her father replied. "But the cherries didn't fuse well with the red crystals."

He pointed to the corner of the room where there were several vials that looked like they'd exploded. Sophie gulped, feeling grateful she hadn't been there when it happened.

The red potion had the opposite effect from the blue. After drinking some, Sophie felt warm and fuzzy inside—like curling up next to a fireplace on a cold winter's day. It was so delicious that it was hard to stop drinking. But soon she started to sweat. Fanning herself, she quickly handed it back to him.

"And this one?" she asked next, reaching for the yellow. But before she got to it, her father grabbed her wrist.

"Careful—" he said. "That one hasn't been perfected yet."

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked nervously.

Her father picked it up instead. Immediately, static electricity surged through his body. All of the hairs on his head stood up. Our heroine couldn't help giggling.

"You're not going to drink any?" she teased.

"Not at this time of night," he answered.

"Why not?" she asked, peeking inside. "What does it do?"

"Well . . . do you remember the time we ate all those chocolate coffee beans?"

"Yes . . ."

"*That's* what this potion does!"

Sophie giggled some more.

"But it also cures paralysis of a jellyfish sting. A concentrated dose may even be able to restart someone's heart. Zap—just like that." As he said this, some lightning happened to flash outside. The thunder made her jump.

"Eek!"

She huddled close to him.

"But too much," her father chuckled, "will make you dizzy. It's tart and fizzy—a little like lemon soda. But it doesn't have any sugar, so it won't rot your teeth."

He put it down and his hair returned to normal. Lastly, he picked up the green.

"And this one is just for health and healing. One sip is like eating a whole bag of green vegetables. It'll make headaches go away and is a perfect antidote to poisonous snake bites. I haven't chosen a flavor yet," he added, sipping it. "But it's this one that's most promising for your mother."

"They're incredible," Sophie marveled. "Truly . . ."

"I just wish I had more books," he sighed putting it back down. "But with the Dragon King's new laws, it's been impossible to order any. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we have, right?"

Sophie rested her head back on her fists and nodded.

"Besides, we still have time," he continued. "There's all summer. I've added a small laboratory on the ship I've been building. See?" He pulled the blueprint out of his back pocket and pointed to it. "And even if we don't figure it out by then, there is always this winter at our new home."

Her father looked down at Sophie and smiled. But

Sophie didn't smile back. Instead, she seemed to completely lose interest again. She sighed and slowly dragged her feet back to the window.

Our heroine realized she couldn't delay any longer. She had to tell him. He had to know the truth. She only wished it wasn't so hard to say.

"What's wrong, Sophie?" he asked.

Finally, she let it out.

"Father . . ." she said trembling. "There is something . . . I need to tell you."

Feeling very concerned, he reached for his chair and rolled it over to the window where she was standing. He didn't say anything, but just sat down and listened carefully.

"Something . . . happened to me today."

She turned around. Never had he seen her so heart-broken before.

"What happened?" he asked gently.

"Well . . ." she began, lowering her eyes. "On the way to church, I was feeling worried about things. So, I went a little early and talked to Jean-Pierre. I wanted to know what God wanted me to do, and he told me I should just ask Him. So, he took me to the altar and I did."

When Sophie looked up again, she was surprised by the expression on her father's face. Suddenly, he was wild-eyed and completely still. He wasn't blinking or even breathing. The only other time she would see him with that expression was at the end of a science experiment.

"A-a-and?" he stuttered curiously.

"And . . ."

Sophie tried to think of the best way of saying it. But the more she remembered, the more she felt all those tears coming on. So, she decided to just blurt it out before it was too late.

"And . . . I don't think we're going anywhere this fall."

"What do you mean?" His expression changed from curious to confused. "Sophie . . . what did you see?"

"God gave me a vision. He showed me what happens. We don't escape. There is no voyage. The Dragon King burns it all down. He sinks the island into the ocean and captures everyone as slaves! Then . . . he takes over the whole world. The WHOLE world! Unless . . ." Sophie gasped.

