

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

\$10

BY DREW ELDRIDGE

*Mighty
heroes!*



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

#3

By Drew Eldridge

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*Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde:
magna virtus tua, et sapientiae tuae non est numerus.*

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Chapter 26

Farewell to the Forest



“Well, do you have everything?” asked Ava.

“I think so,” the boy answered, packing his bag. He stood up and took one last look just to be sure.

The cave was quiet and empty. He’d spent all morning cleaning it, preparing the ground for whoever might move in next. The only thing he couldn’t scrub off were the paintings.

“Take your time,” said Ava, sitting down next to him. “There’s no rush. A part of you is going to miss it here, isn’t it?”

“ . . . Yeah, maybe.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay just one more night?”

“No, I’m ready.” He picked up his staff and turned around. “Come on. Let’s go.”

As they ascended onto the terrace, he was surprised to find all his friends waiting for him.

“Look! There he is!” cried Lumpy’s father, getting everyone’s attention. All the Brumbledumb apes started beating their chests. The little ones tossed fresh spring

flowers into the air. "Three cheers for our hero! The one! The only! The Invisible Hand!"

"The Phantom Ape!" tweeted Sebastian, Dorabella and Edward.

"Robbing HoOoOod!" cooed the pigeons.

"BeEeEe-wolf!" buzzed Madame Bee.

Everyone seemed to call him something different.

"Hip, hip, hurray!" they cheered. "Hip, hip, hurray! Hip, hip, hurray!"

"Golly!" the boy gasped with a big smile. "Hi, everyone! It's great to see you!" But, as usual, it took him a long time to catch on. "Wait a minute," he said, looking around, confused. "What are you all doing here?" He drew his staff and got ready to fight. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

Everyone started giggling.

"Trouble?" chuckled Lumpy's father. "Not anymore. Thanks to you, the forest is peaceful!"

"We've come to say goodbye!" cheered Mrs. Butterfly.

"Yeah," croaked old Mr. Turtle. "You slow or something?"

"Really?" our hero gasped. Everyone nodded. "But . . . how did you know I was leaving?"

The animals all looked at Ava.

"I told them," she answered.

"YOU invited them here?"

Now he began to wonder if he were dreaming. Ava never did things like that. She hated his friends. Even more, she hated parties.

"Sure," she shrugged. "Hey! Why are you all looking at me like that? So, I wanted to surprise him! You got a problem with that or something!?"

"Oh, Ava!" said the boy, his eyes filling with tears of joy. "It's perfect! The best surprise ever! Thank you!"

He reached out and hugged her tightly.

"Ugh! Yuck! Get off me!"

Everyone lined up and took turns thanking the boy, often giving him presents and asking questions about his journey.

“So, where are you going?” asked Dorabella, dropping some seeds in his palm.

“I’m not sure,” he answered, petting her.

“Do you think it will be dangerous?”

“Maybe.”

“What do you think you’ll find?” asked Mr. Squirrel next. Out of his cheeks, he pulled two peanuts.

The boy shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

“What if you don’t find anything?” asked Edward, giving a worm.

The boy thought about it. Though not for too long.

“Hmm . . . I’m not sure. I guess I’ll just have to keep looking, won’t I?”

Then young Sebastian flew down. He landed right on the boy’s shoulder, carrying a lot more than just one gift. In a leaf, he’d bundled all his most precious possessions: a walnut, some cherries and a twig shaped like a spear. It all tumbled out, making a great big mess.

“HELLO!” he exclaimed, interrupting his brother and pushing him aside. “Ahem! Allow me to introduce myself! My name is Sebastian Ploomberry! And I am your BIGGEST FAN!”

“Hi! Pleased to meet you.”

“I SAW YOU FIGHT A HUNDRED APES!”

“A hundred?”

“It was magnificent! The way you zigged! The way you zagged! The way you pounded their big, fat heads. Pow! Pow! POW!”

“Well, I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“You mean . . . YOU REMEMBER THAT?”

“Mmmhmm! It was very brave of you.”

The biggest smile spread across Sebastian’s face.

"Oh," he couldn't help asking. "Can I please come with you on your next adventure? Please! PLEASE!"

"Well . . ." The boy looked at Dorabella, who seemed worried. "Maybe next time."

"Aww!"

"But I'll tell you what. How about you take this?" The boy raised his staff and drove it into the ground. "You can guard it for me while I'm gone."

The little bird's eyes lit up.

"Wow! Your stinger? Really?" He flew up and proudly perched himself upon it. "OKAY!"

"Keep it safe, now. I'm counting on you."

Sebastian puffed up his feathers and stood tall.

"I will!" he promised. "If anyone even looks at it, I shall peck their eyes out! If anyone touches it, I'll go to the bathroom on their head!"

"Thanks," the boy replied, gently stroking him.

When the animals were finally finished, Ava started nudging the boy.

"It's time," she whispered.

Hopping onto a rock, he addressed all of them at once.

"Well," he announced. "I better get going. Thanks again for coming, everyone! It means a lot to me. Good-bye! I'll miss you!"

The animals all cheered one last time.

"WeEeEe'll miss you too! Snort, snort!"

"Wisely and slow now, sonny!"

"Farewell, neighHhHhbor!"

"BeEeEe careful!"

"Avoir un rafale, monsieur!"

"See you later, alligator!"

"Brekekekex! Koax! Koax!"

"Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!"

Waving, our hero and his companion turned toward the sun and began their journey. The first stop would be the Wood of the Willows.

"Golly, it sure was fun seeing everyone again," sighed the boy, kneeling down on the mossy forest floor. He realized he needed a new spear. "I hope they'll be safe while I'm gone."

"You mean, you really plan on returning?" asked Ava.

"I'd like to." When he found the right stick, he began sharpening the end. "Just to visit . . . check up on things."

"You really do love them, don't you?"

"Of course."

The boy stood up. He gave his new weapon a few test swings. "Hi-ya! Hi-ya!" It was even better than his last one. "HI-YA!" With hardly any effort, he pierced it right through an old tree stump. "Wow! Did you see that? Now THAT'S a strong stick!"

Ava rolled her eyes.

"Don't you get it?" she sighed. "It isn't the stick. It's you. You're stronger now. Much stronger. I can tell."

"Really?"

Then something else caught his attention.

"Hey, wait a minute . . . didn't this stump used to be taller? He crouched down and patted around the base for quicksand. "Hmm . . . maybe it's sinking."

"It's called a growth spurt, genius," she answered. "The stump isn't shorter. You're taller."

He looked up, trying to see the top of his head, but couldn't. So he went to a tree instead. He made a little mark on it and stepped back.

"You know what? I think you're right!"

All of it made him wonder what else had changed. Gripping his spear, he felt like seeing how far he could throw it.

"There will be plenty of time for that later," said Ava. "Do not think our journey will be easy. Many new foes await us. You can test your new skills out then. For now, let's focus on moving."

"Right!"

The Wood of the Willows was silent and peaceful, a place so dreamy that even the birds couldn't help whispering. You could hear the sound of a stream a mile away and rarely came upon a spot that wasn't perfect for a nap. As the boy and Ava walked, they remembered all the fun times they had together.

"Hey, isn't this the first place you took me exploring? Look, there's the first tree I climbed! And over there! The first time I tasted blueberries!"

Of course, Ava's idea of fun had always been very different from his.

"And there was the first beating I gave you! And there was where you got your first scar! Aw, look!" she sighed sweetly. "The first tooth I knocked out. You can still see the blood."

The boy didn't recall those memories nearly as fondly as she did, but couldn't help laughing along with her.

Soon, they came to the old obstacle course she had made for him. Just for fun, he ran it again. Proudly, Ava watched as he bounded over every pit, rolled under every log and smashed through every barrier. He found his old boomerang and slingshot. Even more memories came flooding back. All those hours he'd spent practicing! All those disastrous experiments! All those frustrating disappointments and failures until he'd finally succeeded! How wildly he remembered celebrating! However, there was one memory that made him happier than all the others. Stopping at a spring, he suddenly heard a familiar voice call from the bushes.

"Excuse me," it said, softly.

A pretty doe emerged, batting her eyelashes.

Too stunned by her beauty to respond, all he could do was sit there, gazing at her.

"Hey," whispered Ava, nudging him. "Who is that? One of your friends? I don't remember her."

"I'm not sure."

At first, the boy didn't recognize her. But the closer he looked, the more familiar she seemed.

"Sorry, do I know you?"

Her voice sounded even more familiar.

"You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye to me, were you?" she giggled. "Don't you remember? Well, I suppose it's been quite a long time since you saw me. I was only a fawn . . ."

Suddenly, it started to drizzle rain. Far in the distance, he heard thunder gently rumbling. What remained of the sunlight gleamed on her pretty coat. She smiled and, like a flood, it all came back to him.

"W-w-wait . . . wait!" he cried, excitedly. "Is it . . . is it really you?"

The doe batted her eyelashes and giggled some more.

"Yes. It's me. I just wanted to come wish you farewell on your journey . . . and to thank you one last time for saving me all those years ago." Then, after one last giggle, she bounded away into the mist where two fawns of her own were waiting for her.

"Who was that?" asked Ava. "Saving her? I don't remember that. Hey, are you listening?" He stared dreamily as the happy family frolicked away together. "Hello?"

"No, I don't think you would," he finally responded. "You weren't there. It happened the night before I told you I was going to be the forest guardian. She was the first one I rescued."

"I don't believe I've heard that story."

"I guess I forgot to tell you."

"Well, we've got a very long journey ahead of us. So, you can tell it to me now."

Chapter 27

The Legend of the First Labor

"The way I remember it," began Ava, "it was like you'd been hit on the head and suddenly forgot all I'd taught you."

"Well—in a way, that *is* what happened . . ."

"All that work teaching you to be selfish, and you chose the opposite."

"I told you—I didn't choose it. It chose me."

"What did?"

"I don't know what. All I knew was that it was my purpose . . . what I am . . . what I was meant for."

"Well, whatever it was, it certainly wasn't me who gave you that idea."

"In a way, I think you did. Not on purpose, of course. But now that I think about it, I'm not sure it's a path I would have chosen if it weren't for you."

"Now, you have some explaining to do . . ."

"Look, do you remember my first day of training, the morning after I crawled from the cave?"

"How could I forget? You were so pathetic."

"I didn't want to protect anyone then. I didn't even really want to protect myself. But I learned something that day. Something that stayed with me ever since. You may not have been trying to turn me into the forest guardian, but from the very beginning everything you did was preparing me for it."

"Attention!" he remembered Ava screaming at him, waking him from his pool of strawberries. Her voice sounded quite a bit younger back then and her fur had much less grey in it. "Now that you're out of the cave, it's time to begin your training. Sit up!" she said, dragging him across the terrace.

"EeEek!" squeaked the boy.

“Open your eyes! Behold, young one, the world you will one day conquer.”

“Wow! It’s so pretty!” The boy couldn’t quite talk yet, reader. But this is what he was trying to say. “Amazing!” His little eyes filled with wonder as he reached out. “I want to look at it!” he babbled. “I want to touch it! I wonder how it tastes!” Whatever the big furry creature’s ‘lessons’ were, reader, they could wait. This was far more important to him! Little did he know, however, the first lesson had already begun.

“I’m going to go explore it!” he declared.

“Good idea,” replied Ava.

Following the scent of flowers and strawberries, he started crawling—delighting in the way the soft, dewy grass brushed against his fingers. But suddenly the grass ended. He came to a steep, rocky hill.

“EeEek!” he squeaked again, nearly falling off. He looked down, where everything he smelled was laid out in the prettiest of meadows. He tried to reach out and pull it forward, but it was too far. Then he tried yelling “come up here!” But that didn’t work either.

“Problem?” asked Ava sweetly.

He pointed. “What’s . . . down . . . there?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. She came a little closer and sat next to him. “Why don’t you go find out?”

“It looks dangerous.” He peeked over again and gulped. Then he looked up at her. “Is it?”

But Ava just shrugged.

“Maybe . . . but on the other hand, maybe not.”

He crawled a little further and glanced back up at Ava, seeing if she looked worried. But she showed no signs of it. He asked one more time.

“Safe?”

Ava shrugged again—and then nodded.

“Really?”

“Yes . . .”

And now you see, reader, why it had to be a wolf who raised our hero. No human mother could have done such a thing! Exactly what you should never say to a baby or let them do, Ava encouraged. The boy listened, crawled forward and, just as you would expect, after a few steps fell down the rocky hill—“EeEek! Oof! OOF! OOF! OOF!”—bruising just about every muscle in his body as well as skinning all his knees and elbows. Naturally, as babies do, he broke into a wail of tears and called up to her for help. “OwWw! Help! Wah! Help! HELP!” But no help came. Instead, all Ava did was laugh.

“BAH! HAH! HAH! HAH! Oh my! That was precious! Good fall!” She hopped halfway down so he could hear her better through all his crying. “Lesson number one: be careful! Always mind your surroundings. Not everything is as it seems.”

“But you said—Wah! Wah!—it wasn’t dangerous! Wah!”

“Lesson number two: everything is dangerous. The world is a brutal, hostile place. Always assume the worst. Expect the unexpected.”

“But YOU said it wasn’t!”

“I lied.”

“You what!?”

“And that’s lesson number three: don’t trust others.”

“... Not even you?”

A sinister grin spread across Ava’s face.

“Especially not me.”

What a frightening, terrible world this was, our hero began to think. No sooner had he stepped out of his cave than he wanted to turn back. But there was no going back now. Looking around for a path up and finding none, he started to panic.

“Help! Help! Get me out of here!” he cried, trying to stand, but failing. “Oof! Help! Help! Wah! Out! I want out!”

"Out?" laughed Ava some more. "There is no 'out,' child. You are out."

"But I don't like that!"

"It doesn't matter whether you like it. And that's lesson number four. The world is the way it is. Don't like it? Too bad."

"But . . . but . . ." Unfortunately, hearing this only upset the boy more. "WAH!" Which only made Ava laugh more.

"Muah! Hah! Hah! MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!"

It was terrible, reader. He was trapped. Even worse, trapped with a complete psychopath. Even when he begged and pleaded, she laughed. He looked up at the birds and cried for help. He looked at the rocks. He called out to the heavens. No help whatsoever came.

"I wouldn't keep doing that if I were you," Ava finally said to him, noticing some rustling in the bushes.

"Wah! Wahn! Why not? Wahhh!"

"Because . . . someone might hear you."

"Wah! So what? Wahhh!"

"Fine," she shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Then the bushes started shaking. That got his attention. Next, he heard deep, heavy breathing and a growl.

"Eek! What's that?"

"Something small, cute and cuddly."

"Really? That's a relief," he was about to answer. But then he remembered the last time she gave him advice. "Wait! No! You're lying again, aren't you?"

"Good, you're catching on."

The bushes opened. Out jumped a young, wild piglet. It had big teeth and two sharp tusks with blood on them.

"Agh! Help! Help! Please!" he cried, trying to climb back up again.

"Nope. I told you—you're on your own. This is your training, remember?"

The beast started growling and drawing nearer.

“RrRrRr! RrRrRr! Ruff!”

“Agh! But what do I do?”

“Figure it out,” she replied. “What do your instincts tell you when you see another animal?”

“I don’t know. Invite them to play?”

“No.”

“Eat strawberries together?”

“Wrong again. Look out . . . he’s coming.”

“Agh!”

This is how our hero learned how to walk and run, reader. As you can imagine, he got good at it much quicker than most other babies.

“AaAaAagh!”

“RrRrRr! RrRrRr! Ruff!”

“Ouch!”

“RrRrRr! RrRrRr! Ruff!”

“EeEek!”

“Good form!” said Ava, cheering him on. “See, you’re getting the hang of it. One foot in front of the other. One, two! One, two! One, two! MUAH, HAH! HAH! HAH!”

By the end, his behind was so blue with bruises, he could barely crawl. The little boar then jumped on top of him, trying to bite his neck. Surely, he thought as he grappled with it, Ava would come to his aid now. But she didn’t.

“Did you not hear me?” she reminded him. “I said you’re alone. Now, unless you’re not finished whining and complaining, why don’t you try something else?”

“Something else? Like what?”

“You know what! The cave! Remember the cave! That bat! Do you remember? I do! You’re a killer, kid. A natural! I’ve seen it. All you have to do is release it. Do it! Now! Kill! Kill! KILL!”

The boy’s blood started to boil. He clenched his fists. “Grr!” he growled.

“That’s it!”

“Grr! Hiii-ya!”

“Yes! YES! You’re doing it! Bite! Scratch! Jam that finger into his eye, kid. Woo! Hoo! He didn’t like that much, did he? Serves him right. Look, it’s working! He’s relenting! Retreating! Running away like a stinking coward. You see? You can do it!”

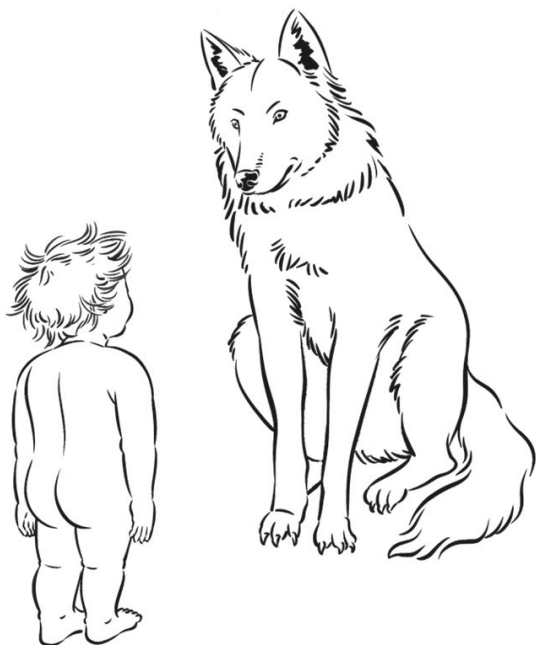
“OoOoOo . . .” the boy groaned. “OoOoOo . . .”

“Let that be lesson number seven. No whining or crying! If you whine, your enemies will dine. If you cry . . . you die. Got it?”

“OoOoOo . . .” he continued. “Yeah . . . I think so . . .”

“Good!” sighed Ava, sweetly. “Now, get up! I said GET UP! On your feet, soldier!” She hopped down and kicked him in the ribs. “ON YOUR FEET!”

“OoOoOo . . . OoOo-kay . . .” Slowly, he rose.



"Now, let's have a look at this ridiculous body of yours." He stood with his hands at his side as she encircled him. "Stand up straight! Shoulders back! Quit wobbling! Close your mouth! Stop blinking so much! Suck in that gut! Remarkable . . . truly remarkable! It's even worse than I feared. Look at those twiggy little arms! Those chicken legs! That melon head! No fangs . . . no claws . . . no fur. And—wait a minute," she stammered, pausing as she looked between his thighs. "WHAT IN THE HELL IS THAT!?"

"Hmm?" he answered timidly, glancing down.

"Oh . . . umm . . . well . . . that's my . . . my . . . my . . ."

"I KNOW WHAT IT IS," she roared in his face. "I MEAN, WHAT'S IT DOING THERE? YOUR MOST VULNERABLE PART—OUT IN FRONT OF YOU FOR ALL TO SEE!"

"I don't know," the boy shrugged. "I didn't put it there . . ."

"Well, get it out of my face OR I'LL BITE IT OFF!"

"Eek!"

He ran to the bushes and grabbed a leaf to cover himself with. But she still wasn't finished.

"Hah! Hah! Hah! Look at you trembling there. Maybe you're right, and I shouldn't train you. Maybe I should just eat you or leave you here for someone else."

She drew his attention to some of the other animals watching, hungrily licking their lips. The only reason they hadn't attacked yet was because of Ava.

"Eek! No, please don't!"

"Why not?"

"Because—I'll do anything you say! I'll try harder! I promise!"

"Then you'll be obedient from now on?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Save the ma'am for your mother. You will address me as commander."

"Yes, commander!"

"You won't talk back when I call you names?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, commander."

"You won't whine and complain?"

"No, commander."

"You'll follow the rules?"

"Yes, commander."

Ava walked closer and glared at him.

"You know, it's no wonder you were left in the snow. Who could ever love something so ugly and worthless?" The boy lowered his eyes and started sniffing. "Aw, what's wrong? You going to cry again, cry baby? That was fast . . ."

"No . . ." he squeaked, wiping away his tears.

"Good . . . because if I EVER hear you cry or whine, or mope, or complain—you're on your own! If words are enough to defeat you, you don't stand a chance against a real attack."

"I won't!" he promised.

"And if I ever see you flee from battle again—I'll kill you myself. Understand?"

". . . Okay."

"I said, do you understand?"

"Yes . . . commander."

"Good," she answered, finally speaking gently again.

"So . . . what's the next lesson then?" he ventured.

But the boy soon learned that when Ava spoke gently—or smiled—it usually meant something even worse was about to happen.

"Funny you should ask . . ."

Such was the beginning of our hero's childhood, reader. And it only got harder and harder. Ava's schooling

was treacherous—lessons with titles like “101 ways to fall down a hill,” “ring around a rosebush,” “capture the stag” and, her personal favorite, “how to take a beating.”

“Oof! Oof! Oof!” he’d mutter as she sat on top of him, pounding his head. “Oof! I . . . don’t think—Oof!—I understand the—Oof!—point of this lesson—Oof!”

“You’re not supposed to. Now hold still!”

“Oof! Oof! Are you sure—Oof!—it’s working?”

“Yes. Now, QUIET! No talking!”

“Okay . . . Oof! Oof! Oof!”

