

THE GIRL WHO COULD NOT DREAM

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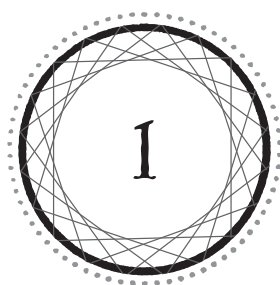
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SOPHIE HAD ONLY EVER STOLEN ONE DREAM.

She'd been six and curious, two not unrelated traits. The dream had been stored in a brilliant blue bottle with a gold-flecked stopper. It was the only unlabeled bottle in the batch, and she'd thought that meant it wouldn't be missed.

She'd spotted it on the top shelf after her parents left (one to the grocery store and one to tend to a customer). She had to haul books downstairs from the shop and pile them on top of a stool before she could reach it. Stretching, she touched the bottle with her fingertips, knocked it off the shelf, and then caught it before it could shatter on the old stained counter below. It took precious seconds to wiggle the stopper out, and she chugged it down without hesitating.

It tasted like fresh melon.

She'd thought she'd see a swirl of mist first, like the squiggly fog that always came before a dream in a TV show, but instead she plunged instantly into the dream. One second she was in her parents' workroom beneath the bookshop, and the next she was tucked into a bed with cupcake-pink ruffled sheets. For an instant, she thought it was her bed, even though she didn't have pink sheets, but then she remembered who and where she was.

Sitting up, Sophie looked around curiously at the cotton-candy wallpaper and the shelves of toys. The owner of this room had a Barbie Dreamhouse and liked horses. A night-light in the shape of a pink unicorn cast a rosy glow over the room. Pink shadows stretched.

One of the shadows twitched.

And a shadowy monster crept out of the closet.

Sophie felt her heart beat deliciously faster. Slowly, so she wouldn't startle the monster, Sophie scooted out from under the sheets. She waited.

The monster skittered left. It dodged right. Sophie pretended to look out the window at the moon stuck between the pale branches of a tree. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted that the monster seemed to have

several tentacles. She looked at it, wanting to count them, and the monster dived beneath the bed.

Lying flat on her stomach, Sophie leaned over the edge of the bed. She lifted up the dust ruffle. Moonlight swept under the bed. The monster huddled in the shadows. Its fur bristled like a cat's.

"Hi, I'm Sophie," she said.

It bared its teeth, three rows of shiny, sharp, shark-like teeth, and growled.

"Shh. It's okay. I won't hurt you." She felt her heart patter inside her rib cage and wondered if it would hurt if the monster bit her dream self with those teeth. She guessed it would, but only until she woke up. "Come on out."

The monster snapped its tentacles like whips, and Sophie scrambled back. Retreating to the pillows, she took several deep breaths. She told herself firmly that she shouldn't be scared. This was what she'd wanted, after all, her very own dream.

Inching forward, she again leaned over the side of the bed. The monster waved its tentacles at her. "You have lovely tentacles," Sophie said. "Like a furry octopus. Did you know that an octopus can open a jar with its tentacles? I read that once. I like books. Do

you like books? My parents own a bookstore. It's nice. We have lots and lots of books." She kept her voice soft and even, as if she were luring out a stray cat. The monster lowered its tentacles. "That's a good monster. You can come out."

The monster scooted forward. Sticking its head out from beneath the dust ruffle, it looked up at her. It had overly large eyes like a lemur's. Its pupils were the size of Sophie's fists and ringed with gold.

"Are you a girl monster?"

It snorted.

"A boy monster?"

It blinked at her. She decided that meant it was a boy monster. He inched out from under the bed. She counted six tentacles. He also had four tiny legs with sharp, curved claws. Squatting beside the bed, he kneaded the carpet with his claws.

"Are you an in-the-closet monster or an under-the-bed monster? The dream bottle wasn't labeled, and we have lots of both. We even have a few on-the-ceiling monster dreams, but those aren't as common." She wasn't supposed to talk about her parents' dream collection. But since she was in a dream, talking to a dream creature, she decided the normal rules didn't apply.

The monster crept farther into the moonlight. His fur was black with hints of red and blue in it. She thought he was iridescent black. She liked the word *iridescent*. She'd learned it just the other week.

"You have beautiful iridescent fur. That means you shine with different colors," Sophie said. "You're a very handsome monster."

The monster purred.