"Unless what?"

"Unless . . . I . . . stand up to him."

Slowly, Sophie's father leaned back in his chair. He didn't say anything but just sat there looking confused. Our heroine waited patiently until he was ready to answer.

"Well," he said slowly. "What about me?" He pushed his spectacles back into place. "Was I with you?"

"No. You weren't," Sophie answered. "I didn't see you anywhere. And that's a part of what scares me . . ."

"Oh . . ."

Now he just looked disappointed.

"But I wasn't alone."

"You weren't?"

"There was someone else with me."

"Someone else?"

Sophie nodded. Her father noticed that she didn't look scared anymore either. If anything, she looked relieved.

"Who?" he asked.

"A boy."

"A boy?" he chuckled. Quickly, he thought of all the boys he knew in the village—anyone who could possibly make her feel safe in a situation so dire. But none came to mind. "What boy?" he answered, perplexed.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "But he had a big sword . . . and looked very brave . . ."

"Oh . . ."

Hearing this relieved Sophie's father. He took a deep

breath, stood up and slowly started pacing around the room, thinking.

"Father . . . what are we going to do?" Sophie asked. She got on her tippy toes and peered out the window again. "Should we warn everyone? Should we go looking for this boy? After church, I tried going back and asking God to tell me more. But nothing happened. I don't understand. Why won't He answer? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no," he replied. "That isn't how it works. You've done everything you need to for now. God told you what He wanted you to know. If He doesn't tell you more, you can be sure there is a reason." As Sophie listened, she couldn't help wondering what that reason might be. "Remember, it's His story you're in, not one of your own." He pointed to all her props, which lay scattered around the workshop. "He is in control. We are merely the actors in it. Sometimes we just need to be patient and give Him time to tell it."

"So, we do nothing then?" Sophie asked.

"No, not nothing."

"Then what?"

"Well," her father answered. "We get ready. The same way we would for any other part we play. Only this is for real. Remember, if this vision is true, then it's a part of what He created you for. He's been preparing you for it ever since you were little. Trust Him . . . keep listening . . . remember your lines. Be watchful for the cues—and when it's your turn to enter the stage, step up. Speak them well. God will be with you."

Sophie nodded, but didn't seem nearly as enthusiastic.

"And what about you . . ." she squeaked, sniffing. "Won't you . . . and Mother be with me?"

They'd always been there for her plays in the past. If not alongside her, they were in the audience watching and

clapping. Her father knelt down in front of her then. He reached out and took her hand.

“We’ll always be with you, Sophie.”

She leaped into his arms and hugged him tightly.

Our heroine went to bed that night feeling like whatever chapter she was in was over. Tomorrow, she would wake up and see what God had planned for her next. She snuggled up to Samson, who was already fast asleep, and blew out the last candle. But just as she was closing her eyes, she heard a terrible sound in the distance. The Dragon King’s war drums started beating. There were battle cries and trumpets. This chapter may have been ending, but another was clearly beginning somewhere else. Quickly, she put her hands together. With all her heart, she prayed that everyone would be safe that night . . . that she would continue getting signs and hints about what to do, and most of all, that wherever that mysterious boy was, God would be helping him get ready too.

Chapter 25

The Sword of the Dragon King

The people of Nibelheim weren't the only ones planning to escape. By then, everyone along the coast was, for the Dragon King's laws had become so strict, you could hardly even breathe without breaking them. Nowhere was this made clearer than in the village of Beville that night.

As usual, he began by sending his dragon. Like a storm, it flew in and wreaked havoc, lighting all the buildings on fire. The smoke that rose from the ashes blinded and choked everyone, causing them to panic and run into the streets. That's when the soldiers poured in.

Choada the troll led the first wave, using his long tongue to snatch anyone who dared to run. Kanga Kang's army followed shortly after. Carefully, he gathered and weighed the booty. Zeetan led his army to the village temple. With his big hammer, he smashed it to pieces and knocked down the statues. The survivors were brought to what was left of the village square. Finally, the Dragon King himself emerged, walking right through the flames, his scary red armor glowing like hot coals.