“Life is war,” she’d yell down at him as he crawled through her obstacle courses in the rain. “The objective of war is survival! To survive, you must be strong! To be strong, you must suffer! To suffer willingly, you must overcome your fear of pain! To overcome your fear of pain, you must become accustomed to pain! To become accustomed to pain, you must experience pain! Lots of pain! That’s where I come in.

“As your teacher, it is my job to accustom you to pain. From here on out, you will never know comfort. Your body will always be bruised. Your elbows and knees, always skinned. You’ll never walk without a limp or see out of both eyes. There will be much blood. And just when you begin to heal and think the pain is finally gone, more and more will come. You will experience pain until you learn to forget pain. Only then will you be ready for the next lesson—fear!

“A creature is only as courageous as when it is terrified . . . only as strong as when it’s disadvantaged . . . only as wise as when its senses are dazzled or shrouded in darkness! Everyone has a plan until they get punched, robbed, wounded, stranded . . . until they are starving, desperate . . . hunted. If you don’t know what to do under such circumstances, you know nothing of value out here. If you cannot make yourself useful when all you have is yourself, you are useless.

“Make no mistake, young one, I did not take you in out of charity. I don’t love you. I don’t care about your ‘feelings.’ I’m not your ‘ma-ma’ or ‘da-da.’ I took you in to make a soldier of you. You’re an object . . . a tool . . . a means to an end. I’m building a killing machine. If you can’t fulfill this function, then you’re expendable.

“Do not think this path will lead to your happiness. It will not lead to happiness, but to unhappiness. Joy, peace, prosperity . . . a good long life—and all that other nonsense—these are things you’re going to have to let go of. I cannot give you these things. I wouldn’t know how to give you these things. And even if I did know how, I wouldn’t because, quite frankly, you don’t deserve it. But what I can give you . . . what I do know . . . what I can promise you . . . if you’re willing to stick around . . . if you let go, and embrace the way of the wolf . . . is something far greater: **POWER!**

“What others believe is impossible, **YOU** will achieve! Where others fail, **YOU** will succeed! Your desires, you will **MAKE** realities. And when you are met with an obstacle—be it an army . . . a barrier . . . even a dragon—instead of crying or curling into a ball, like all the others, **YOU** will **RISE UP, CHARGE FORTH**, make that fist of yours and **SMASH THROUGH IT!**

“But I can only give you the knowledge. You need to be willing to receive it. I can only show you the way. You need to be willing to walk it. Are you ready, child? Are you up for the challenge? The choice is yours . . .”

Ava was impressed with how well our hero remembered her speech, even after all those years.

“You see,” he said, “you taught me to be independent—to defend, act and think for myself. It was then I began to wonder what kind of life I wanted and how I should use my freedom.”

“And what kind of life was that?”

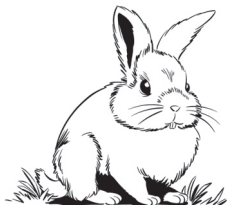
“I didn’t know. Not until . . .”

Exiting the Wood of the Willows, the boy and Ava came to a little field full of pretty flowers, with a great green fern in the middle. Beneath the fern, were two stones shaped like bunny ears. The boy dropped down next to them, his eyes full of tears—but not crying.

“Ah, I see,” sighed Ava. “Now, I remember. So . . . that’s what made you choose this life. Now I understand.”

Chapter 28

Hoppy



"It all happened after our first big fight. Remember? Three winters had passed. You taught me how to fight. You taught me how to survive. But—"

"But you didn't want to kill. Oh yes, I remember it well . . ."

The boy had just finished wrestling a koala. He had it pinned with both hands around its neck, squeezing like he was taught. Ava was sitting on a rock, cheering.

"Muah! Hah! Hah! Good! GOOD! Your training has made you powerful . . . Now, fulfil your destiny. Finish him!"

"W-w-what?"

"You heard me. Finish him! Kill!"

"But . . . but . . . it's just a koala bear. He didn't try to kill me . . ."

"It doesn't matter! Finish him anyway!"

"No . . . I can't . . . I won't!"

"DO IT! KILL! KILL! KILL!"

"NOoOoO!"

The boy released the koala from his grip and it ran off.

"Fool!" cried Ava. "What are you doing? Why do you keep resisting? I told you—if you want to become the strongest, you must learn to put your feelings aside. They'll only get you killed out here. You must act coldly. Do not hesitate! Show no mercy! Mercy is for the weak!"

"But . . . he didn't deserve it!"

"What? Deserve?" She hopped down and sat next to him. "Let me tell you something, kid. Everyone deserves it!" She pointed at the trail of little footprints. "The only thing that stopped that koala from tearing you to shreds are two things: it didn't happen to crave your meat, and it knew it wasn't strong enough. Otherwise, you'd be dead."

"You don't know that. He might have been nice . . ."

"Nice? Oh yes, the weak are very nice—but only because they can't be mean. When they can, they always are. Every creature acts in its own self-interest, or the interest of its tribe. Trust me, kid. I've been around a long time. Deep down, everyone's bad. It's just the way it is. So, pick a tribe and start getting mean. It's the only way . . ."

"No! I don't believe it! I'm not like that . . ."

"Yes, you are. You're a killer. A filthy, rotten murderer. I've seen it. I can smell it. I can feel it in you. You just have to dig down deep and embrace it! Release it! Then you will be unstoppable!"

"No!"

"You're a bad boy."

"No!"

"Yes you are! A bad, BAD little boy!"

"No, I'm not!" He covered his ears. "I'm not a bad boy. Stop saying that! I'm a good boy!"

"Selfish! Evil! Depraved!"

"NoOoOo!"

"That's it. Get over here! Time for your whoopin, boy!"

"NoOoOo!"

"What? How dare you refuse me. Rebellious, insolent child! Fine. If you will not come, then I will collect you. GrRrRr! GrRrRr! RrRruff!"

"Agh!"

Ava sprung at him—but just before she struck, he

summersaulted out of the way. She pounced again and, this time, he jumped over her. Then he scurried up a tree.

“Hey! What are you doing!?” As he hopped from branch to branch, she kept jumping, trying to bite his toes. “GrRruff! GrRruff! RrRruff!” But she kept missing. “Get down here right now!” He swung on a vine to a taller tree. “What’s gotten into you! Grr! Why are you rebelling? Ruff! Where are you getting all these STUPID ideas about peace and love? Wait a minute . . . you’ve been hanging out with the sloths again, haven’t you? DAMN HIPPIES!”

“I’ve just been thinking about it a lot. That’s all!”

“What!? THINKING? Oh, now you’re REALLY in trouble! GrRrRruff!”

“Agh!”

Finally, he managed to get to the top, wrapping himself securely around the tip.

Never had Ava felt so frustrated with him.

“Look! You see?” he called down. “I don’t need to kill anyone to survive. I can just run away or hide!”

“Oh yeah? What are you going to eat then?”

“I’ll be a vegetarian!”

“A vege-what?”

“Fruits! Vegetables! Nuts! I’ll eat those instead!”

“Ridiculous! How are you going to get big and strong?”

“Don’t need to! I don’t care about getting any stronger. I’m strong enough.”

“No! You’re not! Not even close!”

The boy didn’t answer, but just stuck his tongue out at her.

“Fine then! You want to learn the hard way? Go on and give that a try. See where it gets you! I’m outa here. You’re on your own.”

“W-w-wait . . . w-w-what?” the boy stuttered. Ava turned around and started walking away. “What do you

mean on my own?" he called down. "Where are you going? I didn't say you should leave. I didn't mean we couldn't stay friends. Ava, wait!" He shuffled back down the trunk. "I'm sorry, okay? Wait! WAIT!" He hopped back onto the grass. "Ava! Ava!" But it was too late. She was already gone.

The rest of that spring, our hero had to survive completely by himself. He had to find all his own food, build all his own shelters and make deals with other animals using only his own reputation. To make matters even worse, he was in a foreign land. Rock Ridge, where Ava had brought him for the day, was far away from the Wood of the Willows. Everyone was a stranger, as he was to them. Curiously, the animals would peek out from behind the trees, wondering what he was and where he fit on the food chain.

At first, life was very hard. He cried at night, missing Ava and calling out for her. But then he'd remember his training. If he wanted to see her again, he knew he had to survive. He picked up a rock and used it to fashion his first spear. Clay from the river beds helped hide his skin and scent from predators. He did as she taught him and eventually adapted quite comfortably to being on his own. He even started to enjoy his new liberty. Free from having to train all the time, he could do things he felt like, such as humming, performing acts of kindness and, his personal favorite, sitting and doing absolutely nothing. The only problem were the bullies of Rock Ridge, who were far bigger and meaner than he was used to.

"Well, well, well. Looky what we have here!" the kangaroos would tease. "Someone's got quite the collection of acorns! You don't mind sharin' do ya'?" With their long tails, they'd sneak up and suddenly trip him. "Oops!" All his hard work would tumble onto the ground. "Hey, look what I found! A whole pile just sittin' here. Finders keepers, right fellas? Heh, heh, heh . . ."

"H-h-hey," he stuttered, getting up. "W-w-what are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"But I picked those. They're mine."

"Not anymore they ain't. Hass-ah!"

"Oof!"

"Hass-ah!"

"Oof!"

"Heh, heh. Bye, bye! And don't worry, we'll see each other again real soon!"

"OoOoOo . . ."

It wasn't just physical bullying either. Often, the animals of Rock Ridge tricked him. Especially the dingoes . . .

"Psst! Oi! Kid!"

"Hmm?"

"Come 'ere! Roun' the corn'a! I've got somethin' fo' ya'."

"What is it?"

"Behold! A rare, special rock!"

"Wow!"

"Mmmhmm!"

"What's special about it?"

"Oh, this 'ere is a special . . . talkin' rock."

"Really?"

"Mmmhmm! I'll trade ya' for it."

"Okay!"

"Gimme all them apples, and you've got yourself a deal."

"Sure! Here you go!"

Because of Ava's training, he could usually defend himself against the first kind of bullies. But against this other kind, he was entirely helpless, often falling for the same tricks over and over.

"Good morning, Mister Rock. How are you today?"

" . . ."

"Did you sleep well?"

“ . . . ”

“What do rocks dream about?”

“ . . . ”

“Where do rocks come from?”

“ . . . ”

“What are rocks made of?”

“ . . . ”

“You’re a quiet fella aren’t you? Don’t worry! I still like you! I’ll be your friend anyway. Look, I got you some more friends too!”

This was the first reputation he earned for himself. That’s right, reader. In the beginning of our hero’s story, he wasn’t known as a great hero at all, but as “the great forest idiot.” From far and wide, animals would come, not to thank him, but to watch and laugh at him. Contests were held to see who could trick him the best. Bets were made. Many lost, but no one ever left disappointed.

“I simply cannot believe it!” they’d whisper. “How stupid can he be?”

“I wonder what he’s going to do next.”

“It can’t get any worse than last time!”

“Sure it can!”

“If he does anything. Look how lazy he is! How frivolous! For the last eight hours, he’s done nothing but lay there watching butterflies, blowing into shells and reeds.”

“And so absent-minded!”

“He can’t even count his own feet without getting distracted!”

“One!” they’d listen to him announce. “Oh, look! A ladybug! One! Golly, my feet sure are smelly. Yuck! Hmm, where was I? Oh, yes. One! One? What is the number one, anyway?”

“Who is he talking to?”

“Himself . . . ”

“And that incessant blinking!”

“And drooling!”

"This is beyond foolish!"

"Surely, this creature must be mad . . ."

The monkeys mocked him more than anyone.

"Hey, dummy!" they'd call. "Up here! Thirsty? How about a drink!"

"Hmm? Ugh!"

And this was the second thing he was famous for: his bizarre, disgusting sense of humor!

"HAH! HAH! HAH! Look! You peed right on my head! HAH! HAH! HAH! Oh, wow! Good aim!"

Which, even by monkey standards, was considered degenerate. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't embarrass him, make him angry or get him to cry. Indeed, legend had it that you could walk right up to him and slap him across his face. All he'd do was giggle and offer you the other cheek:

"Oof! Hey! What are you—Oh, wait a minute! I know this game! Did Ava teach it to you too? But look, you're playing it wrong. You're supposed to slap me harder. Try again! Oof! Oof! Good, you're getting it now. Oof! Oof! Oof! HAHAHA!"

"No," the animals watching would conclude. "He's beyond mad. This creature must have no brains at all . . ."

The only exception, the animals learned, was bullying. If the boy ever saw an animal picking on another, and they weren't both laughing, he'd spring forth to the rescue, defeating, demoralizing and humiliating the perpetrators like Ava had taught him.

"Maybe he isn't such a pushover after all," they began to think.

"Are you sure he's not a predator?"

"Maybe he used to be, but hit his head and forgot?"

"It's like there are two animals in one body."

But nothing could have prepared them for what happened next. Instead of killing the perpetrators, he'd tie them up and interrogate them.

"Why did you do that?" he'd ask. "Tell me . . . TELL ME NOW!"

"What's he doing?" the animals gasped.

"What a big waste of time!"

"Did you see what that lion cub did to that lamb?"

"He should be killed for that!"

"I agree. Off with his head!"

"Yeah, finish him!"

"Kill! Kill! KILL!" even the little animals would cheer.

They'd watch him chat with the perpetrator and then suddenly let them go.

"What the—"

"Look!"

"He cut him free!"

"And that's not all! Look! LOOK!"

"The lion and lamb are lying down together! They're friends now!"

"Impossible!"

The animals stopped laughing at the boy and started feeling nervous.

"Who is this creature who loves even his enemies?"

"Who is this that can make impossibilities come true?"

"It's like he can re-write the rules."

"I saw him make fire once."

"Has anyone actually sat and talked with him? I did. You know, I rather like the things he says."

"My kids weren't listening to me. He spoke to them. Now, they're well-behaved."

"Who is this animal?"

"What is he?"

"Maybe he isn't mad after all . . ."

"Surely, it must be some kind of trick!"

The animals of the forest all started arguing. It wasn't until old Mr. Turtle set them straight that they finally began to understand.

“Quiet! Silence! All of ye’s!” Mr. Turtle didn’t speak much, but when he did everyone listened very carefully. “Ye’s all wrong about him. Every one of ye’s! Ye’s all been laughing at him! Ye’s been call’n him names! A quack! A loon! The Dumb Ox! But I tells ye, this creature’s foolishness is wiser than all, and one day his bellow’n will be heard all across the forest! The day we’ve been hoping for is upon us! The ancient laws will be re-written! Nothing will ever be the same again.”

Of course, some of the animals laughed when they heard this—loudest of all, our hero, who didn’t understand a single word of it. But many took the warning and invitation seriously. Animals who had once been villainous started approaching him. They invited them into their dens. They listened closely. He shared his tools, built them things and taught them new ways of solving problems. Word of his helpfulness spread and soon he was the most popular creature in all of Rock Ridge.

By the end of spring, our hero was living a very full and happy life on his own. He had plenty of food to eat, fresh water to drink, and rarely got into fights. “A good stick, good hammock and full sack” was his motto. Anything more was a burden and distraction from what mattered. Being able to walk, listen to birds, gaze up at the stars, play with and serve others was what it meant to be rich, healthy and educated. If you had asked him what his plans were, he would have guessed that he’d go on living in this manner forever. But all of that changed, reader, when something unexpected happened that summer.

Our hero was sitting in a meadow blowing on dandelions, his usual afternoon custom. Suddenly, he heard some rustling in the bushes. The cutest, tiniest little bunny hopped out.

“Hello,” the boy greeted him.

It had big eyes, long floppy ears and soft chestnut-colored hair.

“Umm, hello . . .” it answered timidly. “Do you mind . . . if I graze in this field?”

“Not at all! Why would I mind?”

“Well, a lot of creatures seem to . . .”

“Not me!” he answered with a big smile.

“Me neither.”

They sat together some more, enjoying the warm sun.

“I like your long ears.”

“Thanks . . .”

“Do you like mine?”

The boy pulled his out in case he couldn’t see.

“They’re okay, I guess . . .”

“Do you like my dandelion?”

The boy held it up and the bunny sniffed the air.

“Yes . . .” it answered.

“Wow, you really like to hop, don’t you?”

“Well, I am a rabbit after all.”

“Can I try?”

“Sure . . .”

The boy got up and attempted to hop the way the bunny did. Then he tried to sniff the air and scratch his ears the way the bunny did. But he just ended up looking ridiculous.

“He, he! You’re funny . . .”

“Hey, do you want to be my friend?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . .” He stopped and thought about it. “Do you want to play with me some more?”

“Well, that depends. What sort of games do you want to play?”

He named a few of the games Ava had taught him, but the bunny didn’t seem interested.

“How about you?” the boy asked. “What kind of games do you like?”

“Well . . . truth be told, I don’t really like rough and tumble games. But there is this one . . .”

"Which is that?"

"Ah, you're just going to laugh at me . . ."

"No, I won't. I promise!"

"Well . . ."

"Aw, come on. Tell me!" the boy exclaimed, bouncing like an excited puppy.

"My favorite game is one my mother used to play with me—before she . . ." The bunny gulped and sniffled a bit.

"Anyways, I would sit or lie in her lap. She'd feed me lettuce and hum, petting me. That's all . . ."

The boy almost yelped with excitement.

"I CAN PLAY THAT!"

"Really?" the bunny answered in disbelief.

"YEAH! AND I THINK I'D BE REALLY GOOD AT IT TOO!" The loud noise made the bunny flinch, so he quickly covered his mouth and tried speaking gentler from then on. "I mean . . ." he whispered. "I think I'd be good at it."

"Well . . . alright," it answered. "Then I suppose I will be your friend."

The bunny hopped over to him, stood on his hindlegs and raised his arms, letting the boy lift him up and place him on his lap.

"Eek! Be careful! Oof!"

"What's your name anyway?" asked the boy.

"Hoppy."

"Nice to meet you, Hoppy."

"And you?"

The boy thought about it.

"I guess you can call me Runny? Or Dandelion . . ." he said looking around.

The bunny giggled some more. "How about, Dandy?"

"Yeah!"

The boy lay Hoppy down on his lap and grabbed a handful of lettuce. He sat there all afternoon, with the biggest smile on his face, the two of them often erupting

into fits of giggles. Who knew a game could ever be so much fun?

Such was the beginning of the most wonderful friendship our hero ever had in that forest. They spent all summer together—playing, feasting, cuddling, exploring, going on adventures for buried treasure. Every carrot they found was divided equally, each according to their appetite. They had no serious or long-lasting quarrels. Any pain one caused the other was assumed to be an accident or misunderstanding, while accidents resulting in pleasure were assumed to be planned. There was no “Dandy.” There was no “Hoppy.” There was only “Dandy and Hoppy,” which eventually earned them the nickname “Doppy.” They’d finish each other’s sentences, build clubhouses and invent secret coded languages using nose twitches. At night, they’d snuggle up and sleep together. Every morning they’d talk about their dreams. But the thing our hero liked most about Hoppy wasn’t necessarily all the fun they had. Neither was it how great a team they made. No, what made Hoppy special was something far more rare: he was the only other animal who liked to stay up late and think.

“Hey, everyone! Anyone want to come to my tree and talk?”

“Talk?” they’d ask. “Talk about what?”

“Food?”

“Games?”

“Jokes?”

“No. Just talk—about anything. The sun . . . the moon . . . the clouds . . . the stars. Do rocks think? How do we even think and talk to begin with?”

Everyone always just laughed at him—except Hoppy.

“I will!”

Hoppy loved hearing the boy’s ideas, no matter how silly or farfetched they sometimes seemed. Instead of refusing, getting bored, looking at him funny or scolding him

the way Ava used to, Hoppy indulged and encouraged our hero. By the end of summer, he simply could not imagine life without Hoppy and would have done absolutely anything for him.

"And that's what I think the moon is made of!" he'd say.

"Wow . . . green cheese, huh?"

"Mmmhmm!"

"You know what . . . I think you might be right! But if it is . . . then how did it get up there? A flying cow?"

"Maybe."

"But I've never seen a flying cow before. Have you?"

"... No."

"... Shall we try to find one tomorrow then?"

"Yeah! Great idea!"

"Woo hoo!" they'd cheer.

But eventually, summer ended. The air grew colder. The days grew shorter. The leaves turned orange and began to fall. The fun, they both knew, was coming to an end.



"Say, what do you usually do in winter?" Hoppy asked, shivering.

"Well," the boy answered, putting his arm around him, "the last few years I've been returning to a cave."

"You mean the one with Ava?"

"Yeah. But the last time I saw her, we got into a big fight. I don't think I'm welcome anymore. I guess I should start thinking about finding a new place, huh?"

"Maybe . . ."

"How about you? What do you do in winter?"

"There's a burrow. My father made it . . ."

"Your father? I don't think you've told me about him before."

"Well, I've never met him."

"Why not? Where is he?"

"My mother told me he's with my brothers and sisters at the Great Fern."

"The Great Fern? What's that?"

"It's a great green field with lots of lettuce. In the middle, there's a big fern."

"That sounds wonderful! Where is it?"

"That's what I asked my mother, but she didn't answer. All she said was not to worry and that one day we'd all be there together."

"Is that where you're going this winter? The burrow with your mother?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"She's not there anymore."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. One day, she told me she was going up to get food. But she never came back . . ."

"Do you know where she went?"

"I think she might be at the Great Fern."

"Why? Did she say she was going?"

"No . . ."

"Did someone see her there?"

"No . . ."

"Then why?"

Hoppy paused, scratching his ear in deep thought.

"Because. . ." he finally answered, shrugging. "I can't imagine where else she'd be."

The boy nodded in agreement.

"So, where is it?"

"I don't know. I was looking for it all spring . . . until I met you."

The boy stood up and started pacing back and forth.

"What is it?"

"Hmm . . . hmm. . ."

"Dandy?"

"That's it!" the boy suddenly cried out, clapping his hands together. An excited, adventurous look spread across his face. "I've got it!"