"It's nice that you don't have any slime. So many dream monsters are coated in goo." She patted the blanket next to her. "Do you want to come up?"

He hopped onto the bed. He was about half her size, though if he stretched out his tentacles, she bet he'd be larger. Instead, he curled his tentacles underneath him in coils of fur. She wanted to pet his fur. She wasn't sure she dared. He continued to watch her with his large lemur eyes.

"I bet the dreamer who thought you up was scared of cats," Sophie said. "I've never had a cat. Or dog. Or any kind of pet. I've always wanted a pet. I wish you could be my pet."

The monster nudged her hand with his nose. She felt her breath catch in her throat. He had so many sharp teeth that they couldn't all fit in his mouth. A row of teeth stuck out beyond his gums. He wormed

his head under her hand. His fur felt softer than cotton and smoother than silk. Sophie stroked his head and scratched behind his ears.

Sighing happily, the monster closed his eyes.

She lay down next to him, continuing to pet him. He began to snore, and Sophie bit back a laugh that bubbled up inside her. His snore sounded like a toy train. After a while, she fell asleep.

She woke to her parents' screams.

Uh-oh, she thought. Sophie opened one eye and then the other. Her mother was, oddly, perched on top of a table next to the dream distiller. She held a broom and was brandishing it like a sword. Her father held a fire extinguisher with the nozzle pointed at her.

"Don't move, Sophie," Dad said.

"It's okay, baby, don't be scared." Mom's face was chalky, as if she'd used powder instead of blush on her cheeks. Her voice sounded unusually shrill.

Sophie didn't move.

She was lying on the floor. Her head rested against a cabinet, and her feet were stuck in a pile of sponges and mops. She had the open and empty blue bottle in her left hand. Curled against her right side was a furry warmth.

Her mom tightened her grip on the broomstick.
“Kenneth, what is it?”

“Some sort of badger,” Dad said.

“It has six tails,” Mom pointed out.

Sophie shifted her head slightly. Her monster was curled up beside her, still snoring, but the cupcake-pink sheets and the rose-wallpapered bedroom were gone. She was home in her parents’ dream shop beneath the bookstore. “They’re tentacles, not tails.”

“Badgers don’t have tentacles,” Dad said.

“Sweetie, you know it’s not a badger,” Mom said to him.

“It looks like a badger,” Dad insisted. He inched closer. The floorboards creaked under his feet. He stopped as the monster gave a whistle-like snort in his sleep.

“It looks nothing like a badger. Sophie, did it hurt you?”

“It’s a he,” Sophie said. “And he’s really very sweet. Can I keep him? Please?” She shifted so she could look at the slumbering dream monster. If you ignored all the tentacles and the sharp teeth and the sheer size of him, he could almost pass for a housecat. Maybe a housecat with an enormous appetite.

“Absolutely not,” Mom said.

“I think it’s a wombat,” Dad said. “Or a wolverine. Some *w* animal. Sophie, if you can inch away, I’ll spray it with the fire extinguisher, your mother will incapacitate it with the broom, and then we can look up what it is.” His voice was light, but Sophie saw that his hands were shaking. Her parents were scared, and they were trying not to scare her.

Sophie wrapped her arms around the monster. “Don’t hurt him!”

The monster woke up.

Lashing out with his tentacles, he snapped his jaws and snarled. Her parents rushed forward, but Sophie jumped up to block them. “Stop!” She shook her finger at the monster. “You stop too!”

Cringing, the monster whimpered.

“Sophie, what’s in your hand?” Mom was frowning at the blue bottle that Sophie still had clutched in her hand. “Did you . . . Oh, Sophie.”

“I’m sorry!” Sophie stared down at her sneakers, unable to meet her parents’ eyes. They had told her time and again to leave the bottles alone. “It was only a monster-in-the-closet dream.”

Both of her parents were silent.

The monster growled softly and leaned against her ankles. She bent and scratched behind his ears. He bared his teeth at her parents. “Be nice,” she told him. She risked a glance up at them.

Her parents didn’t look angry, but they did look extremely worried. Sophie felt her heart thump faster, and not in the pleasant way that it had within the dream. Her father set down the fire extinguisher. Her mother laid down the broom. “Tell me the dream,” Dad said quietly.

Sophie described the room and how the monster had emerged from the closet. She told them how she’d spoken to him and how they’d fallen asleep. “And that was it,” she said. “It was a nice dream.”