"WHERE IS HE?" he thundered, glaring at them. "WHERE IS HE?"

But they were all too frightened to answer. Slowly, he took off his helmet, revealing long, greasy black hair and a battle-scarred face. He was missing one eye—as well as many of his teeth. His expression was grim and menacing. "I said . . . where . . . is . . . he?"

No one could decide whether he was scarier with his helmet on or off. He crossed his arms and scanned the crowd. Eventually, he found who he was looking for.

"Look! There he is, m'lord!" said Kanga Kang. The kangaroo pointed to some soldiers coming around a corner, dragging an old man with a long, grey beard. "They



found'm underground! Cheeky buggas! Musta' been hidin'm!"

"Good . . ." sighed the Dragon King, with a most sinister smile. "Bring him to me . . ."

Kanga Kang hopped over to the old man and boxed him in the stomach. "Hass-ah!" Then, he spun around and kicked him. "Hass-ah!" The elder flew forward, landing head first in the mud. The Dragon King pointed and laughed with all his soldiers—"Muah! Hah, hah, hah!"—before beginning what may sound like a familiar speech.



"Liars!" he yelled, raising his arms. "Traitors! Thieves! How dare they break the law! How dare they! We've tried to be nice! We've tried to be patient! Look how we're treated in return!"

The poor people of Beville looked at each other just as confused as everyone else who'd been invaded that week. Laws? They didn't remember breaking any laws.

Only the elder was brave enough to speak up.

"What are you talking about?" he said, coughing up dirt. "What crimes have we committed? There must be some mistake. We haven't done anything!"

Hearing this frustrated the Dragon King. Grumbling, he reached into his armor and pulled out a list.

"Mr. Kang!" he yelled. "Come forward, please! You may do us the honors! Tell them the laws they've broken, so they may know what to beg forgiveness for."

"Aye, m'lord!" the kangaroo answered.

With his great big foot, he kicked the elder in the stomach again, just for the fun of it. "Hass-sah!" Then, he snatched the paper and hopped onto a box. Reaching into his pouch, he took out a clipboard and a pen. "Ahem! Ahem!" He took off his sunglasses and put on his reading glasses. Quickly, someone handed him a megaphone. The villagers felt exactly the way you would if you beheld such a thing, reader. When he was finished clearing his throat, he clenched his fist and screamed. "Ro-ight!"

Everyone listened closely.

"First law brick'n . . ." began the kangaroo. "Stealin' from the government! Second law brick'n . . . preventing an officer from performing his duty! Third law brick'n . . ." He took a deep breath, this time screaming even louder. "Bll-asphemy! Hate speech against our dear leader, and his cause! Fourth law bri—"

But before he could continue, some of the villagers started interrupting.

"Hey! Wait! Wait just a minute!" said one. "We didn't do any of those things!"

"Yeah!" called out another. "We've never stolen from you!"

"You've got the wrong village! We're innocent!"

As they said this, Choadá stepped forward and reached for his whip, for being rude was also against the law. But the Dragon King signaled him to stop just in time.

"It's alright, Mr. Choadá! Let them speak! We believe everyone has the right to a fair trial, don't we?"

The troll nodded and stepped back.

"Continue!" the Dragon King insisted.

But the villagers weren't so sure they wanted to anymore.

"W-w-we s-s-said . . ." they stuttered. "We haven't s-s-stolen anything . . ."

"Y-y-yeah! H-h-honestly! W-w-we haven't!"

"Oh, no?" answered Kanga Kang, hopping back down.

"Then, tell us . . . what do ye call THAT?"

He pointed to a carriage full of vegetables.

"That?"

Kanga nodded.

"Well . . . those are the crops we grow."

"But what's the sign say, wise guy?"