"You've got what?"

"Tomorrow, we're going to find it together!"

"Really?"

"Mmmhmm!"

"But . . . it could be dangerous."

"Doesn't matter. I'll protect you!"

"We don't even know which way to go."

"Doesn't matter. We'll find it!"

"But . . . how?"

"We'll figure it out!"

"But . . . but . . ."

"But nothing!"

The boy scooped Hoppy up.

"Eek!"

And pulled him close.

"Oof!"

"Trust me, I'll get you there!" he said. "Listen, Hoppy, if there is one thing Ava taught me, it's that you should

never give up. We have to believe in ourselves. Where there's a will, there's a way."

Suddenly, he remembered how much he missed Ava.

"And if we fail?" squeaked his friend. "What then?"

"If we fail, we fail."

"What if we don't find it?"

"Then we don't find it. But we'll never know if we don't at least try, right?"

"Yeah . . . I guess."

"So, you'll come then?"

"Okay!" answered Hoppy bravely.

"Really?"

"Yeah! Let's go!"

"Hurray!" they both cheered.

Then they yawned.

"Great," said the boy, rolling onto his side. He brought Hoppy even closer and snuggled him. "Then it's settled. We'll leave first thing in the morning! Goodnight, Hoppy!"

"Goodnight," Hoppy answered. ". . . I love you."

"I love you too!"

Sure enough, the next morning came. Quickly, they ate breakfast. Then they had a quick bath down by the river. As our hero packed, Hoppy regaled him with tales of his mother—how beautiful she was . . . all the fun games she knew . . . and how excited he was to introduce them. Little did they know, however, someone else was there that morning, listening from the bushes.

"Okay, do we have everything?" asked the boy. "Lettuce?"

"Check!"

"Stick?"

"Check!"

"Loincloth?" he glanced down.

"Check!" they both answered, giggling.

"Mister—Oh no!" the boy shrieked. "Mister and Missus Rock! I forgot them down by the river!"

"Eek! Hurry! Go get them! Or they'll be washed away!"

He had to think quickly, which as you know, he wasn't very good at.

"Ugh—okay!" he said, dropping his stick. "You wait here. I'll be right back!"

"Okay! But please hurry! It's starting to rain!" Hoppy didn't like rain—or thunder. He heard some rumbling in the distance and trembled. "EeEek!"

"I will!" the boy answered. "Just wait right here. It isn't far. I'll be back in ten seconds. I promise!"

The boy took off running. From behind him, he could hear Hoppy counting.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!" he sang. "Seven! Six!" By the time he got to five, the boy found them.

"Ah hah! There you guys are! Sorry about that. I—" But then he noticed the counting had stopped and he spun around, confused. "That's odd," he said. "I wasn't gone that long. Hoppy never stops counting until the end." It was possible he just couldn't hear it anymore because of the rain and thunder, but he hurried back up just to be sure. When he arrived, he stopped dead in his tracks and gasped. A pack of wild wolves was there waiting for him. The biggest one had Hoppy pinned under its paw, barely letting him breathe.

"Well, well, well," croaked the beast. "If it isn't the mysterious creature we've been hearing so much about. What did the old fool call him? Some kind of savior? Going to change the rules?" As it spoke, it started pressing its paw down on Hoppy, making him yelp. The boy lunged forward, but froze when it threatened to press all the way. "Uh uh!" the wolf continued, clicking its tongue. "Not so fast. One step closer and your little friend gets it!"



“Help!” squeaked Hoppy. “Help me! What’s happening? Why is he doing this? Help! Help! I’m scared!”

The other wolves laughed.

“Don’t worry, Hoppy! It’ll be just fine!” The boy looked up at the wolves, who were all laughing at him. “What do you guys want? Food? Help? Do you want us to leave?”

“Want?” the big wolf chuckled. “WANT? How can I want when I already have everything? Look around—the trees . . . the animals . . . you . . . your little friend here . . . even the air you breathe. It’s mine. ALL OF IT IS MINE.”

"Alright," the boy sighed. "Fine. But what is it you want from us?"

"Hah!" laughed one of the wolves. "Can you hear him? He still doesn't get it."

"What do I want from you?" the big wolf answered. "For you to bow!"

"That's it?" the boy answered. "Okay . . . sure." He got on one knee. "You mean like this?" But all it seemed to do was make the wolf angrier.

"No! NO! You do not bow right! You do NOT understand! Foolish child! But you will . . ." He pressed down on Hoppy more.

"Wait! Please! Stop! I did what you asked. What more can I do? I'll do anything. Look, if you really need meat right now, you can eat me." He laid down and raised his chin, offering his neck. "See? I won't even resist. But please, please don't hurt Hoppy! Anything but that . . ."

"Hah! Eat? You?" croaked the big wolf. "Neither one of you is worthy enough to be MY food."

"Then what? What can I do?"

"Nothing! You can do NOTHING! Understand? That's why I've come!"

Looking into the villain's eyes was unlike any darkness our hero had ever seen—so dark it felt like no one was there. "Hah! Hah! Hah! But where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself first. I'm Maul, lord of wolves! King of beasts! Devourer of worlds! Destroyer of innocence. Fear-RrRr is what I feed on!" he growled as he pushed down more on Hoppy. "PAIN gives me pleasure." Hearing the bunny's cries and the boy's pleading seemed to be like music to his ears. The more they screamed, the more it seemed to tickle him. "Ah, yes . . . yes! That's it!" he sighed thirstily. "Be afraid! Muah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Despair! And guess what, little bunny? You're not going to go to no great fern either. Your mummy and daddy aren't there. They're

both dead. They're ALL dead. I killed them! Chewed them up! Spewed them out! Turned them into food for worms and maggots! And soon . . . YOU WILL BE TOO!"

"What?" Hoppy sobbed. "What do you mean? What are you talking about? Is that . . . true, Dandy? Is that really . . . really . . ."

"No!" yelled the boy. "Don't listen to him, Hoppy! Your mother is—"

But it was too late. Before Hoppy heard him, Maul pushed his paw down all the way, slowly crushing him. The sound of Hoppy's cries as his little bones snapped, reader. . . combined with the laughter of the wolves. . . awoke a new feeling our hero had never felt before. Sadness and anger mixed together—"NoOoOo!"—followed by a strange kind of excitement. The boy's face bent into a monstrous shape. The blood in his veins began to boil. Clenching his jaw and fists, he started growling and roaring.

"Aw, would you look at that," Maul sighed. "I think he's upset. How adorable! HAH! Hah! Hah!"

Then Ava's training kicked in. He sprung up and, like a wolf, bounded towards the beast—punching, kicking, scratching and biting. But it was no use. All his attacks just bounced off of Maul.

"Muah! Hah! Hah! Look! He really thinks he can hurt me! How pathetic!"

"It's no wonder he's weak," teased one of the wolves. "Ava's his teacher."

"Ava? Really?" remarked another.

"After Maul banished her, I heard she adopted a bald ape. Raised him as a cub. But when he grew up, he abandoned her too."

"Hah!"

"Serves her right for betraying us."

"Maybe we should go find her next . . ."

"Yeah! Muah! Hah! Hah!"

Finally, Maul stopped laughing. With one little swing of his head, he knocked the boy backward and into the mud.

“Agh!”

Then, with a flick of his paw, he tossed Hoppy’s body into the mud with him.

“Here! Catch! Muah, hah, hah!”

“Bye, bye!” the wolves cackled. “I’m sure we’ll see you again real soon!”

“Bring more friends!”

“The next time you see Maul, you’d better show some respect.”

“Don’t you DARE look him in the eye again!”

“Bow PROPERLY! Keep your head down. Whisper when he draws near. Don’t even breathe. And maybe you’ll get lucky enough that he won’t notice you . . .”

Our hero spent the rest of the day alone, crying like never before, holding his friend’s body, begging for him to wake up. The sound travelled through the rain, over the river and into the canyons where Ava had been living. Recognizing it, she followed the cries and found him.

“There . . .” she scolded him. “Now do you understand why I’m so hard on you? Look! I warned you about the consequences of weakness. I warned you again and again, but you didn’t listen. And now your companion is dead! You left me because you wanted to be a kind animal. You wanted to frolic, giggle and play! Tell me . . . is THIS how you show kindness to others? Is THIS a fun game to play? Is THIS your idea of peace and love?”

“No . . .” he sniffled.

“What about the next companion you make? You gonna sit there and watch Maul destroy them too?”

“No!” the boy yelled.

“What about when he comes for me? Is this how you’d repay me for looking after you all these years?”

“NO!” he yelled even louder.

"Then learn this lesson, young one, and learn it well—
KINDNESS WITHOUT STRENGTH IS NOTHING. If you want justice, you need to acquire power. If you want peace, you must prepare for war. Quit your sulking! Get up! On your feet!" Shaking, the boy put Hoppy down and did as he was told. "Now, tell me . . . the next time you see that mutt, what are you going to be ready to do!?"

"I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm going to kill him . . ."

"What was that? I can't hear you, soldier!"

"I'm going to kill him!"

"Louder!"

"I SAID I'M GOING TO KILL HIM!"

Chapter 29

Will to Power

The next spring, Ava took our young hero to a place even further than Rock Ridge. The wild outback he was used to traversing suddenly ended. Crossing a wide river, he came into a forest of rolling misty mountains. He saw bamboo and banana trees, as well as a host of strange new creatures.

"So, this Nankai," he asked. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly."

"How do you know him then?"

"He's an old war buddy. Years ago, when I was about your age, I was exploring these parts. The two of us happened to be drinking from the same pond, when suddenly we were ambushed by the Black Beard Gang. The only way we could survive was by working together. Afterward, we kept meeting—exchanging our knowledge of the deadly arts."

"Sounds like a friend!"

"... No."

"But what can I learn from a monkey that I can't learn from you?"

"I'm a wolf. You're a primate. We're too different. If you want to maximize your power, you must learn the way of the fist. This, I cannot teach you."

"He sounds pretty strong!"

"He is."

"Stronger than you?"

"... No."

"So, are we there yet?"

"No."

"Can I pick some of these flowers? Never seen pink ones before. They're real pretty."

"No."

"How about these white—"

"No."

"Where do flowers come from anyway?"

"I said no!" Ava growled. Our hero froze and gulped. "What's wrong with you? Why do you have to talk so much? Why do you always have to ask so many DAMN questions? Just shut up already! Stay on guard like I've taught you! These woods are treacherous . . ."

"Sorry!"

"Don't apologize. Correct yourself."

"Okay!"

"It's just around this corner here. Look. See that path? It will lead you to his training grounds."

"Golly!" gasped the boy. "It sure is pretty!"

"Now, do you have everything?"

"Hmm . . . I think so!"

"Got your lunch?"

"Yeah."

"Your stick?"

"Yeah."

"Your boomerang?"

"Mmmhmm!"

"Alright . . . well then, I guess this is goodbye for now. Go on. I'll see you at the end of summer."

But the boy didn't move. Instead, he just stood there smiling at her, like he wanted something else.

"What?"

" . . ."

"What do you want?"

" . . ."

"What are you staring at?"

Unable to hold back his feelings, the boy spread out his arms and leaped at Ava. "Bye! I love you!" he yelled, hugging her tightly and kissing her cheek. "Muah! I'll miss you!"

"Ugh!" she groaned, disgusted. "What the . . . HEY, GET OFF ME!"

“Sorry!”

“Don’t you EVER do that to me again! Do you hear me? Don’t you EVER, EVER do that again!”

“Sorry . . .”

“Now, get out of here! Scram!”

“Okay!”

“And don’t come back until you’ve learned to fight with your fists.”

“I won’t!” he said, turning around and heading up the little mountain. “And don’t worry. When I come back, I’ll be much stronger. I’ll become stronger than anyone in the whole forest! You’ll see! I promise!”

As our hero ascended, he began to see the shapes of various kinds of apes sparring with one another. Most didn’t notice him. Others turned their heads and started whispering.

“Look!” they’d remark. “That ape is white! He has no fur!”

“No tail either!” giggled the monkeys.

“What a little runt!” the gorillas grunted.

But our hero didn’t let the comments distract him. He was there on a mission and was determined to complete it.

Soon, he came to a small field. The ground was soft and damp, with a constant humming of grasshoppers. In the middle, was a little hut made of banana leaves. An old monkey was sleeping in a hammock outside the door, snoring very loudly. Turning away, the boy cupped a hand over his eyes and started scanning the rest of the clearing. A drowsy-looking tortoise was staring at him from one corner. A fat, drooling gorilla was playing with a kitten in another. But no sign of any powerful warrior. Just then, the snoring stopped.

“Can I help you?” a voice from behind him spoke.

“Woah—” gasped the boy, spinning around.

The monkey from the hammock was standing in the

middle of the field, smiling at him. It had grey fur and a long bushy white beard.

"Hey!" exclaimed the boy, glancing back at the empty hammock. "Did you just—I mean, were you the one laying in that—A moment ago, I thought I saw—"

The old monkey hobbled over to him, leaning heavily on a frail stick. Then it lifted a hand to its brow and squinted in the same direction.

"Hmm? You thought you saw what?"

"Nothing," the boy sighed, feeling silly. The monkey must have had a twin brother. No one could have moved that fast. "Never mind!" the boy chuckled. The monkey chuckled along with him. "Sure, you can help me. I'm looking for someone."

"Oh?"

The boy nodded.

"Yes. A great warrior! His name is Nankai. Do you know—" Upon making eye contact, however, he suddenly shrieked. "Agh!"

"Hmm? What is it? What's wrong?"

"You . . ." the boy stuttered, "your . . . your eyes! They're gone! What happened to them?"

"Oh, those old things?" The old monkey chuckled some more. "Lost them years ago . . ."

"I'm so sorry to hear that . . ."

"Why?"

"Because it must be awful . . ." the boy sighed. "Of all things, to live in darkness must be the worst . . ."

"Is that what you think of me?" the old monkey kept chuckling. "Do not assume, young one, that just because someone has no eyes, they cannot see."

"But . . . but—" Then he realized the monkey must have been joking and started to laugh again. The monkey laughed too. A funny laugh, like this: *Hee, hee, hee! Hoo! Hoo! Tee, hee, hee! HEE! HEE! HEE!*—Which made the boy laugh even more. So much that

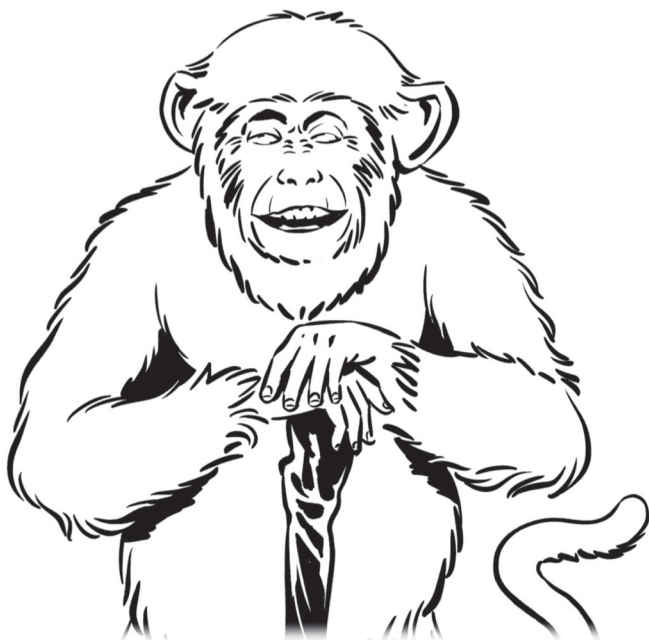
his sides started to hurt. He could hardly breathe or stand.

“Anyway,” he continued, eventually catching his breath, “as I said, I’m looking for the warrior, Nankai. Do you know him?”

“Know him?” answered the monkey. “Of course I know him.”

“Really? Where is he? Can you—”

“Can I what?”



“Well . . . never mind.”

“Hmm . . . you still don’t think I can see, do you?”

“Sorry, fella. I love joking, but I don’t have time for that right now.” He turned around and started walking away. “Maybe when I’m done training.”

"Ah, I see . . ." the old monkey answered. "Too busy. That's too bad. Well, in that case, good luck—for no one with eyes has ever found Nankai before."

"Hmm!?" The boy spun around. "What do you mean? Are you saying he can . . . go invisible?"

"In a way. But only when no one's looking."

"What?" laughed the boy. "Only when no one's looking?"

"Mmmhmm."

"Of what value is that ability?" He stood waiting for an answer, but none came. The old monkey just tilted its head and smiled at him. "Look, I told you—I don't have time for fun and games right now. This is serious. Now, can you really help me or not?"

"Sure, I will help you."

"Thank you!"

"But first you must prove your worthiness."

"How?"

"By fighting me."

"You!?" the boy laughed. "Fight me?"

"What's so funny about it?"

"I'm not going to fight a blind old monkey!"

"Why?"

"It just isn't fair!"

"Alright then, tough guy," said the monkey poking him in the belly with its cane. "I'll tell you what. If you can land even a single blow on me, I will talk to Nankai myself—and personally recommend he take you as his number one student, training under him twenty-four hours a day, all summer. How does THAT sound for help, huh?"

"Wow! Really? You'd do that?"

"Mmmhmm! I give you my word!"

"Alright. You're on. Let's do it!" He walked into the middle of the field. "But I'm warning you—I'm fast! Really fast!"

"Is that so?"

"And strong too! Ava's my teacher."

"So I've heard."

The boy looked around and wondered why all the apes on the mountain suddenly started gathering. Even stranger was how they began pointing, whispering and giggling at him. Maybe Nankai was somewhere in the audience. He scanned the crowd and treetops, but the sun's bright beams made it too difficult to see.

"Ahem!" coughed the old monkey, tapping its stick on the ground. "Are you ready?"

The boy gripped his spear and bent his knees.

"Ready when you are!"

"Good. But please tell me just one more thing. Your weapon—do you really think you'll need it? I thought you said you were strong."

The boy glanced down at his spear and then back up at his opponent.

"Perhaps I misheard you," chuckled the monkey, picking its ears. "These old things don't work as well as they used to."

Laughing, the boy tossed his spear to the ground. It rolled to the monkey's feet.

"Oh my," it sighed, shaking its head and clicking its tongue. "Hee, hee! Hoo, hoo! This is going to be even easier than I thought." The apes in the audience laughed as the old monkey did exactly the same thing. Tossing away its cane, it stood up straight and started stretching. Then it cracked its knuckles. "Alright . . ." it continued, pointing to gorilla and kitten. "Mongo . . . Tango—on your signal, we'll begin the match." The apes in the audience started drumming on the ground.

"ThreEeEe . . ." counted Mongo, funnily.

The boy bent down like a wolf ready to charge.

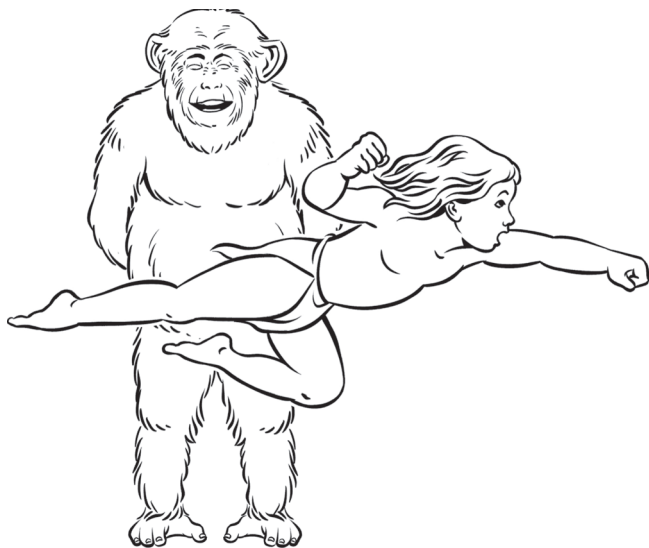
"TwoOoOo . . . oOoOne . . ."

"MEOWwWw!" screeched the kitten.

Like lightning, the boy sprinted forward and pounced.

“Hiii-ya!”

It was already over, reader! Our hero was sure of it! The old monkey hadn’t even budged an inch. Flying through the air, the boy reached forward to tag it. But when he arrived, he didn’t feel anything.



“What the—” he thought, as he seemed to pass right through his target. It was so surprising that he ended up losing his balance and tumbling to the ground, where he got a most unpleasant mouthful of grass and bugs.

“Puah!” he coughed, spitting it out. The apes watching all pointed and laughed.

“Napping already?” giggled the old monkey. “Tee, hee, hee, hee, hee!” Very slowly, it turned around and faced the boy again. “Or is it snack time? I thought you said you were fast. Well, look—I’m right here. Hit me—if you can. Or are you blind? Tee-hee hee hee!”

Feeling frustrated with himself, the boy sprang back to

his feet. "I must have missed!" he thought. "Or slipped! But I'm not going to let that happen again. This time, I'll get him!"

"Rawr!" he cried, starting his next run. "Hiii-ya!"

But the same thing just happened again—and again.

"What the—"

"Tee-hee hee! Missed me!"

"GrRr! Hiii-ya!"

"Tee, hee, hee, hee! Missed me again!"

"Hiii-ya!"

"And again!"

"HIII-YA!"

"Tee-hee hee hee!"

The old monkey stuck its tongue out and shook its bottom at the boy.

"Hoo-hoo hee! Tee-hee hee! Ho! Ho!"

Now, the apes were rolling and howling in laughter. The boy, meanwhile, just grew more frustrated. Why was he missing? He'd been attacking exactly the way Ava had shown him, but all he ever hit was air. He knew he had to change his strategy. This time, instead of trying to pounce, he would run up to the monkey and use his fists.