“You made it a nice dream,” Mom said. “I doubt it started out that way. This monster was undoubtedly meant to eat you.”

The monster made a chirping sound, as if to deny he would ever do such a thing, and he pressed closer to Sophie’s ankles. She caught her balance on the counter. He was heavy. “See, he’s sweet!” she said.

Mom sighed. Sophie looked at her hopefully. She knew that sigh. It meant that Mom was about to cave. “Sophie, we won’t hurt your new . . . friend. But we

will need you to step away from him so we can turn him back into his dream self. Kenneth, pass me one of those dreamcatchers.”

“No!” Sophie shrieked. She threw her arms around the monster’s neck. “Please, I promise I’ll take care of him. You won’t even know he’s here.”

Her father climbed a stepladder and took down a dreamcatcher. It was a pretty one, a circle of soft wood with a spiderweb-like tangle of string in the center. Charms and crystals hung from the strings, and feathers dangled from the bottom. He handed it to Mom.

The monster shrank back and bared his teeth.

“Give him a chance,” Sophie said. “He doesn’t deserve to be sent away. He’s special. Can’t you see? And he likes me.”

“Sophie, dreams don’t belong in the real world,” Mom said gently. “He shouldn’t be here.” Holding the dreamcatcher, she stepped toward Sophie and the monster.

“But he is!” Sophie cried. “Maybe he’s here for a reason! Maybe he’s supposed to be my friend! I want a friend! You never let me have friends!”

Mom halted. She looked pained, as if Sophie’s

words had jabbed her. “That’s not true. You have friends at school.”

“Friends have playdates! Friends don’t keep secrets from each other!”

Her parents exchanged glances.

“And you think this . . . thing will be your friend?” Dad asked. “He’s a monster. He could decide you’re his midnight snack. He could rampage through town. Last thing this town needs is a rampaging monster.” He didn’t say it with much conviction. Sophie sensed she might be winning.

Sophie squatted beside the monster. “If you stay, will you be my friend?”

The monster licked her cheek. He then looked directly in her eyes with his wide lemur eyes and said in a gravelly voice, “Yes. I will be an excellent friend for you, Sophie.”

Mom dropped the dreamcatcher. “He talks!”

Sophie patted the monster’s head. “He’s a very clever monster. Please, please let him stay!” The monster lolled his tongue out and tucked his extra tentacles behind him so he looked more like a cat or a stuffed animal than a monster. He turned his wide eyes on Sophie’s parents.

“Oh . . . well . . .” Dad said. “We want you to have friends. Real friends. But . . .”

Mom knelt in front of the monster. “If you mean my daughter any harm, I will personally skin you before shoving you back into a dream. Understood?”

The monster managed to look solemn as he nodded.

Mom fixed her gaze on Sophie. Sophie had never seen her look so serious. “If we keep him—and I said *if*—you must make three promises to me. One, you will never drink another dream. Two, you will not let anyone see your monster. And three, you will never, ever, ever tell anyone that what you dream can become real.”

Sophie nodded vigorously. She wrapped her arms around her monster’s neck. He wound his tentacles around her waist. One of his tentacles patted her shoulder.

Dad took Sophie’s hand in his. “Repeat the promises.”

“I’ll never drink another dream. I’ll never let anyone see Monster. And I’ll never tell. Can I keep him, please, please, please?”

“There are people out there who might . . .” Dad began.

“Don’t scare her,” Mom said.

“She should be scared,” Dad said. “This is serious. We are taking a risk we might regret, and she must understand the consequences.”

The monster spoke again for a second time. “I will protect her.” He wound his tentacles tighter around her, comfortingly warm.

“Very well.” Mom stood and straightened her skirt. Now that this was resolved, Sophie could tell she was moving on. “We’re having fish for dinner. What do you eat, Monster?”

“Small children,” he said hopefully.

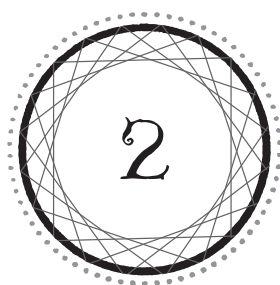
Mom recoiled.

“Joking,” the monster said. “I am telling a joke. I am a funny monster, aren’t I?”

“Hilarious,” Dad said drily.

Monster untangled himself from Sophie and trotted after Mom. “Just a few hamsters would be fine. Or mice. I like mice.”

And that was how Monster came to join Sophie’s family.