The villager squinted. "Taxes," he answered. "Property of the Dragon King."

"Looks a little light, doesn't it?"

"Well . . ."

Kanga hopped right up to his face and put the megaphone next to his ear.

"Someone's had their DIRTY LITTLE PAWS in there!"

"B-b-but . . . but . . . we've only been keeping what we need to survive. You take too much. Our children are starving. We have no choi—"

"Oi! What was that?" yelled Kanga before the man could finish. "An admission of guilt! You all 'eard it!" He raised up his megaphone and started hopping up and down, excitedly. "GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!"

The soldiers all started cheering along with him.

“GUILTY! GUILTY!”

The villagers couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“What about interfering with police officers?” another shouted. “We’ve certainly never done that!”

This time, the troll answered. Though, it was very difficult for anyone to understand him.

“Lazz, yo’ honn!” he croaked. “All lazz! Look hee-ah!” He pointed to his wrist, where there was a little scratch. “Jus las’ week, one of em’ rascally motha’s bit meh! Assault! Batt’raw! Breakin’ de law, sah!”

“I knew it!” shouted Kanga, bouncing up and down some more. “Guilty! GUILTY AS CHARGED!”

The soldiers echoed him again.

“GUILTY! GUILTY!”

“But,” the villager pleaded. “That was only because he was coming to kidnap our children! All we did is beg him to stop. You can’t charge a mother for protecting her child . . .”

“What about blasphemy?” another villager asked. “Hate speech? We’ve never said anything hateful to you. This, I’m sure of.”

Quickly, Kanga hopped over to him next and started poking him.

“No! That’s right! Ye don’t! But ye don’t praise him either, do ye?”

“W-w-well . . . I . . . I suppose not.”

“And why is that? Hmm?” He pulled down his reading glasses and glared at him, poking him some more. “Hmm? HMM?”

“W-w-well . . .” The man looked around at all the burned-down buildings, thinking about how they’d been treated all these years. To the villagers, the answer seemed obvious. But to the kangaroo, it clearly wasn’t. “I . . . I . . .”

“MmmHmm . . .” sighed Kanga, scribbling something down on the piece of paper. “Just as I thought. Ungrateful! Indignant! Hateful! Ye don’t even really believe the

Gov' 'ere should be king, do ye? In fact . . . it's probably what drove ye to commit the worst crime of all!"

"W-w-what? M-m-me?" asked the villager.

Kanga hopped back onto the box and took his deepest breath yet. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he yelled. "FOURTH LAW BRICK'N . . . mur-der . . . MURDER MOST FOUL!" He pointed to the village graveyard.

"B-b-but . . . b-b-but . . . those are our graves. Your soldiers killed those people. It's YOU . . . who have been murdering US!"

Surely, reader, they couldn't blame that on the villagers too. But once again, they were surprised.

"Yesss . . ." hissed Kanga, disgusted. "But YE MAKE THEM do it, don't ye? Ye . . . with all ye teasin' and mockin'! Bullyin' . . . harassin'm all day long!"

"W-w-what? No, we don't . . ."

"Oh, yes ye do! Just the other day, one of the soldiers saw ye smiling!"

"But . . . we weren't mocking them."

"Well, who were ye mockin' then? Hmm?"

"No one . . ."

"Hah! Ye expect us to believe that?"

"But it's true . . ." squeaked the villager. "Sometimes, we just smile . . . and laugh . . . you know? Our lives are hard . . . but we believe in making the best of things, never giving up and always having hope. So, we do things like sing as we work . . . smile . . . or play with our children. We mean you no harm with it."

"Well, ye DO harm us," said Kanga. "It's enough to make a man SICK. Look—Murph over here has been ill for three days because of it. Haven't ye, Murph?"

"That's right," said the soldier named Murph. "Me losin' me-livelihood! Put that one on the list, Kanga!"

"Ro-ight!"

Now the villagers were just angry, reader. Altogether, they exploded with complaints—shouting, stomping and

shaking their fists in defiance. But all it did was make the Dragon King and his army laugh more.