"GrRrRr!" he roared, "Hiii-ya! HIII-YA! HIII . . . YA-YA-YA-YA-YA!" But it made no difference. The old monkey dodged, ducked, rolled under and hopped over every blow.

"YA-YA-YA-YA!"

"Tee-hee! Tee-hee! Tee-hee!"

Now that the boy was closer, he could see that the monkey really wasn't moving all that fast. Rather, it was simply moving at the exact same time the boy was, as if it knew ahead of time which punch or kick would come next. It could even do tricks while dodging them—hand-stands, summersaults and cartwheels—or take sips of banana wine from a shell.

"Mmm! Tasty!" it would say, hopping onto the boy's

shoulders. "Very tasty! Want some?" Then it would look down and blow the wine in his face. "Pff! Tee-hee!"

"GrRrRr!" the boy would growl as he'd try to reach up and grab it—but by then it would already be gone.

"Up here!" said the monkey, hanging upside down on a branch. "You'll have to jump!"

Here too, the boy would fail, for Ava had only taught him to jump forward.

"EeEe! EeEe!" he cried with every attempt.

"I said jump—not dance! Tee-hee!"

Out of ideas and desperate to make a good impression in case Nankai was watching, the boy scrambled around the field looking for his spear. All he found, however, was the old monkey's jug.

"I know," he thought. "It's that drink of his that's making him so fast. Maybe I should have some too."

As quick as he could, he rushed over and chugged the whole thing. Throwing away the empty shell, he clenched his fists, waiting for his new super-speed to surge through his veins. But he only ended up feeling dizzy.

"OoOoOo," he groaned, now beginning to twirl and fall as he jumped. He picked up his stick and swung at the monkey like a piñata, but kept missing, twirling more and getting even dizzier. He bumped into every tree, slipped on banana peel after banana peel and fell into a wasp-ridden thorn bush. Eventually, he hit himself with his own staff and tumbled to the ground, exhausted, ill, and looking completely beaten up, though the old monkey hadn't once touched him.

"OoOoOo—OoF!"

By then, most of the audience had begun to lose interest. Chuckling, they handed over bananas they'd bet and went back to their exercises. The old monkey picked up his cane and hobbled over to our hero, who was sprawled out on his back.

"Who . . . who . . . who are you?" the boy asked,

gasping for breath. "What are you? I can't hit you . . . I can't even see you move . . . How is it that you are so old . . . but move so fast?"

"How is it," the monkey answered, smiling, "that you are so young and move so slow?"

It was then the boy began to realize who he'd been fighting all that time.

"W-w-wait a minute! I understand now! I've got it!" He scrambled to his feet. "You're Nankai, aren't you!?"

"Mmmhmm!" the old monkey giggled.

"Woo! Hoo!"

Now, instead of trying to hit his opponent, he leaped forward and hugged him.

"Well," sighed the old monkey, "it looks like you've tagged me after all."

"So, you'll teach me then!?"

"Mmmhmm! If you are willing to be taught . . ."

"I am, sir! Very much, I am!"

"Promise to do everything I say?"

"Yes!"

"No complaining?"

"Yes!"

"You won't question my methods?"

"No!"

"Then . . . I will accept you as my pupil."

Our hero could hardly contain his excitement.

"Now," Nankai continued, "take your things and go with Tango over here."

"Meow!" answered the kitten, rubbing up against the boy's ankle. He bent down to pet her.

"She'll show you to your quarters. Have a bath. Take a walk. Drink lots of water. Get some sleep. Tomorrow morning, meet me here."

Nankai's training turned out to be far more difficult than our hero anticipated—and stranger than he ever could have imagined, for not only did the monkey speak almost exclusively in riddles, but his lessons seemed entirely backwards.

"First thing's first," he lectured the boy the next day. "Take off your loincloth. This is a monkey mountain and monkey's do everything bare naked."

"My loincloth? But . . . Ava said—"

"Hush! I said strip! Hi-ya!"

I should also mention that he loved wacking students with his cane.

"Ouch!"

"Tee, hee, hee! Now, are you going to listen to me or not? Remember your promise! No questioning my methods!"

"Alright . . ." sighed the boy.

He undid the knot and tossed it away.

"Good . . ." giggled Nankai. "Now you are presentable! And let this be your first lesson. To learn the secrets of the way of the fist, one must first embrace the way of the ass! Speaking of which—" Nankai whistled and out of the bushes came the same gorilla and kitten he saw earlier. "It's time to begin practicing this art. White Ape, meet Mongo. Mongo, meet White Ape. For the rest of the summer, you two will be dancing partners."

"Wait—dancing?" the boy asked. "But I thought you were teaching me to fight!"

"I will—soon enough. But first things must come first. Before one can fight like a monkey, one must learn how to be a monkey. And the best way to do that is to learn the monkey dance. Go on, take a look. Then give it a try."

A few of the apes in the trees started drumming on their chests and chanting.

“OoOo! OoOo! Ooh—ahh! OoOo! OoOo! OoOoh—ahh!”

Mongo started dancing—the silliest, most ridiculous dance you can imagine.

“See?” said Nankai. “Now, you try. Wave those arms! Shake that bottom! Hop up and down! Blow up those cheeks! Cross those eyes! Make funny faces and sounds!”

“Like this?” the boy asked, trying his best.

“No. Sillier!” yelled Nankai, whacking him again.

“Ouch!” He glanced at Mongo and tried once more. “Hmm . . . okay, how about this?”

“NO! SILLIER! HI-ya!”

“Oof!” Finally, he stopped trying to imitate, and instead starting throwing his arms up, making random expressions and sounds. “LiLiLi . . . ThiLiLi?” he gurgled.

“Yes! YES!” cheered Nankai. “Now you’re getting it! But something’s still missing. You must dance the same dance that Mongo does—moving at the exact same time.”

“But . . . how can I do the same dance if I don’t know the steps?”

“Steps? How? No. There are no steps to the monkey dance! There is no how. You just do it! Follow your instincts, listening to your inner monkey!”

“My inner monkey?”

“Mmmhmm! Everyone’s got a little monkey in them somewhere. They just don’t know it.”

“But how do I find it?”

“By dancing with one, like you are now. By practicing it every day! You must empty your mind, White Ape. You must focus! You must listen to the beat! You must . . . become one . . . with the monkey!”

“I am one with the monkey!” our young hero chanted. “I am one with the monkey!”

“Then—and only then—will you hear your inner monkey speaking to you!”

After dance practice, Nankai led the boy to a field

where the apes had all gathered to play monkey games. The first was "King of the Tree." Next they played "Blind Monkey's Bluff." Then came Nankai's personal favourite, "Dodgepoop."

"If you can dodge poop, you can dodge a fist," he'd say, pacing back and forth. "He who can dodge one hundred poops, can dodge a hundred fists."

Bath time naturally followed. Everyone jumped into the hot spring to relax. But on Nankai's mountain, even relaxing turned out to be a form of training.

"Now, White Ape, you must learn the gorilla massage. First, grab hold of the shoulders like this. Use your fingers. Squeeze tight—release! Squeeze tight—release! Then scratch! Up, down . . . side, side. Turn them over and use your feet! Knees bent, shoulder width apart . . . toes curled back. Big circles . . . small circles. Stay balanced. And don't forget to massage their butt cheeks. VERY important! Tee hee!"

By the end, the boy's fingers were so sore, he could hardly pick up his food at dinner time. Not that he was very eager to, reader—for on Nankai's mountain, apes ate nothing but heaps of slimy spinach. How violently he gagged, coughed and squirmed as he tried to swallow it! Often, the other apes had to hold him and force it down. But the hardest part of monkey life came at sunset, just when the boy was hoping Nankai would finally teach him to fight.

"Okay, I'm ready!" he said, excited.

"Good! Here you go."

"What are these?"

"Turtle shells. You can use them for carrying water."

"But I thought . . ."

"How can I teach when I'm thirsty? I thirst! If you want lessons, you must quench it by making my banana wine. First, collect the ingredients: bananas, honey, skunk spray, electric eel slime, coconuts, walnuts, special mush-

rooms and lots and lots of water. Carry it all up the mountain to my hut. Then, open your hand. Stiffen your fingers. Chop the coconuts like this. Grind it into dust with your knuckles. Open the chestnuts using only your thumbs and pointing fingers. Put all the ingredients into the tortoise shell. Hop in. Stomp with your feet until it's all mush, singing the Banana Wine Song:"

Ooh! Ahh! Ooh! Ahh!
Makin' ma' banana wine!
Ooh! Ahh! Ooh! Ahh!
Shake'n my butt! Don't it look fine?
A zippity here! A zippity there!
Swingin' from vine to vine!
Ooh! Ahh! Ooh! Ahh!
While I'm makin' ma' banana wine!

Chop, chop, chop!
Smash, smash, smash!
Stomp your feet n'move your behind!
Cross your eyes, twirl around!
Flip your partner upside down!
Ooh! Ahh! Ooh! Ahh!
Makin' ma' banana wine!

For weeks, he did this—often feeling very frustrated and disappointed in himself. Being a monkey was a lot harder than it looked! But he never complained and he never gave up—and soon it started getting easier. He began winning the games, finishing all his spinach without any help and dancing in perfect unison with Mongo. The banana wine was served to Nankai early, with enough to spare for Mongo and the others. At night, Nankai found him at the hot spring giving gorillas extra massages, his hands not even a little tired.

"Very good!" sighed the old monkey. "I see you have

mastered all our techniques. Now, you are ready to learn the way of the fist."

Little did the boy know, Nankai had already taught him.

The next morning, during his first sparring match, he dodged, ducked and blocked all the attacks of his opponent without even thinking about it. His punches and kicks smashed through banana trees, and he could wrestle his way out of any hold. Everyone marvelled at his skills.

But as the months passed, many of the apes still hadn't accepted him, for he still had one big problem. In the middle of the night, they'd ambush and interrogate him about it.

"Why do you keep holding back when you spar with us?"

"Always saying you're sorry! Asking for permission! Pulling your punches!"

"Because," he'd reply, "I don't want to hurt you . . ."

"Even when we tease, play pranks on you and cheat?"

"Yes," he'd answer. "Even then, I still like you."

Hearing this made them even angrier.

"No! You mustn't! It's not the ape way! You think you're treating us well with your kindness, but you're not! When you hold back, you dishonour us!"

"Where's your anger!?"

"Where's your pride!?"

"You do not beat your chest with proper self-love!"

"I guess I don't have any . . ." the boy sighed.

"Can't squaw! Can't yawp! Can't crow!"

"You'll never be the strongest if you won't hate your enemy!"

"I'm sorry . . ."

Then they'd beat him up. He wouldn't even try to fight back.

"Well, you'd better start hating soon, Whitey," they'd say, spitting on him, "or find something else to fuel your

punches—because if we ever catch you holding back again, we won't spar with you!"

The boy spent many late nights wondering about this. It was true, he realized. He was holding back. Something else to fuel his punches? What could that possibly be? He tried asking the other students, but all they'd do was laugh at him. Nankai was even less helpful, answering the boy's question with jokes and riddles that would leave him more confused than when he asked. It wasn't until he hid in a meadow to cry and saw a familiar animal hop through the grass that he finally discovered the answer.

"Hey, where'd Pale-face go?" said one of the apes who'd come to ambush him again that night.

"Where you hiding, Round-eyes? Time for your whoopin'!"

"I guess he finally gave up and ran away! Heh! You see? I told you he was too weak to be one of us!"

Imagine their surprise, reader, when they realized he was already awake and training.

"No! NO! LOOK! OVER THERE!"

"What's he . . . doing?"

"I told you," giggled Nankai, who was never very far away. The apes turned and listened to him. "You shouldn't underestimate the lad. Oh, there's rage in him alright! Only his rage is fuelled by something far fiercer than hate. I sensed it the very first day we met, when he hugged me. And when he learns to harness and control that power, you all will be in very big trouble . . ."

The boy had turned his blanket into a hood so he could concentrate. Using his one big advantage, his wild imagination, he thought of all the things that made him angry in his life. The mosquitoes when he was a baby . . . the bat . . . the boar . . . all the bullies he encountered in Rock Ridge. His heart quickened. His fists clenched. Then he thought of what made him angriest of all: the moment when Maul killed Hoppy. Like a volcano, he

erupted the same way he did the day it happened. Only now, he was stronger and knew how to punch properly.

“GrRrRrRAWR! HIII-YA!” he cried, charging at his first sparring partner of the day.

“Oof!”

“HI-YA! HI-YA! HI-YA!”

“OOF! OOF! OOF!”

“GrRrRrRAWR! HIII-YAAA!”

“OoOoOof!”

The poor ape fell over and didn’t get back up for a very long time.

“Wow!” the apes gasped.

“Did you see that? I’ve never seen such power . . .”

“Maybe he isn’t such a pushover after all . . .”

Nankai was right. His face! His eyes! His battle cry! It was scarier than anger, reader. It was worse than hate. He had no fear of pain. . . no hesitancy. . . nothing held him back. When he charged, opponents felt like he was planning to run right over them. When he cocked back his fist, he seemed to be aiming not only for their body—but somewhere deeper. And although no one ever knew where or what that place was, when he hit them, they always felt it there.

Of course, like anything else, it took time and practice to summon this rage. For a while he had to use his imagination before every fight. But the more he practiced, the faster it would come. Soon, it took no time at all. Eventually, he didn’t even need to use his imagination. The rage was always there. Even between battles, when he was his kind and gentle self, you could see it there in his expression, posture and tone of voice—like he was perfectly safe, but at any moment could smash you to pieces. By the end, he not only won the annual fighting tournament, but the respect of all the apes who used to ambush him, awarding him with nicknames like “King of the Apes,” “Thunder Fist” and “Lord of Frenzy.”

They begged him to stay and lead them in battle against their enemies. But he couldn't, for winter was coming and his friend was waiting for him—someone who he had made a promise to. After thanking Nankai at his farewell party, he put his loincloth back on and descended the mountain to where Ava was waiting. When she heard his footsteps, she mistook them for a lion's. Spinning around, she bared her teeth and growled—until she saw who it was.

"Oh! It's you . . ."

Or was it? She had to look very closely to tell. But when he smiled and ran up to hug her, she was sure.

"Well, well, well . . ." she marvelled, "looks like you've managed to put on some muscle after all. Hopefully, you've been taught a thing or two about how to use it."

Even more different was his response.

"Care to find out?"

He put his hands on his hips and smirked at her.

"What!?" she growled. It was the same boy alright, but his whole attitude had changed. He didn't even flinch when she glared at him. "What did you just say to me, twerp? Gone for an entire summer and already asking for a beating."

"I said—would you care to find out?"

"Alright," she answered. "Looks like you've forgotten your manners. I guess I'll have to remind you who's boss." She bent her knees, ready to charge. He didn't move at all, but just stood there smirking some more. "I'll wipe that stupid grin off his face," she thought. Then, she pounced.

The boy dodged, ducked and jumped over all of her attacks, the same way Nankai did to him seven months earlier, sending her whirling and tumbling into the mud. Then he jumped on her back where she couldn't reach him, laughing as she tried to squirm free. He seemed to disappear in the bushes and used vines to trap, catch and tangle her. When she finally thought she had him, he

picked her right up over his head and bodyslammed her into the ground. Before she could get up, he picked up his spear and thrust it to her throat. As loud as he could, he roared. For the very first time in his life, reader, he saw Ava's ears go back—and her tail curl between her legs.

"Now," he said to her, "there are going to be some new rules around here. Understand?"

He put his spear away, backed up and crossed his arms.

"W-w-what?" she stuttered, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. "New rules? What rules?"

"There will be no more killing, stealing or hurting other animals. Not if you want to stick with me."

"Stick with him?" she thought, not daring to speak the words aloud. "But he's supposed to be the one who sticks with me. I'm the leader! Or at least I used to be . . ." No longer the strongest, Ava realized she couldn't command him anymore.

"No killing? But I'm a wolf. How am I supposed to do that? I need meat. I need to kill!"

"I know," he answered. "And I've already solved that. See?"

He picked up his sack and dumped out a pile of monster heads.

"Wh-wh-who . . . who are they?" Ava gasped.

"Vermin," he answered. "They lurk around here sometimes, preying on my friends. You can eat them if you'd like."

"You killed these?"

"Mmmhmm—and I doubt we'll have much trouble finding more."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to explore the rest of the valley next year."

"What? Explore? Why?"

"There may be other warriors I can learn from. I'm not finished, Ava. I know there are more secrets out there

and I'd like you to join me. But you need to promise you will no longer follow the old laws."

Old laws? Just who did this animal think he was, re-writing the ancient laws? But it didn't sound like she had much choice.

"Fine. . ." she answered. "We'll try it your way."

Chapter 30

A Restless Heart

"I spent the next few years training under every teacher I could find," said the boy, continuing the story. "The tiger taught me how to use my fingertips in battle. From the praying mantis, I learned how to clinch and trap. The crane improved my balance, and the swallow, famous for his speed, showed me how to move without telegraphing my attacks. I designed new devices, improved weapons and discovered the secrets of fire. I was powerful—able to keep promises, help friends and harm enemies. I also had a lot more free time. Finally, I could do what I loved most again."

"Thinking . . ." said Ava.

"It was then I embarked on my next quest."

"And what quest was that?"

"The quest to discover the meaning of life."

"What do you mean?"

"Everywhere I looked I saw animals fulfilling some kind of purpose—something little they each did that helped make the forest better for all. Bees pollinated flowers. Squirrels planted trees. Beavers built bridges. Birds danced and sung pretty songs. But what about me? What was my purpose? What was I supposed to do? I tried singing, but it just didn't sound right. My gardens weren't fruitful either. When I tried to clean, I usually ended up making more of a mess and my paintings were never as beautiful as the real things. I tried everything that I saw others doing, but nothing seemed to work. And the more I looked without finding it, the sadder I began to feel."

"Yes, I remember it well. You wouldn't eat. You couldn't sleep. Up all night, pacing and mumbling. We all thought you were ill."

"I was. And I was sure that if I didn't get help soon, I was going to die. So, I did the only thing left I could think

of. The one thing that always seemed to help when I had a problem. I went to see Mr. Owl."

"Well, that is quite the conundrum, my young friend," the boy remembered him saying. He was white and fluffy, with great big friendly blue eyes and a deep voice. When he spoke, he often giggled like this: "Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot! HOOT, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot!"

"Sorry for bothering you so late, Ari. I just really needed to tell someone."

"It's no bother at all. I like listening and only wish you'd visit more often."

"Sorry, I guess I've been busy."

"So I've noticed."

"Anyway, do you think you could help me with this?"

"Certainly! Hoot! Hoot!"

But remember, I cannot help by giving you answers. Only questions! We owls do not have big brains. Only big eyes. With them, we see much. So busy, the creatures of the forest are! Hoot, hoot! We are the animals who are not so busy. Instead, we prefer to sit above and watch."

"Yes, I know you are. And that's exactly why I've come to you, Ari. You see much and often notice things the rest of us miss. Please, help me! I need to know what my place is in all this."

"Well—Hoot! Hoot!—first I need to make sure I understand your question properly."

"Alright."

"Please clarify. What exactly do you mean, young one, by 'me' and 'my place?'"

"By 'me,' I mean me, this animal standing before you. By 'my place,' I mean what I'm supposed to do."

"Thank you. And please clarify what animal you are."



"Well . . . I suppose that's a part of the problem," answered the boy, shrugging. "I'm not really sure!"

"Yes, I see that. Don't you think we should settle this first? It would be awfully difficult to tell what 'an animal we know not what' is supposed to do."

"Difficult?" gasped the boy. "No. Impossible, Ari! You're right. We must settle this first!"

"If you insist."

"I do."

"How might we settle it then?"

The boy scratched his chin.

"Well, I suppose I'm not really sure of that either."

"Think, my friend. Think very hard. We have lots of time."

"Well . . . maybe there have been others who have had this problem."

"Go on . . ."

"I haven't noticed any. But, then, I suppose I haven't been looking either."

"Like you said, you've been busy."

"Have you seen any?"

"Oh yes, many times."

"Please, tell me!"

"Well," Ari began, "as you know, most animals have mothers and fathers who teach them what they are. From generation to generation, wisdom of the ancestors is passed down. But sometimes—hoot, hoot!—the wind blows strongly. Great floods occur. The young and the old are separated. A little one gets stranded or lost. When that happens, their parents cannot help them and they have only one other thing to rely on."

"And what's that?"

Ari hopped off the branch and sat next to the boy.

"Tell me, have you ever observed the buzzing bees?"

"Yes, many times—and I've talked to them too."

"How about spiders?"

"Some more than others . . ."

"Have you asked them how they weave their webs?"

"Yes, so that I might learn how to weave threads of my own."

"What do they tell you?"

"They don't know how. They just do it."

"Like how the honey bee knows to go to nectar?"

"Yes, the same way."

"How about peacocks? Have you observed them too?"

"Very often. It's one of my favorite things to do."

"So I've noticed. Tell me, when they see a pretty mate, what happens?"

"They just . . . go to one another."

"Because they've been taught by parents?"

"No. It makes no difference whether their parents teach them."

"Then why? Have you asked them?"

"Yes. They don't know why—only that they can't help it. It's quite funny, really."

"And please tell me one more thing. Is it not the case that what creatures do, and what moves them, is how you know what they are? The honey bee is drawn to nectar and makes honey. Certain spiders weave certain webs. Others don't. And so on?"

"Yes."

"You say a thing is what it does?"

"Yes."

"And if a thing is what it does, then does it also mean that a thing does what it is?"

"I've never really thought about that before . . ."

"Take some time and think about it then."

"You know, now that you mention it, I think I do believe that."

"You just think you do?"

"No, I do. I'm certain I do."