SOPHIE LIVED IN A PALE YELLOW THREE-STORY house that her mother called “charming” and her father called “in danger of collapsing if a bird sneezes.” On the third floor, which used to be the attic, were two bedrooms, one for her and one for her parents, plus a tiny bathroom. Both bedrooms had plenty of skylights so you could see the stars (and plenty of buckets under the skylights to catch the rain that dripped in). Her mother liked to keep cut flowers in the buckets. Both rooms also had plenty of books, which were kept away from the drips, and homemade pillows everywhere so you could curl up and read the instant the reading mood struck you.

On the second floor were the kitchen, dining room, and living room, all stuffed with books too. There were so many stacks of books, in fact, that

Sophie could cross from the stairs to the kitchen without touching the floor once. She usually went barefoot so she wouldn't dirty the books as she clambered over them.

Downstairs, on the first floor, was her parents' bookstore, the Dreamcatcher Bookshop. Sophie loved the bookshop. It was a labyrinth of ceiling-high bookshelves that were crammed with new and used books. It smelled of warm dust and fresh cupcakes. The cupcakes were baked every morning by their newest neighbor, a woman who had always dreamed of owning a bakery, and were sold from trays by the cash register. The shop had a bay window with a window seat where you could sit, read a book, and eat your cupcake. It also had three or four red velvet chairs with worn upholstery, tucked between the shelves. After closing, Sophie would intercept the unsold cupcakes on their way to the trash, and she and Monster would curl up on one of the red chairs. She'd eat one cupcake, and Monster would inhale ten. Monster had a sweet tooth, or several.

One of their favorite games was for Sophie to stand at the bay window (shades down so no one could see in) and toss cupcakes across the bookstore. Monster would run, leap, and catch them in midair.

This often led to cascades of books crashing to the ground. Luckily, with his six tentacles, Monster was also skilled at restocking shelves.

But even better than the bookshop with its cupcakes and overflowing bookshelves was the basement. Hidden from ordinary customers was her parents' secret shop, the Dream Shop.

This was where her parents bought and sold dreams.

Sophie loved the Dream Shop more than any place in the world. Dozens of shelves lined the walls, each filled with bottles, sorted by the type of dream they held. There were beach dreams and outer-space dreams and falling-through-empty-air dreams, lost-loved-ones dreams and first-love dreams, ordinary-life dreams and late-for-the-bus dreams, and of course, monster dreams. Each dream was stored in a bottle and labeled with a number and date, and every dream was tracked in a massive leather-bound ledger where her parents recorded notes on the type of dream, as well as details of every transaction with every supplier and buyer.

Her parents bought the dreams in their raw form, caught in a web of threads called a dream-catcher. Sophie's whole family (minus Monster) made

dreamcatchers. Dad would purchase bendable wood to make the circle frame. Mom would weave spider-web-like patterns inside. Sophie would decorate them with crystals and beads and feathers. They then hung them in the windows of the bookstore, filling the entire bay window with sparkles. They'd become the bookstore's gimmick. Buy a book, get a dreamcatcher. Buy a cupcake, get a dreamcatcher. Want an extra? Fine, it's yours. But if it becomes worn, if the strings fray or sag, return it and take a new one. Often enough, these same dreamcatchers came back, either brought in by the customer or "found" by a supplier.

Her parents then took the raw dreams and put them into the distiller, a complex contraption of intertwining glass tubes, valves, and levers that sat on a table at one end of the workroom. The distiller extracted dreams from dreamcatchers, transforming them into liquid, which would drip into bottles. Sophie had never used the distiller on her own, but she had watched her parents countless times and practiced (without an actual dream) when they weren't looking. She hoped that someday her parents would let her use it for real. She'd tried pleading, crying, begging, demanding, and simply asking, but they always said, "When you're older." They had been saying

that for pretty much all of the nearly twelve years of Sophie's life. For now, her daily chore was to dust the distiller. It was boring, but even without ever having worked the distiller herself, she knew it was important to avoid specks of dust in the dreams. Producing a clear dream was a tricky process.

On the opposite side of the room, beneath the stairs, was the somnium. Also made of glass tubes, the somnium was a dream viewer. If you poured a liquid dream into the funnel at the top, the dream would appear in the bulge of glass in the center. It then could be collected again into a bottle for reuse. The somnium was an essential tool for sorting the dreams. They wouldn't know what kind of dream they had until they'd poured it into the somnium.