“MUAH, HAH, HAH, HAH! MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!”

They loved every minute of it. Clearly, the villagers realized, talking to the Dragon King wasn't going to solve the problem.

But that's when everything started to get worse. Amidst the rabble, the Dragon King heard something he didn't find funny. It was very faint, but it seemed to be coming from somewhere in the back row.

“Yeah, get out of here!” the voice called. “We're not afraid of you anyways!”

All the laughing immediately stopped, reader. Exploding with rage, the Dragon King started thundering again.

“WHAT? WHO SAID THAT? WHO! SAID! THAT!”

Never had the villagers beheld such fury in a man. Everyone froze again and became dead silent. Eventually, the one who uttered it dared to raise his hand.

“YOU!” the Dragon King screamed, pointing at him. “COME HERE! RIGHT . . . NOW!”

A brave young man made his way to the front of the crowd.

Fearlessly, he walked right up to the Dragon King, crossed his arms and looked him square in the eye.

“Now . . . tell me again,” the Dragon King sighed, cupping his hand over his ear. “What was that you said back there?”

“You heard me!” yelled the man. “I said we're not afraid! Not of you . . . or your STUPID goons . . .”

“No?” The Dragon King didn't even look mad anymore, only surprised. The villager was short, skinny and poor-looking. He wasn't wearing armor. Nor did he appear to have a weapon. “And why is that, exactly?”

"Because . . ." said the young man, smirking. "Our elder told us there is a God! A God who loves us! A God who is powerful! Way . . . WAY more powerful than you!"

"Really?" asked the Dragon King curiously.

The villager screamed in his face again.

"YES!"

The Dragon King peeked behind the young man, but didn't see anyone. Then he turned and looked behind his army. Again, he didn't see anyone. He gazed up at the clouds and squinted. Still, there was nothing.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked.

The villager nodded.

"Yes, I am! So, you'd all better get out of here RIGHT NOW, before you make Him angry!" He stomped his foot. "THIS is your LAST chance!"

No one expected what happened next, reader. The Dragon King started shaking and quivering. He even looked like he might start crying. The people of Beville were astonished.

"Oh . . ." sighed the warlord. "Oh . . . I see." He hunched over and pouted. "Well . . . if you're sure . . . then I guess that changes things, doesn't it?"

Was that it, reader? Was it over? Some of the villagers started looking hopeful.

"I guess . . ." The Dragon King sniffled, turning around. "We'll all just have to . . . pack up . . . and leave. I guess . . . we'll just . . . have . . . to . . . go back . . . and—"

But as he spoke, the elder noticed him slowly reach for his sword.

"Wait! Look out!" the old man cried. "Get down!"

As quick as lightning, the Dragon King spun around and sliced. The young man's head flew off his shoulders and landed in the mud. The body fell shortly after. All the villagers gasped in horror.

"Well, would you look at that," marveled the Dragon

King, turning to his army. "I guess he was wrong. BAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!"

For the third time, the army burst into laughter with him. The villagers all started screaming and running.

"Muah! Hah! Hah! Look at them! Scurrying like little mice!" teased one soldier.

"They're sure scared now!" teased another.

One by one, they caught the villagers and hauled them back. More than anyone, they seemed to enjoy teasing children.

"Rawr! Rawr! Where do you think you're going, you little brat? RAWR! Looks like God doesn't love you much after all, does he? HEE! HEE! RAWR! Look what the Dragon King did! He's going to get your mummy and daddy next! And then YOU! Muah! Hah! Hah! No one can save you now!"

The commotion ended when the Dragon King raised his sword and stabbed it into the ground with a loud crash.

"NOW," he screamed. "IS THERE ANYONE ELSE WHO BELIEVES IN GOD?"

This time, no one answered, reader. Even the elder was too shocked to speak. All the villagers could do was huddle together helplessly. Watching this put the biggest smile on the Dragon King's face.