"How can a thing be what it does and not do what it is?"

"Exactly."

"So, here is the next question then. If you believe a thing is what it does, and a thing does what it is, then if you discover what you do, will you not discover what you are?"

"Yes. I think you're right!"

"Not me! Hoot, hoot! You! You're right. I'm just an owl asking questions."

"So, if I discover what I do, and what it is that makes me do it, I will discover what I am . . ."

"So you say."

"And if I discover what I am, I'll know better about what I'm supposed to do . . ."

"So you insist."

"Great! But . . ."

"But what, my friend?"

"But . . . how do I discover . . . what I do?"

At this, Ari the Owl couldn't help giggling.

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! HOOT! HOOT! HOOT!"

"What so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. You are just a very amusing creature. I have enjoyed watching you for a long time. Never have you ceased to amaze me."

"What do you mean?"

"So curious and concerned you are about others. So inquisitive and eager to understand them. Yet it never seems to occur to you to examine thyself."

"Examine . . . myself?"

The owl fluttered onto the boy's shoulder.

"My young friend, you are going to find that many answers you seek will be found not out in the world, but in here," he said pointing to his chest. "We owls have an old saying. If you want to know what someone thinks they believe, ask them. If you want to know what they really

believe, watch them—especially when they think no one is looking. When you learn to pay attention to your footprints, you will see what I mean.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Not yet. But in time, you will.”

“So what must I do then, Ari? How do I examine myself?”

“There is a place you can go.”

“A place? What place?”

“A place full of life that never sleeps. You know of where I speak. The plants are many and various. Every species in the forest passes through. At night, the fireflies light up the sky, obscuring the stars, making it easy for an animal to lose its way.”

“The Dark Wood . . .”

“Yes. You must go there. Find a spot. Wait. Listen very closely, following your heart. The answer you are seeking will call to you.”

“Alright,” said the boy, “I’ll do it. Thanks, Ari! You’re the best!”

“Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! You are very welcome.” He felt like telling the boy more, but didn’t. “Well, I best be on my way. Be careful out there, son,” he said, putting his wing on the boy’s head. “I know it’s been hard, but I want you to know I am very proud of you. Always remember to never give up. Keep moving forward. Follow the light. Don’t be afraid.”

“Okay.”

The boy hugged his friend, and then watched him fly off.

“Oh, and just one more thing,” said the owl, turning around and winking at him. “Don’t forget to turn off that brain of yours tonight. Hoot! Hoot! There must be no distractions on this quest. Don’t think. Just be. If you be . . . you will see.”

“Okay. I’ll try!”

“Bye now. . . hoot, hoot. . .”

“Bye! Thanks Ari!” he yelled, jumping up and down.
“Goodbye! See you later! BYyYyE!”

But the boy never saw his owl friend again. Though sometimes, especially late at night, he often got the feeling like he was somewhere nearby watching over him.

Chapter 31

Rise of the Forest Guardian

“That night,” the boy began, “I journeyed into the Dark Wood. As usual, everyone was wide awake. Everywhere I looked, there was dancing, eating, drinking and games.”

“A foolish place,” scoffed Ava. “I’m sure you can understand, now that you’re older, why I never permitted you to go.”

“Henry snuck me there a few times while you were asleep.”

“I knew it! THAT BIG FURRY BASTAR—”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t like it, even when I was little. The Dark Wood was too loud. Everyone was grumpy. And if they weren’t grumpy, they were sad. Even the animals I saw smiling looked sad. It was never long before I asked Henry to take me home. But on the night I talked to Ari, I wanted to go. I remember it was raining. Thunder was rumbling. A part of me felt like delaying the quest, returning when I could hear better. But I was too curious! I needed to know! Wandering the forest floor, I watched and listened carefully as Ari had instructed.”

“Woo!” the animals there cried. “Shake it, baby!”

“I’ll bet ten acorns the black horse wins! Ye haw!”

“Oi! Who wants to fight me next?”

“Everyone kept grabbing me,” explained the boy. “Asking me to join in.”

“Psst! Hey! Kid! Want to try a mushroom? They’re magical!”

“Won’t you dance with me, honey?”

“Hey, get away from him! I saw him first!”

“I put up my hood. Then I made a mask like a raccoon’s so I wouldn’t be recognized. I climbed up into the trees and perched on a branch, hoping it would help me hear better. But it still wasn’t working. Maybe I wasn’t

doing it right, I thought. Perhaps I needed more practice. If only I had bigger ears. If only the thunder and rain weren't so loud. How was I supposed to hear what was calling to me if I could barely even hear my own thoughts? It was then, I suddenly remembered Mr. Owl's advice: 'And don't forget to turn off that brain of yours. Just be. If you be, you'll see. Hoot! Hoot!' I decided that I was just going to listen. Not listen and walk. Not listen and think. Just listen, the same way I often just listened to birds or the wind. Closing my eyes, I relaxed all my muscles, doing nothing but breathing. And that's when I finally heard it."

"Heard what?" asked Ava.

"All at once, the sounds of the forest entered my ears—every conversation, every rain drop, every lightning strike, like a whirlwind in my head. But there was one sound that stood out from the rest. It was faint, coming from very far away. I could barely hear it on the wind. It was a call—a terrible shriek—for help!

"Exactly what Ari had predicted happened. My head jerked in the direction the shriek was coming from all on its own. My body followed. Without even thinking about it, I had already drawn my spear and leaped down to a lower branch to hear better. Tingles shot up my spine. All the little hairs on the back of my neck shot up. My heart started beating uncontrollably, as if it would explode if I didn't find where it was coming from. Forgetting completely about my quest, where I was and even about the deadly lightning striking all around me, I closed my eyes and listened again.

"Every time, I heard it a little clearer. But I also started hearing other faint cries. What was happening? Where were all these shrieks coming from? Had there been something wrong with my ears? Why was I only noticing now? I knew this wasn't the time to think about it. Something had to be done! But I couldn't follow them all

—I had to choose one! Letting my heart decide, I fixed my ear upon the first voice and followed it.

“Passage after passage among the treetops opened for me, as if the very trees themselves were trying to help. ‘Quickly!’ they seemed to whisper. ‘Hurry! This way! There isn’t much time!’ When I finally arrived, I saw two little fawns captured by the biggest, strongest monster I had ever seen. It had a body like a bear, the face of a pig and two little bat wings.”

“Quiet!” snorted the beast, dragging them to his cave. “Quit your screamin’ or I’ll hit your little sister again!”

“But where are you taking us?” the older sister fawn squeaked.

“To your new home. We’re going to—start a big happy family together. He! He! HeEeEe!”

“But we don’t want to! We’re not even the same animal as you. Please, just let us go back to our real home!”

“Not a chance!”

“Help! HELP! HELLL—”

“I SAID BE QUIET! He-yeah!”

“Ahh!”

“Heh! Heh! Heh! I like the way you yelp when I hit ya’. Now, you’re coming with me whether you want to or not! Both of ye’s! There’s nothing you can do! You’re powerless! Do you understand? I own you now! You are my meat. You exist for my pleasure and nourishment! Accept it and give up! There is no escape. No one’s coming to save you!”

“When I saw this,” the boy continued, “the answer to the question I’d been asking finally became clear. *This* was what I was meant for. *This* was the place I was supposed to be. The monster tightened his grip around their necks and dragged them deep into his lair. Little did he know, there was another monster following him.

“The cave was pitch black when I entered, with flashes of thunder and lightning dazzling all my senses.

Even worse was the path—full of forks in the road, pits, traps and dead ends. But none of it stopped me. Having grown up in a cave myself, with you as my teacher, I was used to navigating blind. I knew when to trust my eyes, or my nose, or my ears, or my hands—or nothing at all but instinct. I knew how to distinguish between shadows of things and the things themselves, between echoes and the causes of echoes. I could detect and follow evidence no matter where it led me. Even if it took me somewhere I was afraid to go. I cut through the cobwebs, walked through the den of snakes, remaining perfectly calm when bats started flapping around me. When I reached the end, I saw him fling one of the fawns over his shoulder. The other, he tossed into a pit for later.”

“Wait!” the fawn in the pit cried, “Take me instead. Let my little sister go. I’m all you’ll need. I promise!”

“Heh! Heh! Heh! I like the way you beg too. But it’s no use. Don’t worry, my pretty. You’ll get your turn! I’m sure you’ll be delicious too, like this little one. *Sniff, sniff.* Oh, she smells so fresh! Hee! Hee! Hee!”

“No! Please don’t!”

“Aw, look how cute you are, trying to jump out of my pit. Go on, keep trying. You’ll keep yourself nice and warm that way. What’s the matter? You crying? Oh, now look what you’ve done. You’ve made your little sister start crying too. I better go console her. Bye, bye for now! Hee! Hee! Hee!”

“NoOoO!”

“As the monster carried her sister away,” the boy continued, “she tried to get out of the pit. But every time she jumped, she tumbled back down.”

“No! NO! NoOoO!”

“Her legs weren’t strong enough.”

“Help! Please! Someone!”

“Her hooves couldn’t grip the edges. She was just about to give up, but decided to try one last time.”

“HELP!”

“Just before she fell, I caught her arm and quietly pulled her up.”

“W-w-who are y-y-you?”

“Shh. Not too loud or he’ll hear us. Are you alright?”

“Y-y-yes, I think so. But who are you? And what are you?”

“I am to him what he is to you.”

“My sister! He’s got my little sister. I have to find her!”

“No, it’s too dangerous for you. Leave it to me. I’ll save her. You need to get out of here.”

“But—”

“Trust me.”

“But—”

“Now! There is no time!”

“A-a-alright,” she stuttered. “But how will I know which way to go?”

“Just follow your nose. Now, hurry!”

“Farewell then, stranger. Good luck—and thank you!”

“She licked me on cheek and galloped away. I picked up my spear, following the screams down the last tunnel, to the monster’s den.”

“Please don’t hurt me!” the little one begged. “Don’t eat me! I’ll do anything!”

“Anything? Heh! Heh! Now, lay down! Don’t move! And don’t you dare scream for help . . . or I’ll go back for your mummy and daddy.”

“I crawled overtop of where the monster was standing. The fawn must have thought I was a big spider, because when she saw me she shrieked even louder than before. When the monster looked up, I pounced and buried my spear into its neck.

“The fawn ran as the two of us wrestled and exchanged blows. I got onto his back and choked him with my whip. But he was too strong and flung me off. Then he pulled out my spear and snapped it in two like a twig.

Picking me up, he pinned me against the wall of the cave, biting into my shoulder. That's when I jammed my finger in his eyes, just like you taught me. When he let go, I punched him in the throat, kicked him between the legs and rammed his head into a boulder—a boulder I then picked up and smashed into his skull until he was dead."

"Well, that's quite the story," said Ava, whose favourite part was clearly the end. "So that was the deer you saw by the spring?"

"Yes," the boy replied. "She was the fawn in the pit. I guess I just didn't recognize her. She was so little back then. Now she's all grown up and has fawns of her own. I didn't realize it happened so long ago. But I'm sure you can see how it never would have happened without you."

"I suppose," sighed Ava, finally conceding. "But there's still one thing about your story that doesn't add up."

"What's that?"



“It’s about your talk with Ari. You said you noticed how every animal played a part in making the forest better.”

“I did.”

“But what you failed to mention was how no animal ever does so for that reason. The bee isn’t thinking of the forest when he works, only of himself and his hive.”

“True.”

“Nor does the beaver, squirrel or any other animal. Every creature acts in its own self-interest, even when its actions benefit all.”

“That’s right.”



"So, my question for you is this. When you went out that night and rescued those fawns, how was it in *your* interest? What personal benefit did you receive? What was in it *for you*?"

"I . . . do not know," replied the boy, puzzled. He thought about it—and Ava let him think. "I guess . . . it was just . . . the looks on their faces." He remembered coming out of the monster's cave and seeing the fawns run into their parents' arms:

"Mother! Father! You'll never believe what happened to us! A monster carried us into a cave! And inside, there was an even scarier monster! Some kind of giant spider! Or bat!"

"No it wasn't," the older sister interrupted. "It was some kind of other creature. Not a monster, but a hero! He saved us!"

The boy almost approached to introduce himself—but stopped when he realized he might frighten them.

"Now enough of that, you two," he remembered the mother saying, licking their fur. "All that matters is you're safe now."

"That's right," added the father. "We best be getting home before others come. Quickly now, follow me!"

"After that," said the boy, "I went home and slept better than I ever had before. I woke up and ate a big meal. Water quenched my thirst again. Strawberries tasted sweet. I was happy—because I knew I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing. And the more animals I saved, the happier I felt. If that isn't a benefit, then I don't know what is."

"You are a strange creature, indeed," Ava replied.

"I know," sighed the boy.

"Still, I think you may have helped me realize what my own purpose is, for in all my life nothing has made me happier than watching you grow into the warrior you've become. I may not have these 'feelings' of yours. I may not

believe in kindness, mercy or heroism. But I do believe in you. If the same feelings that made you so powerful are leading you this way, then I promise to do everything I can to help you get there and never leave your side.”

“And I promise to never leave your side either, Ava. You took me in when no one else would and never gave up on me. Whatever lies ahead, we’ll do it together.”

Chapter 32

Bullies at the Border

As our hero and his companion embarked on their great journey toward the sun, the heroine of our story was beginning a much smaller, but no less important expedition. The morning after her vision, she woke up, rolled out of bed and dropped right to her knees in prayer! Even faster, she hurried into the next room and shook awake her parents. Grabbing their hands, she prayed again! Then she brought them to their neighbour's house, where they watched in awe as she climbed up and kidnapped Narissa through her bedroom window—saying another quick prayer as she did so—before rushing them all to church! She found Jean-Pierre and, over some tea and biscuits, finally got to tell him about her vision.

The four of them sat on the edge of their seat as she tried to recount every detail—Narissa, of course, making sure she didn't leave out the spooky parts. After much discussion, they all agreed that God had chosen her for a great mission, but that it still wasn't clear when, where or how that mission would begin, and that, therefore, it was best to wait. God, Jean-Pierre, explained to them, was answering their prayers. Revelation was merely the first step. What He needed from them now was patience as the rest of His plan unfolded. Sending them forth, he advised everyone to keep it a secret for the time being, for the Dragon King had many spies, and then assigned each of them a special task. Sophie's father would continue building the ship. Even if it was no longer an escape vessel, God might be able to use it in other ways. Sophie's mother was to meet with her daughter every day in a secret place and pray together. He asked if God had provided them with such a place and they both nodded. And last, he turned to Narissa, bestowing upon her the most important task of all, that of never leaving Sophie's side.

The rest of the week, the three girls camped out in our heroine's closet. As Julie paced back and forth reading aloud adventure books, Sophie lay on the floor taking notes. Narissa sat at the desk drawing up blueprints for "adventuring dresses," often stealing Sophie away to take measurements, as well as eating most of the candy. Late into the nights, they took turns guessing what the hero might be like. Her mother was quite convinced he'd be some kind of angel or demigod. Narissa sketched a savage warrior with enormous muscles, wearing almost no clothes. Sophie imagined a knight in shining armour, seated upon a glorious white horse—a sword in one hand and the Book in the other. Discussions quickly devolved into hot debates. But the hostility never lasted very long. In the end, they would always agree that, whatever he was like, God knew best. They should trust Him and, instead, focus on getting Sophie ready to receive him. Blowing out the candles, they'd each take out their most precious medallion, crystal or rune and pray for God to grant her wisdom.

Meanwhile, sitting upon the throne in his fiery black mountain fortress, the Dragon King was getting ready too. With his sword, he carved new laws into stone, forbidding anyone from talking about saviours. A new secret police force was established. Choadá was the sheriff. Zeetan was the chief detective. Together, they hunted down terrorists. Trials were held in a shiny new courthouse, where the Honourable Kanga Kang administered justice. Foot patrols and random searches increased, with severer penalties for not paying taxes.

But worst of all, reader, were the bullies. The Dragon King's child soldiers! Relentlessly, they preyed on the children of villages like Nibelheim—beating them up, stealing tools and kidnapping pets. Eventually, it got so bad that Jean-Pierre had to call an emergency secret meeting at the temple.

When everyone was settled and the coast was clear, he approached the pedestal, took a very, very long puff of his pipe and addressed their concerns.

"My friends," he began, "many years ago, our forefathers arrived on these shores with the divine mission to spread the knowledge of God. They built our village . . . sent out explorers who befriended the native inhabitants . . . taught them how to read, farm and live in peace. We have continued in their footsteps. Seven new temples have been erected along the coast. We opened hospitals . . . boarding schools. In this very room, some of you are old enough to remember, the great treaty was signed. For the first time in a millennia, the tribes of this coast were ready to unite in harmony." Many of the parents listening smiled as he spoke, remembering the good old days.

"But then . . ." Jean-Pierre continued, his countenance falling, "the dark one came." He pointed out the window at the mountain fortress. "That tyrant who awoke the dragon. In just one day, everything we built was destroyed. Now, we live as prisoners within our borders. Borders that feel like they're getting smaller and smaller. Soon, there may be none at all. And it's this I'd like to discuss with you today.

"As many of you know, a terrible tragedy recently occurred. Two Nibelheim girls were severely beaten. A third was stuffed into a sack with her puppy. When a boy heard their screams, he hurried to the nearest grown-up, who arrived just in time to cut them loose. The girls were taken to the hospital, but the boy remained behind to try to find the puppy. The bullies, who he thought had left, ambushed him next. They pushed, mocked and threatened his family, daring him to stand up and fight one of them. The boy accepted the challenge and . . . well . . . I don't think I need to tell you what happened next."

As Sophie listened from the front row, she peeked over her shoulder at the boy he was talking about. He had

two black eyes and a pad around his neck. One leg was in a cast. His right arm hung in a sling. When she noticed him looking back at her, she tried her best to smile, hoping it might cheer him up. But it didn't work.

"What we do need to talk about," Jean-Pierre continued, "is what should have happened. I know how hard it can be, children. The injustices we suffer at the hands of the Dragon King's soldiers are outrageous. But we must remember that, as People of the Book, violence is not our way." Approaching the altar, he picked up the big golden copy. "We've all taken a vow—sworn an oath to spread God's word peacefully. Even when we're mocked. Even when we're threatened. Even if we're sentenced to death for it." Then he opened the Book and started reading. "If someone steals from you, let them have what they've taken. If someone gets angry and strikes you on one cheek, turn and offer them the other. Love, forgive and pray for those who persecute you." Gently, he closed it. "We are to be the light in a world of darkness, teaching and showing the way, but never forcing anyone. And certainly never getting into fights." Even more gently, he placed It back on the altar. "I am not angry at Felix, children. And neither is God. But as your priest, I must ask you now—do you understand the promise we've made Him? Can you promise that this will never happen again?"

The boys of the village all nodded and answered, "Yes, Father." But there was one boy among them who couldn't help raising his hand.

"Yes, Alex?" asked Jean-Pierre. "Do you have a question?"

The boy was short, blonde and incredibly plump. Wiping his glasses, he stood up straight, trying his best to avoid bumping into anyone. Narissa rolled her eyes.

"Ahem! Ahem! Excuse me, sir! But I was wondering if you'd heard about the rumour going around. You know—the prophecy."

"That's right!" another boy added, getting excited. "The prophecy foretold by the elder of Beville! He said God's sending us a warrior!"

"Yes, I've heard it too," added yet another boy. "We might not be able to fight back, but he might. Right?"

Soon, all the boys were chattering about it.

"I heard he's as strong as a gorilla!"

"I heard he can walk on hot coals!"

"I heard he has a big sword!"

"Who could it be?"

"One of the Guardians?"

"Maybe it'll be one of us!"

Jean-Pierre was trying to answer, but no one could hear him over all the excitement. It wasn't until Narissa stood up and shushed them that they finally settled down.

"Yes," Jean-Pierre answered. "Indeed, children, what you've heard is very true."

Alex was about to shout out, "Hurray! We're saved!" but quickly covered his mouth when he noticed Narissa cocking back her fist, glaring at him like she would knock his teeth out if he tried. No one interrupted Jean-Pierre. It was a rule Narissa had imposed on the other children ever since she was young. A rule, of course, Jean-Pierre frequently had to remind her wasn't valid. The only thing that ever seemed to restrain her was when Sophie held her hand. With lightning speed, our heroine reached out and caught her fist just before it flew.

"However . . ." continued Jean-Pierre, thanking Sophie with a wink. "We must remember that the prophecy doesn't change God's plan for us. No, children. It will not be a Guardian. That order was destroyed long ago, the last remnants of its knights perishing at sea. Nor could it be one of us. God cannot command a Person of the Book to kill anymore than he can order two and two to make five or squares to have only three sides. Being a rational, logical, consistent God, He will never give contradictory di-

rections, break promises or violate covenants. No, if a warrior comes, he will not be one of us. He will be an outsider . . . a stranger . . . a wanderer. . . raised not by an order in an academy, but by God Himself in nature. Judging by past warriors God has sent. . .” Jean-Pierre picked up his pipe again. “We can only know one thing for sure. . .” Puffing it, he gazed around the temple at all the pictures on the wall—glorious paintings and sculptures that told the story of the Book. Everyone went dead silent as they waited for him to finish. “We’re all going to be in for a big surprise. Now, unless there are any more questions, let us pray.” The People of the Book put their hands together and bowed their heads. “Lord, we thank thee for thy blessings. Please, fill our hearts with love. We forgive the Dragon King’s child soldiers for their wicked deeds, pray for their liberation as much as our own and apologize for when we sometimes wander astray. In the name of the holy, sacred, almighty One, Amen!”

“Amen!” everyone repeated.

As the People of the Book slowly started exiting the temple, Sophie peeked over her shoulder again.