Sophie liked to wake early and spend an hour or even two before school at the somnium, watching other people's dreams. She never tired of it. She'd tuck herself under the stairs, out of sight, and she'd watch dream after dream. Often Monster watched with her. Sometimes he read books instead.

She loved all sorts of dreams: scary dreams, funny dreams, bizarre dreams. She especially loved the ones that featured improbable creatures like her monster or talking clocks or rabbits in waistcoats.

Watching them almost made up for never having any dreams of her own.



Except for the dream she stole, Sophie had never had a dream. She'd tried everything: warm milk and cookies before bed, no food or drink before bed, a scary movie in the dark late at night, a book under the covers with a flashlight, inventing elaborate stories before she fell asleep, picturing the best images from other people's dreams. But every night, she lay her head down on her favorite pillow, curled up under the quilt, and closed her eyes. And boom, it would be morning again.

After twelve years of no dreams (except the stolen one), she had given up trying. Almost.

"Good night, Monster," she said on the night before her twelfth birthday.

"*Boa noite*, Sophie," Monster said from the floor beside her bed. He slept in a dog bed fluffed with extra pillows.

She leaned over the bed to look at him. "What?"

"It is Portuguese for *good night*," Monster said. "I am learning Portuguese."

"Oh." She lay back down and pulled her blankets

up to her chin. The window next to her had a draft, or more accurately, a gap around the frame. A few fallen leaves had drifted inside and littered the floor. “Um, Monster, why are you learning Portuguese? We don’t know anyone who speaks Portuguese.”

“In case I ever encounter a Portuguese man-of-war,” he said. “I would like to dissuade him from stinging me. They leave welts so painful that they last for two or three days.”

“I don’t think jellyfish speak Portuguese,” Sophie said. “Or any language.”

“Men-of-war are colonies of multiple organisms,” Monster said. “They have to communicate with each other.”

“You need to stay out of the biology shelves.” Sophie curled up on her side. Through the window, the street lamp lit the bare branches of a tree. A few golden leaves swayed in the wind. She listened to the wind whistle down the chimney. “It’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“You may have the extra cupcakes,” Monster said graciously.

“That means it’s a special night,” Sophie said. “A change night. I wake up someone different, a twelve-year-old.”

She heard the rustle of blankets. Reaching up, Monster patted her cheek with a tentacle. Monster's fur was softer than any teddy bear. "You are always special, Sophie. You do not need nighttime wonders to make you so."

Sophie sighed. "I know."

"Fill your days with wonder instead."

"You sound like a fortune cookie."

He withdrew. She heard him circle like a cat to find a comfortable position. He settled down and kneaded the pillows with his claws. "I value what you are, not what you are not."

"One dream," Sophie said. "I don't think that's a lot to ask for a birthday present."

"You had your one dream," Monster said. "You birthed me."

"Ew, you make it sound like you're my baby."

In a falsetto voice, Monster chirped, "Mama! Mama!"

Sophie laughed.

From the other room, Sophie's father called, "Go to sleep, Sophie. If you aren't asleep, the birthday fairy won't come and leave you presents!"

"I don't believe in the birthday fairy," Sophie called back.

“Oh no, you’ve hurt her feelings!” Dad said. “She’s crying. Sobbing! I hate dealing with morose fairies. You apologize right now, young lady.”

“Sorry, Birthday Fairy,” Sophie called.

“I forgive you,” Mom said in a pseudo-quivery voice. “But my magic has been so diminished by your lack of belief that I don’t know if I can fly anymore.”

Monster looked quizzically at the door between bedrooms. “Your mother can fly? I have never seen her do so.”

“I’m not her mother,” Mom said in the same fake voice. “I’m the birthday fairy. My blood is streamers, my heart is a balloon, my flesh is made of cake . . .”

“Yum, yum, yum,” Dad said.

Sophie heard her mother laugh and then a muffled squeak.

“You know, your parents are very strange,” Monster observed.

“So says the six-tentacled monster,” Sophie said.

“Good night, Sophie,” Mom called in her own voice. “Happy almost-birthday!”

Dad echoed her. “Happy almost-birthday, sweetheart!”

With a smile on her face, Sophie closed her eyes.

She listened to her parents' voices, too soft for her to hear words, continue in the other bedroom. Outside, the wind tapped on the window, and Sophie fell asleep.

She woke dreamless, twelve years old.