"That's what I thought."

He continued his speech. No one dared interrupt him, either.

"You know," he chuckled. "I am beginning to see I was wrong about you people. You're not as guilty as I thought. You've simply been deceived . . . misled . . . lied to . . . that's all." He pointed to the Elder. "By THIS fraud here! Let me guess. He told you that you're important. He told you that your pitiful lives have value. There is a god up there, somewhere, who is looking out for you. IS THAT RIGHT?"

The villagers all nodded timidly.

"I thought so! But . . . let me ask you this. If that's true, then where is this god? I mean, has anyone ever really seen him before? Hmm?"

No one had an answer.

"If he's so powerful, then why didn't he stop me back there? Maybe he doesn't love you as much as you think. Maybe he isn't even real. Or . . ." Then the Dragon King suddenly started roaring again. "PERHAPS HE IS AFRAID! JUST LIKE YOU! RAWR! GRAH! BRAW!"

The children in the front row screamed at the top of their lungs. Babies cried. It made the Dragon King laugh even more. "BRAH! HAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!" He drew his sword up again and stared at it, beating his chest. "No, god is not here . . . and if he is . . . clearly, he is on MY side!"

He hopped up onto the box, pushed off Kanga and grabbed the megaphone.

"You want the truth? God hates you! God doesn't care whether you suffer! I know this—because I grew up there, in the wild!" He pointed over the mountains towards the middle of the island. "Starving! Freezing! Fighting every day for my life! You think your lives are hard? Hah! None of you can even imagine what I went through! If any of you had been in my place, you'd be no different than me!"

Many of the villagers didn't know this about the Dragon King, but they knew the dreaded place he was talking about. Some even started feeling a little sorry for him.

"God loves only the strong! He helps only those who help themselves. He favors the bold! The cunning! The ambitious! He gives power and dominion to those who rise up and seize it! And preserves only those willing to do what is necessary to survive!"

Like a lion, he suddenly pounced down at the villagers. He raised his sword and smashed open one of the

boxes of booty. The elder's precious scrolls came tumbling out. Then, he stabbed his blade into the pile, and started dragging it across the village square.

"Now, because I am in such a good mood today," he continued. "I have decided to give you all one last chance. Give up this silly religion. Leave this dreamer behind. Instead, join me. I will rebuild your village, double your rations and let you keep the rest of your precious children. God may not love you, but if you love ME, he will take pity on you. You will be rewarded . . . in this life . . . and any next to come. All you have to do is cross this line . . . get down on your knees . . . say you're sorry . . . and call me king."

The Dragon King waited patiently as the villagers considered his offer. No one wanted to cross, reader. But no one wanted to die either. They looked at their dead friend who was already half-buried in the mud. The mothers crossed first with the children. Then, the young women. Lastly, the men.

"GoOoOod . . ." the Dragon King croaked, patting them on their heads as they passed. "GoOoOod . . ."

Even the elder's son went.

"I'm sorry, Father," he whimpered. "But I'm not going to die for this."

"Adda-boy," said the Dragon King, patting him too. "You've done the right thing. I'm proud of you."

By the end, the old man was the only one left. He sat in the mud, shivering and heart-broken. The Dragon King and his soldiers all laughed at him.

But the Dragon King still wasn't finished, reader. He wouldn't be satisfied until the elder crawled too. It was the only way he could be sure they'd never cross him again. Little did he know, there was someone else that night who had similar plans.

"Heh, heh, heh . . ." chuckled the Dragon King, stomping his scrolls even deeper into the mud. "Well, old

man, it seems you have failed. But . . . I'll tell you what. I'll make you a deal. If you cross too, we will let you live. Come, join your people. Heck, you can even keep this pitiful religion of yours. Really," he laughed like it was cute, "I don't care . . . as long as you cross . . ."

But the elder didn't move. Instead, he closed his eyes, put his hands together and started whispering.