“Oh, Father,” she whispered. “Look how sad Felix is! Won’t you go talk to him, please? I’m afraid he still hasn’t forgiven himself.”

“If you’d like,” he whispered back. “But if you ask me, I think he’d rather talk to you instead.”

“Hmm?”

“Haven’t you noticed the way Felix looks at you?” butted in Narissa. “And how often he looks at you?”

“No,” she answered, spinning around in her seat to check. But he looked away just in time.

“Well, he does!” Narissa continued, glaring at him. “I’ve caught him many times! And interrogated him! And, while he has not yet confessed his sin, I have indeed confirmed that—Hey! Are you listening to me?”

“Oh, Father,” sighed Sophie, this time clinging to his

arm. "I beg you! You're so good at cheering people up. And I think it's a man he needs to talk to, not a girl. Don't you agree?"

Her father nodded.

"Hold on!" moaned Narissa. "I don't agree. What about me? I can go talk to him. I'm great at cheering up boys."

From the pew behind her, she heard the chubby blonde boy snicker.

"What was that, Alex!?"

"Nothing!"

"Why I ought'a—"

This time, Sophie's father caught her fist.

"You can't, remember? You need to stay with Sophie. Can you do that for me?"

A great big smile bent across Narissa's face.

"Yes, Mr. Toussaint!"

"Thanks," he answered, trying his best to pry off her hand without hurting her. Standing up, he asked them to wish him luck. "And maybe you two could get Mrs. Toussaint a glass of water."

"That would be lovely, dear," sighed Julie, dreamily. "Sorry, I don't know what's come over me. Suddenly, I feel dizzy."

Sophie's father wandered to the corner, where Felix was slouching. When the boy noticed him, he tried his best to sit up straight. But the pain was too great and he ended up wincing instead.

"How's the arm?" the tall, burly man asked.

"It's alright, I guess . . ." he answered.

"And the hand?"

Felix peeked under the bandage.

"The doctor said I fractured my knuckles."

"Oh? How'd you manage that?"

"I tried to punch one of them," answered Felix, using

his other hand to demonstrate. "But . . . ended up hurting myself more."

"Well," chuckled Sophie's father. "If you make a fist like that, you're bound to break something. How did the fight start?"

"They started calling me names."

"What kind of names?"

"I'm sure you can guess . . ."

Sophie's father nodded.

"Then they started pushing me, saying they would go after my sister next. When they told me what they planned on doing—I guess that's when I lost my temper."

"Well, don't let it get you down. You did something brave."

"I don't feel very brave," the boy sighed, slouching again.

"Sophie seems to think you are."

In an instant, he straightened back up.

"She does? She said that?"

"Many times," chuckled her father again. "After all, not every one of her actors lets her strap fireworks to them—or hang them upside down on a wire—or saw them in half in a magic show. I take it you'll be appearing in her next play too?"

"I auditioned last month, but I haven't heard back from her yet."

"Well, she's been a little busy lately. But I'm sure she'll let you know soon. Say, why don't you come over for dinner this week? I'm sure she'd be thrilled to have you."

"O-o-okay!" the boy blurted out, wishing he hadn't stuttered. "I love—ugh, I mean—I'd love to!"

"Great. We'll see you soon then."

Sophie's father began turning back around, but suddenly Felix reach out and seized him by the arm.

"W-w-wait. Please . . ."

"Yes?"

"Before you go, there is something else I've been meaning to ask you."

"Sure."

"Is it true . . ." he said gulping. "That you beat up the Dragon King once?"

Sophie's father looked over his shoulders, checking to see if anyone else was listening.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Everyone," answered Felix, shrugging. "But I want to know if it's true. The Dragon King rode into town trying to kidnap one of the girls. You drew a sword from the sheath of one of his soldiers and fought him with it—and won."

"It wasn't a fight. I was just trying to stop him, that's all."

"Well, whatever you did, I was wondering if maybe you could teach me sometime."

"No. I'm sorry," he answered, looking over his shoulders again. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because—you heard Jean-Pierre. That's not our way."

"But you did it."

"That was different."

"How?"

"I wasn't yet one of the People of the Book. It's true. I confronted him. And when it was over, I nearly killed him. But just before I struck, Jean-Pierre stopped me, saying that if I wanted to live here and marry Julie, I had to let him go. I would advise you to do the same, Felix. Forget about fighting. Listen to Jean-Pierre. Focus on God. Trust in His plan. Prayer is the greatest power. Remember—a well-forged soul is far stronger than steel."

He tried to turn around again, but Felix kept pulling him back.

"Even so—maybe you could teach me just a little? I'm

not asking you to teach me to kill or hurt anyone. Only how to defend. You know. . .” Sophie’s father noticed him glancing at Sophie again. “In case I ever need to protect someone too . . .”

“Alright,” he finally relented. Then, leaning forward, he whispered into Felix’s ear. “As soon as you can walk again, meet me in my shop. Come alone and don’t tell anyone.” The boy’s eyes lit up with wild excitement. “Deal?”

“Deal!”

They were just about to shake hands, when suddenly a shriek was heard coming from the front row, followed by a crash. Sophie’s father rushed to the front, where he found Julie lying on the ground, barely breathing.

Chapter 33

Dark Discovery

That afternoon, Sophie borrowed a sledgehammer from her father's shop and smashed through her closet floorboards to an even secrete place. Out of a little chest labelled "All or Nothing Box," "Warning! Dangerous!" and "The Big Guns," she drew her most powerful ancient relics and prayed like she had never before.

"Lord, make our hero strong!" she'd repeat. Poof, reader! Just like that, another new monster would ambush him on his journey, further sharpening his killing skills. "Lord, make our hero temperate!" caused him to suddenly lose things that were precious. Prayers for his wisdom resulted in him tumbling into another of nature's labyrinths. The more she asked for him to be just, the worse his luck would get, tempting him to lie, cheat or steal to get ahead.



For every prayer that he have faith, he'd reach the next horizon, only to discover more of the same. For every prayer that he never lose hope, he'd lie awake at night full of doubt and despair. For every prayer that he be charitable, he'd make another big mistake that brought him to his

knees, begging for forgiveness. By the end, he was so kind and powerful, reader, that many believe even God must have been surprised.

“Did you really have to kill every last monster back there?” complained Ava, shaking the blood from her fur.

“Mmmhmm!” he answered with a big smile.

“What I don’t understand is why you insisted on using your bare hands. With that new bronze spear tip you forged, you could have got it done a lot quicker and easier.”

“Well, sure,” the boy shrugged. “But where’s the fun in that?”

“And that crocodile you wrestled this morning? I suppose that was just for fun too?”



"No. It's bad manners not to wrestle a crocodile. Bad luck too!"

"Shall we stop and rest?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

"You don't look very fine. Look at your back. It's all blue and purple."

"Ah, that's nothin. Golly, I sure am hungry though! What do we have left to eat?"

"Well, let's take a look." She put the bag down and started nosing through it. "You have broccoli . . . broccoli . . . and more broccoli. And some slimy spinach."

"Woo hoo! My favorite! Pass it over, please!"

Ava slid him the bag.

"Look," she said, noticing some footprints. "A bear has crossed into this valley. I wonder if it's Henry."

"Henry . . ." sighed the boy, sadly. "I hope so. I'd give anything to see him again."

"Yeah, me too. But don't worry. I'm sure we'll get our revenge one day."

"Revenge? No, I mean so I can apologize to him."

"Apologize!?" Ava roared. "What in the world could you possibly have to apologize for!?"

"For not being a better friend."

"Surely, you can't be serious . . ."

"Listen," the boy explained. "I know what Henry did was wrong. But it wasn't all his fault. If I'd known how lonely or hungry he was in winter, maybe I would have been able to help him. He made a mistake. And everyone makes mistakes sometimes. I'd forgive him for it if he'd let me. Maybe he would forgive me too."

"You're a strange, strange creature," sighed Ava for about the hundredth time that spring.

"Yeah," the boy sighed back with his mouth full. "I know . . ."

Finally, he was ready to fulfil his destiny.

"Say, do you smell that?" he suddenly asked, sniffing the air.

"All I smell is monster guts, thanks to you."

"No, not that." The boy leaped onto a boulder to get a better view. "There is something different about this valley. I think there's a big lake nearby. . ." *sniff, sniff*, "a really, REALLY big lake! And look at those finches up there!"

"What about them?"

"Their beaks are different!"

"So?"

"So—when animals look different it's usually a sign that something on the land is different." He cupped his hand over his eyes and squinted down the slope. "WAIT A MINUTE," he gasped even louder. "LOOK! THERE'S SOMETHING DOWN THERE!"

Before Ava could respond, he took off running.

"H-h-hey—stop! Wait for me!" She hurried after him, but he'd grown too fast and she couldn't keep up. When she reached the bottom, she found the boy standing perfectly still, gazing at something only he seemed to recognize.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I . . . I . . . I don't believe it!"

He rubbed his eyes and squinted—a habit he'd acquired ever since crossing his first desert.

"You don't believe what?"

When he opened his eyes again, it was still there.

"A fortress!" he gasped.

The structure was tall, grey and made of heavy stone bricks. A long, spiky wooden fence with blood stains encircled it. The windows had bars—preventing anyone climbing in . . . or out.

"A fortress?" inquired Ava. "What's that?"

"A building . . . designed for great battles."



“But you’ve never seen such a building before. How can you be so sure?”

“I’ve seen them.”

“You have? Where?”

“In my dreams,” he replied. “In my imagination. I can’t explain it, Ava, but I’ve seen structures like this before. I drew one just like it on the wall of our cave.”

“But if this place was designed, then that means there must be a designer.”

“A designer,” the boy continued, “who must have imagined similar things as me.”

Ava took a step towards it, but the boy stopped her.

“Wait. . .” he said, drawing his spear.

“What?”

“Be on your guard. I think there might be traps.”

“What makes you think they laid traps?”

The boy shrugged. “It’s what I would have done.”

The path to the fortress was quiet and marshy, flooded with a shiny black ooze. All but the tallest of trees had been chopped down, trapping in a thick, misty fog. Flowers were faded, droopy and full of razor sharp

thorns. The only sound he could hear was the cawing of crows.

"I don't like this place," whispered Ava.

"Yeah, me neither," the boy replied.

They crossed a rickety bridge over what must have once been a moat. It led them to a black wall that looked different from the rest. The boy placed his hand on it curiously.

"What is it this time?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," the boy answered, feeling the wood. "I think it might be a door. Look, here's a knob. But it won't turn." Then he noticed a little hole next to it. "I wonder . . ." he mused, looking around.

"How about this?" asked Ava, pointing to a strange object. "I've never seen a log like this before. Or is it a rock?"

The boy knelt down and examined it, noticing a hole similar to the door's. He dug his hands into the surrounding mud and started feeling for—

"Ah hah!" he cheered, pulling out a key.

"What is it?"

"Watch . . . I'll show you."

As soon as the boy stuck it in the hole, the top sprang open, making Ava flinch. When he peeked inside, he found something even more surprising.

"A shield!" he cried. "And a bow! Look at these arrows, Ava! They're much better than mine! And—" Beneath them, he found another key. "I knew it! Here it is!" Slinging his new equipment around his shoulder, he approached the black wall and inserted it. Only this time, instead of the top opening, the wall itself shifted.

"Don't you see?" said the boy as it creaked open. "This is the way in! The door! And this over here," he added, finding a piece of wood and flint. "This is a torch."

"Be careful," Ava warned, watching him light it. "I don't like the look of this place." The inside of the fortress

was even blacker. "There is something in there," she said, sniffing the air. "I can smell it. This passage wreaks of death."

But the boy didn't seem to mind at all.

"I'm not afraid of death," he declared, holding up his spear and entering. "You coming?"

Ava stood in the doorway, astonished by how much he'd changed. It reminded her of the first time he explored the black wall of the cave.

"If you want to pursue power," she remembered telling him, "... truth ... or any other good ... then you must first look inward and face your darkest fears."

For the longest time, he'd been scared of the dark. Especially the bats. But after Hoppy died, he finally worked up the courage to enter. Now, he was perfectly comfortable in the dark. Bats no longer startled him. They even started obeying his commands.

"Ava?" he asked again.

"Right," she answered, snapping out of it. "Yes. I'm coming!"

The cobwebs were so thick that you could hardly take a step without getting a mouthful of spiders. Worms squished between his toes. Flies tried crawling in his ears. Only the flame drove them away. As quick as he could before choking, he hurried around the room lighting other torches. When he could finally see, he discovered he wasn't in a room at all, but some kind of chamber that branched into several corridors.

"Where to now?" asked Ava. "The passage to the left seems to have fresher air, and I think I can hear running water coming down the passage on the right."

"Whichever way we least want to go," the boy replied, "that will be our path." He looked for the corridor with the most skulls and bones, where most of the black ooze seemed to be coming from. "This way," he said, trying not to gag.

Every few steps, there was another torch to light. There were also several barrels and boxes. Some contained more arrows or keys. Others were full of fancy shells. In one very decorative chest, he discovered a golden quadrarang—a four bladed hooked cross, far sharper and more accurate than his boomerang. He secured it to his belt next to his whip and ninja stars.

“What is this place?” he whispered, entering the next big room. Everywhere he looked, there were cages, pots and chains with handcuffs on the ends. “There are monkey bones here!” he gasped, examining them closer. “And rabbit bones too! Turtle shells . . . reindeer antlers . . . elephant tusks.” In the middle of the room was a large pit with spikes at the bottom. “A torture chamber! What kind of monster could do such a thing?”

But Ava didn’t answer, for something even more troubling had caught her attention.

“Hey . . . kid . . .” she whispered to him.

“What?”

“Come here. You might want to take a look at this . . .”

Turning around, he found her sitting perfectly still, staring at a wall. Slowly, he approached from behind her and raised up his torch. What he saw there was so shocking, he almost dropped the light. Someone had painted a picture on the wall. A picture of a boy who looked just like him.

“Who’s there!?” he roared, spinning around and readying his spear. Sweat dripped from his forehead and his heart started pounding. “W-w-who’s there!?” He was twitching and twirling in circles—as if he were worried someone was going to pounce at him from behind. “WHO’S THERE? Who’s spying on me? Come out at once! SHOW YOURSELF!” He might have fallen into the pit if Ava hadn’t brought him to his senses.

“Hey!” she barked. “Get a grip! There’s no one here but us!”

"Show—"

"I SAID there's no one here! What's gotten into you?"

"I . . . I . . . I . . ." he stuttered, finally calming down. "I don't know. I thought maybe someone—"

"It's just an old painting."

"Old?" The boy wiped the sweat from his eyes and looked closer. "You mean . . . that isn't me?"

"It can't be."

The boy crept forward and pulled some of the cobwebs down.

"You see?" she said, drawing his attention to how much taller the figure was. "One of his eyes are missing. It can't be you."

"Not . . . me?" our hero gasped curiously. "But if it isn't me . . . who is it?"

"And look over here," said Ava drawing his attention to the rest of the wall. "It isn't just one boy, but two."

"You're right . . ." he gasped again. "But look how similar they are. You think they're brothers?"

"*Were* brothers, more likely," she answered, tearing down more cobwebs. Then she pointed down a corridor, where the paintings seemed to continue. The two friends looked at each other and nodded.

" . . . Only one way to find out."

With every step they took, more of the story seemed to unravel.

"In the beginning," whispered our hero, examining each image closely, "there were two boys who grew up in this forest together. They laboured . . . built tools. . . and learned the art of war." The third painting showed them surrounded by animals, with birds placing laurels on their heads. "They became the most powerful . . . respected . . . and feared creatures in all the land. But then . . ." In the fourth painting, only one of the boys was wearing the laurel. A dove was perched on his shoulder as he smelled a flower and cradled a lamb. The other boy sat alone in deep

thought. "Something happened. They had some kind of falling out." The fifth showed a great war breaking out. One boy sat upon a horse with moose, elephants and reindeer at his side. The other commanded tigers, wolves and snakes. The good boy seemed to be winning the war. However, the sixth painting showed that a terrible surprise was waiting for him. Suddenly, the hallway ended. Holding up his torch, our hero beheld the seventh painting. What he saw there, he recognized only from his nightmares. "A dragon . . ." he gasped, raising up his spear and bracing himself. It was so real-looking too, reader—like it might jump out of the wall! Then . . . from around the corner . . . they heard a terrible, hungry growl.

"RrRrRrrr . . ." it echoed. "RrRrRRR!"

Our hero and Ava spun around, ready to fight.

Shhh-k . . . shhh-k . . . they heard next.

Was that the sound of its tail dragging? Or the body of one its victims?

"We must be quick!" our hero whispered, gripping his spear. "Or he'll scorch us alive!"

"RrRrRRR!" it continued. The shadow it cast emerged . . . and kept growing bigger . . . and BIGGER. "WoOoOo . . . AhHhHh . . . AHHHH!"

They were just about to charge when they saw what it was.

"ACHOoOoOo!" sneezed a little mouse, its small voice echoing through the halls. When it saw them, it let go of the cherries it was pulling and stood up. "Oi! Who in the blazes are you two!? And how did you get into my castle!?"

Chapter 34

The Legend of the Bad Boy

“Well, are you just going to stand there?” asked the mouse with crossed arms. “Or are you going to answer the question? I haven’t got all day!”

“I-I-I’m sorry,” the boy answered. “We didn’t know this was your fortress.”

“And what’s with the spear? Oh, I get it. Trying to sneak up on me, eh?” The mouse raised his fists and shuffled closer. “Come on. Put ’em up! Put ’em up! I ain’t afraid of you or your furry friend. I’ll fight both of ya’ at once!”

“No! Wait! We don’t want to fight!”

“Surrendering already, huh?”

“We thought you were a dragon!”

“A dragon? How could there be a dragon? Everyone knows the dragon is gone. But . . . I suppose it would be pretty easy to mistake me for one. So I’ll let you off—this time.”

“Why you little . . .” growled Ava. She looked like she was about to stomp on him before the boy signalled her to stop.

“Thank you, sir mouse!” he said, bowing down cordially. “We appreciate your restraint and mercy.”

“Say, you two aren’t from around here are you?” Scurrying up the boy’s leg and onto his shoulder, the mouse started sniffing him. “You smell different too. Wait a minute,” he gasped. “You’re not by chance . . . human . . . are you?”

“Well—”

“Tell me, did you come down from the Caverns of Cruelty just now?”

The boy thought about it.

“I think so. If you mean the tunnel up north. It led us into this valley.”

"And before that . . . did you by chance cross the Desert of Despair?"

"There was a desert. I admit, there were times I felt like giving up, but I didn't."

"And before that . . . the Descent of Doubt?"

"Yes, that sounds about right."

"The Tundra of Transgressions . . . Isle of Illusion . . . Plateau of Poverty . . . and Forest of Fear?"

The boy scratched his head, trying his best to remember.

"Yeah, I think so," he answered, shrugging.

"By the beard of Cornelius! You **MUST** be human then! And if that's the case, then you **MUST** come with me. The Mysterious, Mysterious Master has been expecting you!"

"The mysterious who?"

"The Mysterious, Mysterious Master—Cornelius Cornington! The oldest, wisest creature in all the land!"

"Oh . . ."

"Sheesh, you must be from real far away if you haven't even heard of him."

"You said he's expecting me?"

"Mmmhmm!"

"But . . . how?"

"That's just it! We don't know! It's one of his many mysteries. But everything he says always comes true."

"Wow!" gasped the boy, turning to Ava. "I'd sure like to meet this Cornelius! Maybe he'll be able to help us."

"Helping is what he does best!" said the mouse. "I'd be happy to introduce you to him. It's my job, in fact."

"Your job?"

"Mmmhmm! I'm the groundskeeper here. Protector of that which is most important. The Mysterious, Mysterious Master said you'd be wandering in here one day and appointed me as your escort." The mouse hopped off the

boy's shoulder, somehow knowing the boy would catch him. "The name's Chick. Pleased to meet you!"

"It's nice to meet you too!"

With his other hand, the boy reached into his pocket, pulled out some seeds and sprinkled them for his new friend.

"Such good manners too!" said Chick with his mouth full. "Alright! Follow me!" Then he scurried back down to the floor. "This way!"

The mouse led them out of the fortress into a courtyard, where the mist was so thick they couldn't see the walls. Some areas felt hot and humid. He had to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Other spots were so cold he could see his breath.

"Psst," whispered Ava. "Are you sure this is a good idea? We don't know anything about this mouse. I don't trust him."

"Don't worry. We'll be fine."

"How can you be so sure it isn't a trap?"

"I'm not. I just know I'm ready if it is."

"You do know I can hear ya', don't you!?" complained Chick. "How typical of a wolf. I tell ya', if my master hadn't foretold your coming too, I'd kick your butt out of here!"

"Like you could!" she growled back. "Listen to the mouth on this runt," she said to the boy. "Can you believe this? If he says one more thing to me, I'm going to eat him for lunch!"

"Say, Chick, what kind of rock is this?" asked the boy. "I've never seen one so black before."

"Ah, that is called igneous rock. Long ago, during the Battle of the Brothers, a volcano erupted nearby, flooding the grounds with lava. When it hardened, it turned into this."

The boy found a red rock too. One that was shiny and warm to the touch. He put it in his pouch with

some of the other strange stones he'd collected on the journey.

"How much longer?" complained Ava, noticing the clouds turn dark. "There's a storm coming."

"Relax! It's just a little further. Look and see for yourself." Through the mist, a dome-shaped cave appeared. It was covered in old, dead vines and had holes in the sides almost like windows. "This is where the two boys first lived. Now the Mysterious, Mysterious Master dwells within. I'm going in this way in case he's sleeping," he said, pointing to a small crack. "You two can go the other way in."

"Which way?" asked the boy.