"Hey! Are you listening to me!" growled the Dragon King. "I said cross! No? Alright, so you want to play rough then, do you? Okay, tough guy, how about this?" He turned to the crowd. "If the old man crosses, I will rebuild your village even better than it was . . . triple, instead of double, your rations . . . and return all your precious children. If he doesn't . . . then I'll round them all up . . . and destroy them right in front of you tonight!" Hearing this, the soldiers all drew their weapons. The villagers gasped and panicked. "THERE, IS THAT BETTER? FEEL LIKE CRAWLIN' YET? BRAH! HAH! HAH!" He raised his sword to give the signal. "WELL, WHAT'S IS GONNA BE OLD MAN? HUH? WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?"

It would be the first time in the Dragon King's life that he ever felt scared.

"Hey! What's wrong with you? Are you even listening to me? What are you, deaf? What's that you're whispering? Show you? Show you what? HEY, I'M TALKING TO YOU! ANSWER ME! RIGHT NOW!"

This time, reader, the elder obeyed. But it wasn't in the way the Dragon King expected. Far from begging, crying, bargaining or one last effort to flee, something happened our villain had never seen before.

Suddenly, as if awakening from a dream, the old man's eyes shot open. He looked at the Dragon King confused, almost as though he'd forgotten he was there. Then he suddenly burst into laughter, like it was the best day of his whole life.

"AH, HAH, HAH, HAH!" he cackled uncontrollably. It was almost like someone was tickling him. "BAH, HAH, HAH, HAH! MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!"

Everyone watching was dumbstruck. Especially the Dragon King. If you had seen the look on his face, I am sure you would have started laughing too.

"H-h-hey . . ." the Dragon King mumbled. "Are you crazy? What are you laughing at?"

"You!" answered the elder. He still couldn't stop laughing. "You! Tee, hee, hee! You really think you're going to get away with this, don't you? Bah, hah, hah! You thought God was hard on you as a child. Well . . . JUST WAIT AND SEE WHAT HE'S GOT IN STORE FOR YOU NOW! MUAH! HA! HA! HA!"

"What? God? What are you talking about, old man? Look, I'm right here!" He held up his sword. "If anyone wants to fight me, all they have to do is—"

But the elder interrupted him very rudely.

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you, Dragon King? To be the only human who God Himself had to come down to defeat! But we both know that isn't REALLY what scares you. It isn't . . . what would really . . . REALLY HURT!"

It was like there was a whole different person talking, reader. The look on the elder's face was unrecognizable. The rage in his voice and eyes was even scarier than the Dragon King's. Our villain was speechless.

"W-w-who . . . w-w-who . . . who are you people?" was all he could say. He looked down at the scrolls he trampled, wondering what sort of God they believed in. He always thought they worshipped a nice God. But the way the elder was talking now, it was almost as if this God was even more ferocious than he was. "What do you believe is in store for me?"

"Your worst nightmare, that's what!" the elder cried. Then, he stood up. His chains fell off—which everyone

thought was very odd. He hopped up onto a pile of rubble with far more energy than an old man should have and started dancing. "A NEW KING WILL RISE!" he screamed. "SOMEONE EVEN MIGHTIER THAN YOU!"

He pointed at the Dragon King with a sinister grin.

"What? Impossible! No one is mightier than I! I . . . who had no help from God . . ."

"He will come from the same place you did . . . have the same hard life—no, even harder! But instead of being bitter, he will be cheerful and grateful. Instead of being cruel and selfish, he will be sensitive and kind. He will not crave power and riches, but only peace, love and harmony . . ."

Now, the Dragon King was really angry, reader.

"W-w-what?" he stuttered stupidly. "WHAT? No! That's impossible . . . IMPOSSIBLE! No one could be grateful in a place like that! No one nice could survive! RAWR! YOU LIE!"

But the elder just laughed even more.

"Hoo, hoo! Hee, hee! Tee, hee, hee!"

He hopped back down and started prancing right towards the Dragon King, completely unafraid. It was the first time anyone had seen the villain take a step back.

"He will be stronger than you . . . faster than you . . . younger than you. The very soldiers standing behind you now will crawl over your bones to him, begging for mercy!"

The Dragon King glanced at his army and noticed that many of them looked worried. He heard some of them whispering about whether it could be true.

"H-h-hey! Stop it! STOP IT!" he said, shaking. "BE QUIET!"

"Stories will be told about his great feats . . . tee, hee! Statues around the world will be erected in his honor . . . hoo, hoo! While you, with your little sword and pathetic

excuses, will be laughed at for all eternity, as nothing more than the FOOL who thought he could rise against God! BAH, HAH, HAH, HAH!”

Finally, the Dragon King lost control— “I SAID BE QUIET!” Fumbling for his sword, he raised it up high and struck.

But he was too late, reader. From that night on, news about the prophecy began to spread like wildfire. Rebelions broke out along the coast! Slaves revolted! Assassinations and spies plagued the halls of his fortress. The Dragon King may have killed the elder, but he never felt like he was truly dead. Sometimes, he swore he could still hear the old man laughing at him. Late at night, he’d awake in a sweat and see him grinning in the shadows.

As for the hero of our story, he was busy getting ready for the long journey ahead of him. Winter was over. His wounds were fully healed. The bones in his limbs had grown thick and strong. Especially the bones in his fists, reader! He could punch right through a slab of stone and not even feel it. Perfect for smashing into bullies’ heads! It was time. He was ready to leave. But could he make it before it was too late? The way was long and treacherous! He had no map, compass or guide to help! Nothing but a restless heart . . . a fool’s hope . . . and a hunch.

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The **EPIC!**
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PHILIP & SOPHIE
The Sword of the Dragon King

BY DREW ELDRIDGE

*Mighty
heroes!*



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About the Author

Drew Eldridge is a tutor from Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has a Bachelor of Arts Degree, majoring in English from the University of Winnipeg, specializing in Young People's Texts and Cultures.

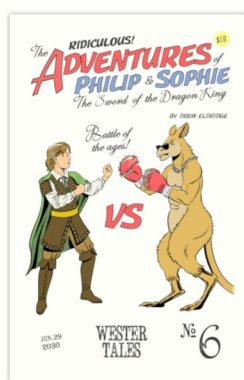
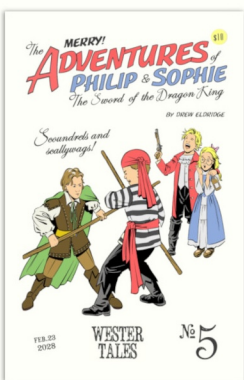
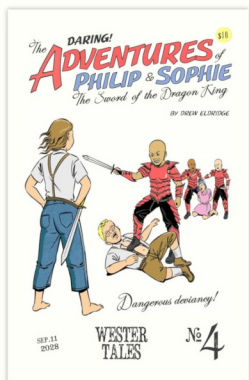
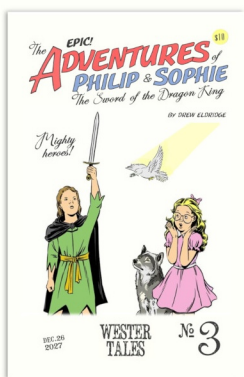
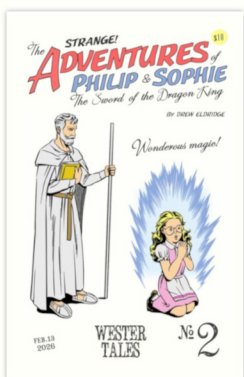
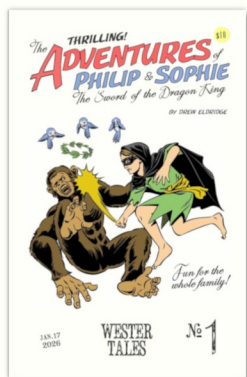


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