"You'll know it when you see it. Heh! Heh! Bye for now!"

"Wait!" barked Ava. But it was too late. He was already gone. "Why that little—"

"At least it doesn't smell so bad," remarked the boy. "Come on. Let's try and find the door."

"I've got a bad feeling about this . . ."

The two friends found the entrance just before it started pouring rain. It took them through a winding corridor full of finger paintings, into a large open room. All at once, memories of his own childhood cave came flooding back.

"Look!" he gasped, nudging Ava. "It's a bed! Just like mine! This must have been where the boys slept." The water which poured through the ceiling had eroded most of it, but you could still make it out. He pushed it into a drier part of the room so it wouldn't be further damaged. "And—over here!" he cried next. "A fire pit!" Half buried in the dirt, he found some logs, some of which were shaped like animals. "Toys . . ." He saw rocks that looked similar to the ones he and Hoppy had collected—among them, a tiny ape-shaped stone that reminded him of Lumpy's baby brother. Rinsing the mud off in the rain and

drying it with his cuff, he placed it in the bed, where it would be safe.

"Welcome, strange one . . ." a voice suddenly called from behind. The boy spun around, but didn't see anyone. Then came the sound of little footsteps. He glanced down, and from the shadows emerged an old guinea pig with a long, shaggy white beard. "At last, we finally meet."

"I found 'em in the fortress, Master," said Chick, helping him climb onto a rock. "He opened the gate and went in, just like you said."

"Magnificent!" said the guinea pig. "Truly, he must be just as powerful as we imagined."

"Greetings, sir," the boy replied, bowing his head. "It's an honour to meet you."

"No, the honour is mine. Please, come closer and sit. We have much to discuss."

The boy sat down cross-legged in the driest spot he could find, with Ava next to him.

"Go on," said Chick. "Ask him a question. Anything! The Mysterious, Mysterious Master knows all . . ."

"Excuse me, sir . . ." the boy began.

"Yes?"

"You said, 'At last we meet.' Is it really true you knew I'd be coming here?"

"Yes, Chosen One. 'Tis true."

"Hmm? Chosen One? I've never been called that before."

"OoOo!" said Chick, rubbing his hands together. "This is going to be good!"

"What do you mean by 'Chosen One?' Chosen for what?"

"Listen carefully now!" the mouse added. "And no interrupting!"

The Mysterious, Mysterious Master paced back and forth deep in thought before answering.

"Tell me, my son," he began. "Have you ever had a dream that felt more real than being awake?"

"Yes . . . I have. Many times."

"And have you ever gotten the feeling you're not alone . . . or . . . like you're being watched . . . even when no one else is around?"

The boy nodded.

"And have you ever gazed at a sunset, wondering whether what you can see is all there is . . . or whether there are realities and powers beyond the seen realm?"

"I have."

"And when wondering about it, have you ever thought about where everything came from in the first place? How it got here? Why there is anything at all, instead of nothing?"

"How did you know I've wondered these things?" gasped the boy. "Is it you who's been watching me?"

"Only in my dreams," replied the guinea pig. "Only in my dreams."

"But if you've seen me do things before I do them, then from where are you watching?"

"From the place I call . . . the Beyond."

Lightning struck close to the cave just as the Mysterious, Mysterious Master spoke the words. The old guinea pig didn't even flinch, almost as if he knew that was going to happen too.

"The Beyond?" the boy gasped. "Where's that?"

"The Beyond is the place that never was, but always is. A place that is everywhere and nowhere. It cannot be arrived at no matter how far someone journeys and can only be entered when halfway between awake and asleep. 'Tis a world full of faeries, chimeras and purple buffalos . . . entities more beautiful than in your most wonderful dreams . . . and more terrifying than in your darkest nightmares. Eternally, good battles evil there . . . shadowlands, above which hovers the eternal light."

"And you . . . saw me . . . in this place?"

"Many you's—for from the vantage point of the Beyond, past, present and future can be seen all at once."

"But if you saw where I came from and that I'd come here, then you must have seen what I'm going to do next."

"And that is why I have been waiting here for you. To help prepare you for the quest that lies ahead, now that you are ready."

"What quest?"

The guinea pig and mouse looked at each other and nodded.

"I think it's time you learned the whole story, young one." He pointed to a small silver shell. "Blow on this . . . and the question you ask will be answered."

The shell looked just as old as the Mysterious, Mysterious Master. Picking it up, the boy brought it to his mouth and emptied his lungs. The sound echoed through the walls and out into the forest. Then the ground started to shake. They heard the sound of stomping and cawing, as if a stampede was headed their way.

The Mysterious Master raised up his arms and shouted into the storm:

*Hear ye! Hear ye!
Animals of the forest unite!
Hear the Legend of the Bad Boy!
A tale of horror and fright!*

"What's happening?" asked Ava, losing her balance. "Do you hear that? Horses! And elephants! And—"

But before the boy could answer, hundreds of mice, chipmunks and birds poured into the room. A turtle offered its shell for the boy to sit on. Three little bunnies hopped into his lap. Baby birds fluttered onto his head, using it like a nest. When everyone was finally settled, the room fell quiet and turned pitch black.

“Once . . . long ago . . .” began the guinea pig, “when oak was acorn and the depths were flooded by rain . . . a great dragon dwelt in our lands.” As he spoke, lightning would flash, casting shadows on the wall of the things he described. “It had . . . BIG SCARY TEETH! And . . . FIERCE, FIERY BREATH! A long whippy tail . . . that would reach out . . . and SNATCH LITTLE MICE UP for dinner!”

Using a twig, he hooked and poked at his listeners’ feet, making many of them shriek. Never had our hero been so mesmerized.

“Chaotically, it ruled—scorching fields and trees as it pleased! Ruthless slaughter! Unquenchable thirst for blood! Every night, the animals of the forest cried out, begging the stars above to send a deliverer! A warrior-animal who was both mighty and just! For many years, their petitions went unanswered. But then . . . one day something incredible happened.”

Everyone braced themselves as the guinea pig took a deep breath and raised up his twig.

“An EARTHQUAKE,” he yelled, slamming it down, “of SHATTERING magnitude SHOOK the valley.” It felt as if it were happening all over again. Even the boy couldn’t help flinch, reader, when the room started shaking. He had to hold on extra tight to the bunnies to keep them from hurling away. “The TrEmOrS cAuSeD aN AVALANCHE that CRASHED into Turtle Island, sinking it into the sLiThErY SwAmP of EeLs! Out of the mist, two strange creatures crawled.

“Called ‘human’ for their supernatural intelligence, they quickly mastered the elements and arts of war. The bigger they grew, the more POWERFUL they became. The more POWERFUL they became, the more peace and order spread across the land. Twasn’t long before they reigned SUPREME over all others! There was only one thing that stood in their way.”



"The dragon!" a brave little mouse called out.

"Oh no!" called out another, covering its eyes.

The bunnies buried their heads in the boy's lap.

"That's right . . ." answered the Mysterious, Mysterious Master. "And how right you are to shudder. But do you think that dragon scared the boys? Hmm?" He poked the mice some more—tickling their feet with his twig. I suggest you do the same, reader, if you ever read this aloud to someone. "Hmm? HMM? Were they SCARED? WERE THEY!?"

"Eek!" they cried, recoiling. "No! They weren't!"

"No indeed . . ." Cornelius huffed. "These animals were different. Though gentle as doves, they had hearts like vicious tigers. RAWR! Nothing scared them! And together they went to the dragon's DARK LAIR. 'Twas a battle the likes of which no creature has ever witnessed."

The Mysterious, Mysterious Master didn't even need to describe the battle. The shadows did it for him. Darting around the room, they bent into the shape of a dragon and two boys. Every time it breathed fire, a gust of wind would burst into the room. With every blow dealt, lightning would strike nearby. *Crash! BANG!*—Like that. Poor Chick nearly blew right out the window, but a monkey caught him just in time.

"When it was over, they emerged victorious! The dragon retreated over the horizon never to be seen again. Finally, the forest was at peace. Thus began the Second Age, when the two young kings ushered in an era of prosperity. Rivers started flowing again. Flowers bloomed. Birds sung songs of hope and love. All bowed down, offering allegiance. The only question that remained was how the forest was to be governed. But on this, the boys could not agree."

The Mysterious Master whirled around his twig. Suddenly a tornado began to emerge above the cave.

"Realizing there could be only one king . . . they de-

cided to settle it . . . by the ancient law of combat.” The winds of the funnel kept blowing faster and faster! “Ushering in the Third Age! The era . . . of . . . WAR!” Everyone had to hold onto something now, or they’d be sucked out the top. Everyone, but the Mysterious, Mysterious Master, who the wind didn’t seem to be touching at all, apart from his beard. “I KNOW . . . because I was THERE—watching from my grandfather’s nest! The night the volcano . . . BLEW UP! And the ground . . . CRACKED OPEN! AhHhHh!” he yelled with everyone. It felt like riding on a roller coaster. One he seemed to be the only one enjoying. “MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!”

The shadows of the two boys whirled around the room, their swords CLASHING every time lightning struck . . . the ground SHAKING and JOSTLING them about as shapes of animal-armies stampeded into each other. The boys battled, surrounded by fiery hot lava, up onto the bad boy’s fortress—and, finally, up onto their old cave. The same cave everyone was gathered in now!

The bad boy, who fought much more aggressively than the good boy, was winning. With his dirty tricks and cheap shots, he’d blind and handicap his brother. But just before dealing the final blow, the good boy’s quicker reactions and superior balance prevailed. Not paying attention to his surroundings, the bad boy tripped and fell backward. It was over! The good boy had him pinned against the ground, his sword pressed against the other’s neck. All he had to do was thrust it forward and it would have been over. But that’s when the bad boy used his dirtiest trick of all.

Knowing how much his brother loved him, the bad boy lied—saying he was sorry and begging for forgiveness. If spared, he would change his ways. They would rule together just like they used to—if only the good boy would disarm. Falling for the trick, the good boy dropped his sword, offering a hand up instead. The bad boy accepted

with one of his hands—but secretly reached for the fallen sword with his other. With all his rage, he plunged the blade through the good boy’s heart and pushed him down into the pit.

As the storm began to fade, the Mysterious, Mysterious Master pointed to the top of the cave, where a ray of sunshine started shining through, illuminating an object stuck in the floor.

“It was then that my grandfather prophesied. One day, a new good boy would come. He would draw the sword, Enchiridion, from the stone, embark on the same quest as its former bearer and finish what he started. Guardian of the forest! Hand from above! Hope of animals who cry out in the wilderness! DESTROYER of monsters!”

Putting the bunnies down, the boy stood up and slowly walked over to the sword. The good boy’s skeleton surrounded it, both hands placed on his broken heart. Careful not to disturb the bones, our hero reached out, gently gripped the hilt and pulled. Effortlessly, it slid from the stone. The animals all gasped as he held it up, examining the glistening blade.

“When do I begin?” he finally said, turning to the guinea pig.

Hearing this, the crowd of animals erupted into cheers.

“Hurray!”

“Did you hear that?”

“He’s going!”

“I knew the prophecy was true!”

“So did I!”

“We’re saved!”

“Now, Chosen One!” answered Cornelius. “And you must hurry! For the army of the Dark One grows stronger every day!”

“How do I find him?”

“Chick will be your guide.” The little mouse scurried up his leg onto his shoulder again. “Take with you also the Horn of the Good. Blow on it if you are ever in need. We will come to your aid.”

Sheathing the sword in his sash, the boy picked up the silver shell and placed it in one of his back pockets.

“But most importantly, do not forget the legend you learned today. The enemy you face is cunning. Lies are his greatest weapons. You must not be tricked by them. The truths he tells are even more deceiving. Do not think that because he uses the same words as you, he speaks the same language. What you call ‘justice,’ he calls ‘crime.’ Peace and happiness are torture and genocide to him. Freedom of others is his enslavement. The time will come when he will try to persuade you. You must not listen! Trust only what your heart tells you. Judge only by actions. DO NOT turn your back to him and never EVER disarm.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t!” replied the boy, nodding. “I promise.” Then he turned to the crowd. “Farewell, everyone! And thank you!”

Chapter 35

Lucky Tumbles

With a hoarse voice and sore knees, our young heroine limped out of her closet and into the kitchen. She was hoping to find her mother cooking breakfast—or perhaps Mr. Stanley sipping on a nice cup of tea. But the room was completely silent and empty.

“Ahem!” meowed Samson hungrily, drawing attention to his equally empty bowl. “Haven’t you forgotten something? AGAIN!?”

“Oh! I’m sorry, kitty!” she gasped, rushing to the cupboard.

“You should be!”

“Here you go. And a treat for you too!” He snatched it from her palm and gobbled it down. “. . . Forgive me?”

“NO!”

“Aw! Thanks!” she sighed, scratching him on the head. “Perhaps I should see if Mother’s hungry too.”

As quietly as she could, she tiptoed around the corner and peeked into the master bedroom. “I could make her breakfast in—” But her mother was still fast asleep. Even worse, the glass of water Sophie had brought the night earlier was still full. “Sorry, Samson,” she whispered, gently closing the door. “Looks like it’s just you and me this morning. But that doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun, right?”

Samson spent the rest of the morning having very much fun indeed, for there was nothing quite so amusing to him as watching Sophie try to balance on a stool.

“OoOo!” she howled, trying to put the dishes away. “OoOo!” One by one, they dropped to the floor, smashing into hundreds of tiny pieces. “OoOo! OoOo! Eek!”

“AH! HAH! HAH! HAH!” he laughed. “Oh my! This is even better than the time she tried cleaning the chandeliers. AH! HAH! HAH! HAH!”

Eventually, she herself fell.

"Oof!" she cried, tumbling into the laundry basket. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." Then her stomach growled. "Hmm, I wonder what I should cook this morning."

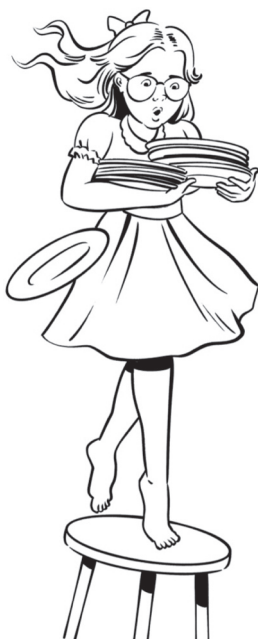
With all her might, she tried to open the jam jar. But it was no use. Her tiny little hands weren't strong enough. Nor could she lift the jug to refill the maple syrup. For the first time in her life, she had to eat her pancakes plain.

Indeed, just about everything seemed to go wrong that morning, reader. The hot water ran out for her bath. While stretching, she slipped and twisted her ankle. Unable to hold on to the laundry outside, the wind nearly blew her away. Out of breath, with the house messier than when she started, she decided to take a break.

"I know," she remarked to Samson, who was already on his third nap. "I'll go help Father and his friends. Aren't they putting up the new windmill today? Maybe I can fix them some sandwiches . . ."

Sophie changed into her overalls and put on her sun hat. Then she strapped on her goggles, rubber gloves and boots that were way too big for her body. The sight of her marching across the farmyard dragging a snack wagon was impossible not to laugh at.

"Howdy!" she beamed, curtsying to them. "Lovely day, isn't it?"



"Splendid," they answered, kindly pretending something else was making them chuckle.

"Good afternoon!"

"Hi, Sophie!"

"Howdy to you as well, young lady!"

Her father smiled. "So nice of you to join us."

"Look!" she said, reaching into her basket. "I hope you're hungry. I brought you all some—" But then she noticed all the empty dishes next to the men. "Oh . . ." she sighed disappointedly.

"Sorry, Sophie. We just finished eating," said her father. "Mrs. Stanley brought us a pie."

"I see . . ."

She tried her best to smile, but couldn't. Noticing this, the men suddenly began to realize they were still hungry.

"But—on the other hand . . ." her father continued. "I suppose it was a little on the light side, wasn't it fellas? I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"Really!?" Sophie gasped, perking up.

"Yes, me too," agreed one of the men.

"Me three."

"Oh, good!" Sophie sighed, clapping her hands together. "Because—guess what? I brought LOTS!"

The men lined up at the wagon, where they each received the biggest plate of food they had ever seen. By the end, no one could move. But it was well worth seeing Sophie happy again.

"Is there anything else I can help with?" she asked, collecting their plates. "Golly, this windmill sure is big!"

"Well," her father answered, "Not unless you can do some heavy lifting." Sophie gulped and turned red, remembering the last time she had tried. "Maybe you could check on your mother for me."

"She's sleeping."

"And Narissa?"

"She's busy with a purification ritual."

Some of the men started chuckling.

"I wonder what she did this time," remarked one.

"Could be anything," said another.

"I heard she tried to administer a public whipping."

"To that Alex boy."

"Again?"

"No. Not a whipping. A spanking. I know—because it was my shed she broke into. Took the paddle from my canoe—along with some tar and feathers."

"And a rope, stake and matches from mine."

"It's a good thing Jean-Pierre arrived just in time to stop her. Though, if you ask me, that boy was happier on the rack!"

"Hmm," sighed Sophie, scratching her chin. "Maybe I should go help her . . ."

"I think that's a good idea," chuckled her father.

"Try the hill," suggested one of the men. "I think I saw 'em there this morning."

"Okay!" she answered, curtsying again. "Thanks! Bye for now then, everyone! Oh—and please don't hesitate to call me if you get hungry again!"

"Farewell," they all answered, tipping their hats.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the village, Narissa and Jean-Pierre were hard at work:

"You know, you're a real trooper," she told him. "I think you might just be the best priest who ever lived! Strong too—for an old guy!"

"Thank . . . you . . ." he answered, between breaths.

This was another important part of the People of the Book's religion, reader. Besides lots of praying and book-making, everyone had to talk to the priest about mistakes they'd made. The priest would help them come up with a plan for making things right. Then he had to help them carry it out. Unfortunately for Jean-Pierre, the only thing Narissa was better at than making mistakes was devising the most extreme, unnecessary punishments for herself.

Everything from putting a bar of soap in her mouth for a week to crawling around the village in rags and chains, offering to be a slave. On this occasion, she'd sentenced herself to pushing a boulder up and down a hill. Not just any hill either, but the tallest she could find. And because of how much she loved talking, it usually meant he had to do most of the work.

"I'm sorry I'm such a handful," she sighed. "I just get so angry sometimes! It's that boy—Alex! Do you know what I heard him say? He wants to marry Sophie! The nerve!"

"Go on, my child . . . please, tell me more . . ."

"I wasn't really going to burn him alive. I just wanted to scare him a bit. You know? Instill in him a proper fear of God!"

"And . . . do you think . . . that worked?"

"No," sighed Narissa, disappointed.

"Try . . . to remember . . . what I told you about . . . imagining what it's like . . . to be in the other person's shoes."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Alex just likes her a lot . . . I'm sure you of all people . . . understand why."

"The problem is he's just not worthy of her! But . . . I suppose he isn't wrong to want to."

"It's good to . . . want to protect our friends."

"Maybe I didn't choose the best way of expressing that."

"Perhaps not . . ."

"My mother says I have my father's sense of justice."

"That you do . . ."

"Just like he used to say I had mother's big heart. I sure miss him a lot."

"I miss him too . . ."

"Jean-Pierre, I'm going to try harder to be good from now on! I promise! I'll do the breathing exercises every

day, just like you showed me! The meditation too! Then you won't have to spend so much time with me . . ."

With one last great push, they reached the top and collapsed from exhaustion.

"There is no place I'd rather be," he answered, putting his arm around her. She snuggled up to him very close. "And you know what else you have of his?" Jean-Pierre asked.

"What?"

"His smile."

"Really?"

"Not to mention his choice of boulders . . ." he then chuckled. "Did your father ever tell you that he used to bring me to this same hill when he was your age?"

"No . . ."

"He was very hard on himself—always taking on burdens too heavy to bear. It made him feel weak. But it also made him strong in ways others weren't. What I'm trying to say is—do keep trying, Narissa, but remember there is a reason God made you this way. And soon, he will reveal it to you. Never forget that He loves you very, very much, like I do. If your father were here, I know he'd be proud of you."

They sat together watching the clouds until Sophie finally arrived.

"There you are," she called up to them, huffing and puffing. As usual, she only made it halfway up before needing a break.

"Don't worry, I'll get her," said Narissa.

She walked down and scooped up her friend—"Eek!"—carrying her all the way to the top like she weighed nothing.

"Last stop!"

"Oof! Thanks!"

"So," said Jean-Pierre, smiling as he watched. "How is our young prophetess doing today?"

"Tired," she answered with a yawn.

"It's no wonder with all that praying you've been doing."

Without warning, Narissa pulled Sophie's skirt up and grabbed her knees.

"Hey! What are you doing? That tickles!"

"Hold still!"

"NARISSA!"

"Mmmhmm!" she answered in a doctor's tone. "It's just what I thought! Prayerpateller bursitis!"

"Prayerpateller what?"

"Bruises from too much praying!"

"Really?" gasped Sophie. "Jean-Pierre, is that a real condition?"

"I'm afraid it's been known to develop from time to time amongst our people."

"I'll bet you've been sitting too much too . . ." said Narissa.

Sophie hopped away before she could finish that thought.

"Maybe you should have a rest," chuckled Jean-Pierre.

Narissa agreed. "Yeah, Sophie! You need a break!"

"But . . . I am taking a break," she replied. "I've come to help."

"No—I mean a REAL break. From everything!"

"I think Narissa may be right," said Jean-Pierre. "It is very kind of you to offer. But the most helpful thing you can do now is recover. Tell us, Sophie, what do *you* feel like doing today?"

"Anything?"

"Besides playing with me," Narissa clarified.

"Well . . . I suppose it's been a long time since I've sat in the garden."

"You mean, the garden on the eastern border?" asked Jean-Pierre. "The one you and your mother made?"

"It's called Elysium," said Narissa. "But they didn't really make it. They let it grow wild."

"It's my favorite place to relax," said Sophie. "Though, I'm not really sure why."

"Well, there must be a reason," said Jean-Pierre. "It's like you say. There are no coincidences."

"Perhaps I'll do some baking first . . ."

"Your strawberry danishes!?" Narissa interrupted.

"Mmmhmm!"

"OoOo! Maybe I should go too!" she said, turning to Jean-Pierre, "Didn't you say I had to stay with her?"

"Yes," chuckled Jean-Pierre. "But not at the expense of fulfilling your religious duties. No, if Sophie is to be alone today, then there must be a reason for that too."

"Won't you save me one then?" Narissa begged.

"Sure!"

"I'll see you as soon as I can," she said, picking our heroine up and squeezing her. "I'll miss you!"

"Oof! I'll . . . miss . . . you . . . too . . ."

"Farewell for now," said Jean-Pierre, getting ready for the next push.

Narissa plopped Sophie down and joined him. Then they watched—trying not to giggle too loud—as Sophie struggled to descend without slipping.

Chapter 36

The Place Where the Sun Goes

“So let me see if I understand correctly,” said the boy, walking up the final slope. “The bad boy left this valley in search of the dragon . . .”

“Yep!” answered Chick, sitting on his shoulder.

“He found it in a hollowed-out volcano . . .”

“Mmmhmm!”

“A volcano on the other side of this mountain—a place you call ‘the coast’ . . .”

“Affirmative!”

“He defeated the dragon, but didn’t kill it. Now it obeys his will . . .”

“And he uses the dragon,” added Ava, “to enslave surrounding inhabitants. He’s built a fortress on the volcano and has amassed an army. An army that comes to plunder your valley for wood, oil and fur . . .”

“Yes, I’d say that about sums it up!”

“A fire-breather,” whispered Ava. “We’ve never fought one of those before. I heard they can’t be killed. Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Chick, I have another question. You said this Dragon King’s army comes with axes and saws.”

“I did.”

“Then it must be an army of more than just lions and tigers.”

“Quite correct!”

“Then . . . who is wielding the weapons?”

“Weapons? Who else but humans . . .”

The boy stopped in his tracks.

“Humans? So . . . there are others like me here. . .” He gazed up the slope at the gleaming, golden ridge.

“Oh, yes! Many! Though, not as many as there used to be. When the bad boy grew up, he killed most of them.

The rest, he turned into serfs and slaves. Which reminds me—this is my last stop!”

The mouse hopped off the boy’s shoulder and slid down his cape.

“Already? But I have so many more questions about humans!”

“Sorry,” replied Chick, pointing up. “Boss’s orders! But don’t worry, you’ll learn all you need to know soon enough.”

“Well, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your help.” The boy bent down and gently stroked the mouse on his head, giving him the last of his seeds. “I’m going to miss you!”

“I’ll miss you too! Bye for now! Oh, and don’t forget about that horn. Remember, if you are ever in need, blow on it! We’ll come and help!”

The mouse and wolf locked eyes.

“... Mouse” muttered Ava with a nod.

“... Wolf,” Chick muttered back. The next instant, he was gone.

Turning around, the boy cupped his hand over his eyes and gazed back up at the golden horizon. It was very close now—only a short walk away. His heartbeat started to quicken. The little hairs on the back of his neck pricked up. Restlessly, his hands, fingers and toes began to squirm—his imagination running wild with pictures of all his hopes and dreams.

“Well, kid,” sighed Ava, recognizing the look in his eyes. “I’d tell you to approach with caution, but if there is one thing I’ve learned over these years, it’s how incapable you are of holding back your feelings. I doubt you can even hear me right now, can you? Go then—in whatever manner feels best. No matter what we find, I’ll be right behind you. Okay?”

Without even realizing it, our hero had already begun to move. The walk turned into a jog. The jog into a sprint.

The closer he got, the brighter the sun grew. He heard waves, seagulls and laughter—laughter that sounded just like Hoppy's. By the time he was at an arm's reach, his eyes were full of the happiest tears. But nothing could have prepared him for what he saw when he reached the top.

An infinite, golden blue lake! The cleanest, freshest air he had ever smelled! The softest grass beneath his feet! White shores, upon which nestled what he had always dreamed of! It took him three or four deep breaths before he could speak. Even then, there were no words to express how he felt.

"GOLLY!" was all he could utter.

Ava sat down next to him.

"So . . ." she asked, more intrigued by his reaction than the view. "Is it what you expected?"

"No!" he gasped. "And yes! I mean—I don't know! I can't explain it!"

"What is that?" she asked, following his gaze.

"It's . . . it's a village!"

"A village? What's that?"

"A place . . . where people live."

The boy looked around and realized he was standing in a field on the edge of a long mountain range. There were bunnies and flowers at his feet, as well as strawberries.

"And I suppose that's the Dragon King's fortress," said Ava, pointing southwest. "Looks like the fastest way there is down this hill, through that little forest over there and around the human habitation. But if you ask me, I'd say we should wait and camp here for the night. If we're going to fight a dragon, we'll need some rest."

"Why not rest in the village?" asked the boy.

"Because—it will be night soon. We won't make it in time."

"Sure we can! If we run!"

“Well . . . I can’t.”

Ava shooed away some of the bunnies and laid down, exhausted from the journey.

“Alright, we’ll camp out here then,” said the boy.

“Good. Then it’s settled.”

“But . . .”

“But what?”

Ava watched as the same excited expression washed over his face, and he began hopping up and down like an excited puppy.

“CAN’T I JUST GO TAKE A PEEK!?”

“Fine,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “Just a peek. But you’d better hurry or there won’t be much to see.”

“I will! I promise!” he yelled, taking off running again. “Don’t worry! I’ll be right back!”

Chapter 37

The Girl in the Garden



How quickly our hero's heart raced as he dashed down the slope!

"Just a peek!" he kept reminding himself. "Just a peek!" He weaved through the trees and hurtled over bushes, careful not to step on any bunnies or turtles. "I just . . . need to . . . see . . ."

Soon, the trees started thinning out. The sound of the giant ocean waves grew even louder. When he began to see the edge of the wood, he slowed down, tiptoeing and eventually crawling. Ducking behind a bush, he cupped his hands over his eyes and looked down into a little meadow.

"What a strange rock and log those are," he thought, spying a flowerpot and bench. He sniffed the air. "Something delicious must be down there." Then he looked up a little higher and his heart began to pound. "Is that . . . what I think it is . . ." It was hard to tell because the sun was directly behind the figure. Rubbing his eyes, he decided to take one step closer to get a better view. But just as he put his foot down, he felt something soft and doughy, like a pot-bellied pig.

"OoOoOof!" a voice squealed.

Horried that he might have accidentally stomped on one, the boy scrambled backwards. When he looked down, however, he was even more surprised. It wasn't a pig at all, but another boy.

"Hey! What are you doing?" the stranger whispered, standing up and brushing himself off. "Get your own spot! This one's mine!"

He had short blonde hair, chubby cheeks and strange clear rocks strapped to his eyes.

Our hero was too stunned to respond.

"Wait a minute . . ." the other boy continued, leaning forward. "You're not one of us. Don't look like much of a pirate either. What are you then, some kind of foreigner? Hello? Why are you staring at me like that? You deaf or something?"

Still, he couldn't move.

"Oh," sighed the blonde boy then, patting him on the back. "I think I know the problem. You're a primitive aren't you? Probably don't even know what talking is. That's alright! You still may be smart enough to help me." Then he put his arm around our hero and pointed back into the meadow towards the bench. "See that girl over there? That is my lady. Fairest of the fair! One day, I'm going to marry her. Was just about to make my move too . . . until I lost my nerve. So maybe you can do it for me. All that's involved is delivering this letter. You don't even have to say anything. Just walk up and drop it on her lap. Can you do that?"

The boy looked at the note . . . then at the other boy's finger . . . then at the figure on the bench, which the sun was beginning to reveal . . . and nodded.

"Hurry! She's getting up! You have to get going! Now!"

Checking the ground—making sure there were no other boys he might step on—he carefully started tip-toeing forward.

"I said MOVE!" the other boy squealed, shoving him. Down our hero tumbled into the garden, reader, falling straight on his face with a great thud.

"Oh my goodness!" gasped the girl, hearing it. She dropped her basket, rushed over and started poking him. "Excuse me, boy! Are you alright?"

By this point, our hero couldn't tell whether he was awake or dreaming. Still stunned from the last human he saw, he tried to pick himself up. But if you thought he looked silly before, seeing his first boy, you should have seen his face this time.

"Hello?" she asked again, examining his head for a bump. "Can you hear me?" Brushing the dirt from her hand and noticing the rags he was wearing, she stood back up. "You're not from around here, are you?"

When he finally regained his senses, he rose to his feet, shaking the dirt off like a puppy.

"Eek!" she squeaked, hopping backward.

Then he walked up to the girl—much closer than boys are supposed to—and leaned in, examining her.

"Are you . . . a girl?" he asked.

"Of course I'm a girl," she giggled, which made him smile. "So you *can* talk."

He tried to sniff her, but she hopped backwards again just in time to avoid it, sticking her hand out instead.

"Well, allow me to introduce myself then," she said with a curtsy. "I'm Sophie. It's nice to meet you!"

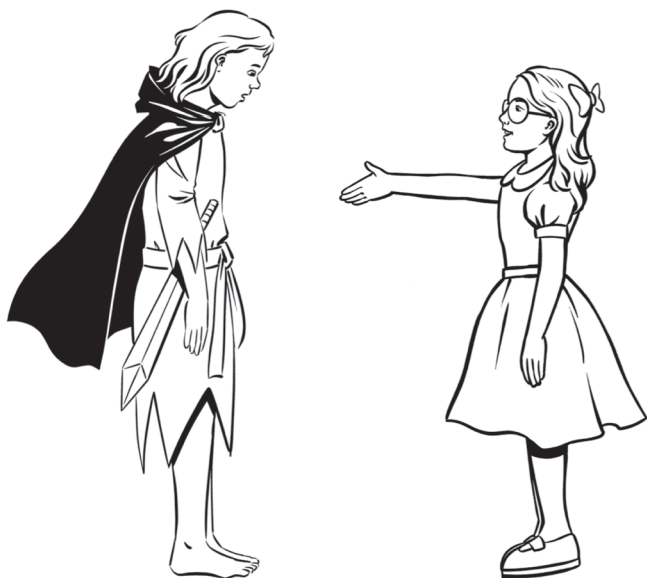
"So-phie . . . So-phie . . . So-phie. . ." the boy repeated, staring at her hand. He wondered what he was supposed to give her. What did girls like?

"That's right," she giggled again. "And what is your name?"

"My name?" He scratched his chin in deep thought.

"Yes, your name."

She had never seen someone stumped by such a question before.



"I am called many things," he eventually responded.

"Nicknames don't count," replied Sophie. "I mean your real name—what you call yourself."

"Oh! What I call myself! Well, in that case I'd say my name was Me. Nice to meet you too!"

"ME?" gasped Sophie. "I'm sorry, but did you say your name is . . . Me!?"

"Yeah!"

She examined his expression for any signs that he might be joking, but could find none.

"I say," she started giggling again, "That's a funny name!"

"It is?" he asked confused.

"Yes! Very much so!"

"Why?"

"Because it's ridiculous!"

"Well, it isn't half as funny as So-phie," he replied.

"My name's not funny."

"Sounds funny to me. What does it mean anyway?"

"My name?"

"Yeah."

Now it was Sophie who was scratching her chin in deep thought. And she looked just as silly as he had.

"I . . . I . . . I don't know!" she gasped, realizing she'd never really thought about it before.

"You see! It is a funny name!" chuckled the boy, "At least my name means something. At least my name means me."

Little did our hero and heroine know, this would be only the first of many funny arguments they'd get into—arguments which, no matter how hard they tried, would rarely end in agreement.

"Me doesn't mean you, silly. Me IS you! And my name does mean something," she said, pointing to herself. "I'm Sophie! Sophie means me!"

"Well, why didn't you say so?" asked the boy.

"It's not something people usually have to say!"

But while they rarely ended up agreeing, they did almost always end up laughing.

"Well, if that's the case," the boy concluded, "then I know what my name is."

"You do?" Sophie gulped, almost afraid to ask.

"Mmmhmm!" He stood up straight and, in his friendliest voice, tried introducing himself one more time. "If 'Sophie' means me. And 'me' is you. Then my name must be Sophie too! Nice to meet you!"

Our heroine looked at the boy with the same silly look on her face that he had when he first laid eyes on her. Only she took a much longer time to recover.

"I say!" she finally gasped. "How . . . how . . . how preposterous! Your name can't be Sophie!"

"Why not?" the boy sighed disappointedly. He was just starting to like that name.

"For many reasons!"

"Like what?"

"Well, for a start, Sophie is a girl's name. And second—"

They could have gone on for hours, reader—and often would! But today wasn't about arguing. There were more important matters to discuss! So, as luck would have it, they were interrupted.

"H-h-hey!" Sophie stuttered, blinded by the sun suddenly reflecting off his blade. "W-w-wait a minute! What's that!?"

"Oh, this?" he answered, drawing it up. "This is my new sword, Enchiridion."

Like a tidal wave, all our heroine's memories of her vision came flooding back.

"I KNOW WHO YOU ARE!" she yelled. "YOU'RE THE BOY WHO'S GOING TO GO ON AN ADVENTURE WITH ME!"

"I am?" he gasped.

"YES! You MUST BE if you have that sword!"

The boy examined it.

"You mean—you know Cornelius Cornington, the mysterious guinea pig too?"

"... Who?"

But before he could explain, Sophie's mother started calling in the distance.

"Oh goodness! She's awake! I'm so sorry, but I've got to get home! Would you like to come with me? There is so much we need to discuss!"

"Well . . . I'd like to, but—" He looked back toward the wood. "I have a friend waiting for me."

"Oh, I see. Well . . . maybe we could meet tomorrow morning then. Do you think you can find your way back here?"

"I think so."

"If not, just come into town and ask for Sophie—Oh!

But we **MUST** do something about your name first. You can't go around calling yourself 'Me' and there is **NO WAY** you're a Sophie. Please tell me—what does your mother call you?"

"My mother?"

"Yes, back home."

"Well . . ." he sighed, lowering his eyes. "The truth is I don't really have a mother. I don't really have a home either."

"**WHAT! NO MOTHER?**" Sophie gasped, nearly fainting. "No one to take care of you!? No one to tuck you in at night!? No one to tell you bedtime stories!?"

The boy thought about it, trying his best to remember the stories Ava told him:

"And then the little boy got skinned, bludgeoned to death and eaten for asking too many **FOOL** questions," they always ended. "Now, you will go to sleep. Understand? Or I'll come over there **AND PUT YOUR LIGHTS OUT FOR YOU!**"

"No . . ." sighed the boy, scratching his head. "Not exactly."

"How perfectly awful! Well, you need to have a name. A proper name. And not just any, but one that suits you. Can you think of one?"

But all the boy could think of now was "Sophie."

"I have an idea," she said. "But you'll have to close your eyes and trust me."

Now, she was the one who was getting a little too close.

"This might feel a little funny . . ." she warned him, placing her hand on his heart.

"You mean . . . like butterflies?" he asked.

"No," she giggled. "I mean in your head."

Sophie used her power to search inside his soul. Memories flashed before her eyes—glimpses of all the pain he'd felt and everything he cherished. She saw the long

journey he'd embarked upon. He was searching for something . . . something he wanted so much, it was almost electrifying.

"Golly!" she gasped, jerking her hand back. "For a little boy, you've sure felt a lot! But you know what, I think I found what your name is."

"You did?" he asked very curiously.

"Mmmhmm! It's Philip."

"Phil-ip?" he repeated.

"Yeah!"

"Wow! But—what does it mean?"

Sophie paused to think of how to explain it.

"It means 'To be without, and to always be searching.' What do you think? Does that sound like you?"

All our hero could do was stand there, staring at her in amazement. How is it that after only one meeting, she seemed to know him better than he knew himself? They heard her mother call again, but he didn't want her to leave.

"Well?" she asked in a hurry.

"When can I see you again?" he asked.

"I told you," she giggled. "Tomorrow."

"Right here?"

"Yes, in Elysium."

"Okay!"

"Well, until tomorrow then, Philip . . ." she said with another curtsy. "It has been so nice to finally meet you."

There was that hand again, reader—as if she wanted something. But what did girls like? Maybe he should give her some seeds, he thought . . . or a slobbery monkey kiss . . . or a scratch on the chin . . . or a pat on the head. Finally, he got what he believed was a very brilliant idea. Being a human like him, she must have wanted what he would have wanted if he'd stuck his hand out.

"Oh! I know!" he said, getting very excited. Reaching

into his back pocket, he pulled out a big, floppy dead fish and slapped it into the palm of her hand. "Here you go!"

The fish smiled up at Sophie crosseyed, with a full mouth of razor sharp teeth. Then the boy held his hand out wondering what kind of fish she might give in return. But that isn't what happened.

"EeEeEeEek! High-ya!" she shrieked instead, tossing it as far away from her as she could. Up it went, far over the garden, landing in the bushes—where the other boy was still hiding.

"Oof!" they both heard. "Ah!"

"Oh my goodness!" she gasped, hiding behind Philip. "What was that?"

Realizing he'd been caught, the boy in the bushes started making animal sounds.

"Ooh ooh! Ah! Caw! Caw! Bawk, bawk! WeEeEe!"

Oh no, reader! The note! Our hero had completely forgotten about it. How silly of him! That must have been what she had wanted.

"Oops! Sorry!" he apologized, drying her hand with his sleeve. "Here! This is for you! Bye!" And off he ran, back into the woods. "See you tomorrow!"

Opening it, she read it aloud.

"Do you like me? Circle . . . yes or no."

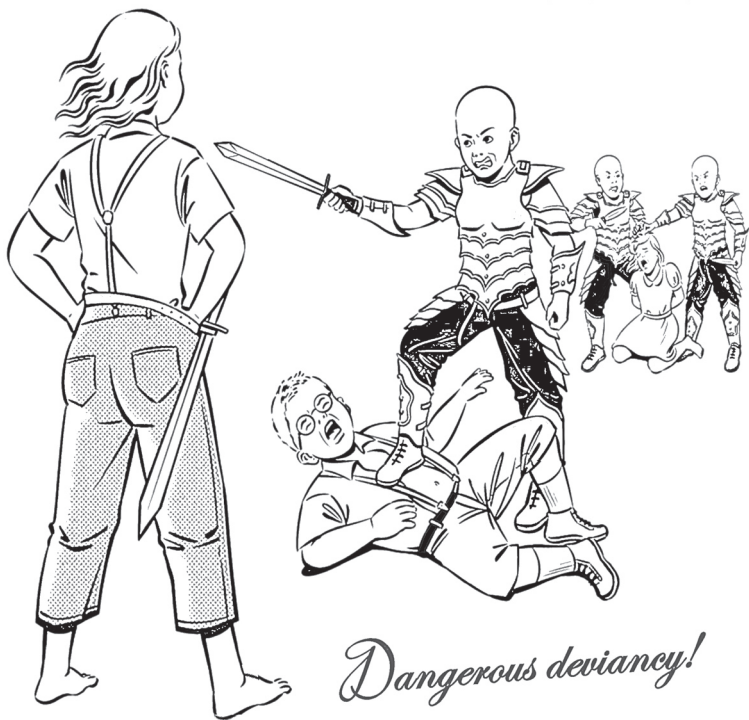
"Oh no!" exclaimed the boy in the bushes. "I forgot to sign it! Now she's going to think it's from him! My whole life is ruined!"

"I say," sighed Sophie, heading back to her house. "What a strange boy . . ."

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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.



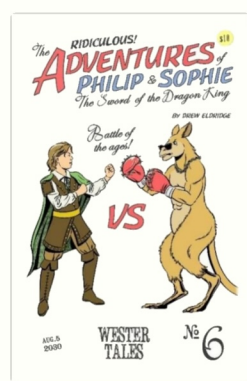
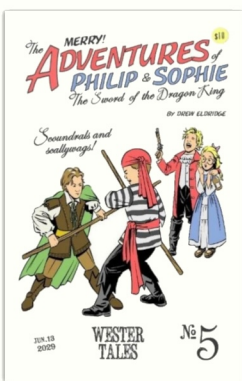
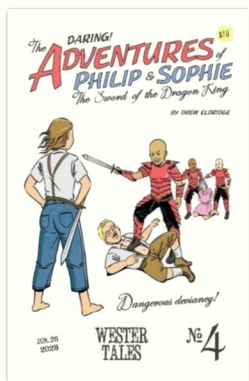
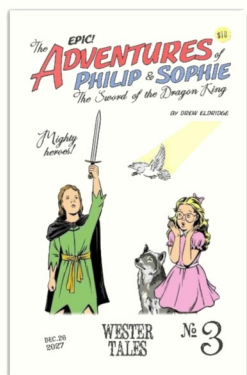
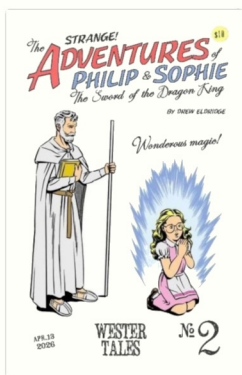
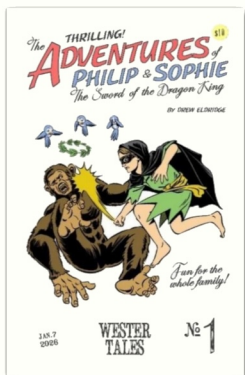
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