

The castle moved, its spindly legs reaching out one step at a time over the rocky wastes. The whirl of gears and whistle of steam played their music as Sophie slept. At first she had had trouble getting used to life with The Great Wizard Howl in his fantastic moving castle. The towering structure made up of little buildings (that had agreed not to fall apart despite the inclinations of gravity) was as different from her humble hat shop as Sophie could imagine. Now she felt at home enough to sleep in her little room at the end of her long days of cleaning. The rocking gait of the castle became a comfort. The wailing of valves and the tittering of spirits as they rolled off the ground and were left in the castle's wake didn't even cause her to stir. When she slept she was whole, she was safe, and her curse seemed to belong to another life.

Then the castle stopped.

Sophie was thrown from her bed by the sudden action, and the reality of her situation quickly returned to her. As she scrambled to get dressed and put on her white, working-hat, her looking glass showed a woman who was getting older by the minute, until all that was left of Sophie's youth was gone. So had been the pattern for weeks, with Sophie seeing glimpses of the girl she truly was, before the weight of the day took hold of her. But she had no time to reflect. Howl was gone again, and if the castle had stopped on its path through the Wastes, someone would have to deal with whatever had caused the interruption. Withered again by age that wasn't hers, Sophie felt the need to take charge.

She made her way past the hearth room and outside onto the castle's landing. Immediately she scanned the horizon for signs of ambush. The neighboring kingdom had become bold and she wouldn't be surprised to see them attacking a wizard's home-- especially when he wasn't around. But in front of her she saw no machines of war. Only a rocky path, the boy Markl, and... a scarecrow.

"Can we keep him!?" Markl exclaimed, attempting to match the appearance of his scratchy going-outside beard with an appropriately grizzled voice.

Sophie smiled. She tousled his hair, then lowered the copper steps from the landing to the ground, and made her way down to better inspect the scarecrow. Markl

followed, running circles around her and the scarecrow with shouts of “Please, please, please, can we please?”

Now that she could see the scarecrow up close, she realized that she recognized it. “Turnip Head?” she said softly. Turnip Head responded to this by bouncing up and down excitedly.

“That’s a stupid name,” said the boy. “I want to call him Allison.”

“How did you get out here,” Sophie mused. She had seen him once before she came to the castle, and something about him had stood out to her then. No, it wasn’t that he was a living scarecrow with the white-red head of a turnip. She had seen spirits take odder shapes than that. It was something about his hat. Blue, and soft, crumpled but loved.

“So can, we? Can we keep Allison? Please?”

Markl brought Sophie back to the present. There might not be any enemies she could see, but that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be soon. They had to get out of the Wastes as quickly as they could and hope that Howl returned before they found any more trouble. “We’re leaving,” Sophie said, but the boy wouldn’t quit.

“Please? I’ll take care of him! I’ll feed him, um, if he eats, and I’ll clean up after him, and you won’t even know he’s there.”

Sophie looked from Markl’s pleading eyes behind his bushy gray beard to Turnip Head, bouncing with a fervor. Something about that blue hat wouldn’t let her say no. “Fine,” she said, “But, if Howl says he goes, he’s gone. I don’t know how he’ll take to a scarecrow. And you are responsible for him. I don’t even want to see him around the castle.”

Over the next two weeks, Sophie saw more of Turnip Head than she did of Markl. The boy had quickly grown tired of his new companion, stating “Allison’s no fun anymore. All he ever wants to do is bother you.”

Turnip Head *had* been bothering her. If it wasn't for the hat, Sophie expected she would have thrown him into the hearth fire by now, despite Calcifer's objections. But she just couldn't place it. It was one more mystery to distract her from her work and keep her from finding a cure to her curse.

She woke early in the morning with the hopes of cleaning before Turnip Head could harass her. She ignored her reflection as she felt herself aging. She would have time to worry about that later. Once she did her work, she could focus on herself as much as she wanted.

Mercifully, Turnip Head was nowhere to be seen in the early morning dark of the hearth room. She asked Calcifer to put out just enough light for her to see without drawing attention from anyone else in the castle. He glowed a soft red in response.

As she scrubbed the stone floor, Sophie's thoughts were only of herself. The sight of her gnarled fingers nearly brought her to tears. She remembered feeling like she was getting older even before the Witch of the Wastes had cursed her, but then, she had felt she had a whole life ahead of her to figure out what that would mean. Now she missed her simple hat shop, and the days of endless possibility. Even if she had squandered them in her meekness.

Before long, the sun's light outshone the dim flame of the hearth, and the spirits of the castle came out to join her. Spiders danced in the corners of the room, and their ballet created beautiful webs that Sophie would have to clean tomorrow. Mice ran here and there delivering messages with great import. And Crumbly came out to see what she might be able to eat.

Sophie liked Crumbly. She was a spirit with five hands and a giant mouth who only ate crumbs. She would roll about on her hands, using her arms like the spokes of a wheel and pick up any crumbs that had been left on the floor. These were promptly devoured. Once Sophie had tried to feed her a whole piece of bread as thanks for helping with the cleaning, but Crumbly had refused. Even after Sophie had crumbled the bread for her, the spirit would not eat it. Apparently she only cared for crumbs that had been discarded naturally. Spirits.

As much as Sophie liked Crumbly, the spirit was loud, and her morning racket finally brought Turnip Head out from whatever corner of the castle he had been hiding in.

“Go away!” Sophie shouted. But Turnip Head just bounced happily next to her. The wooden stick that supported his body tonked merrily on the stone as he jumped. Tonk. Tonk. Tonk. As Sophie’s anger grew so did the pain in her fingers as they seemed to become even more wizened. “Please, just leave me alone! I have other problems to deal with!”

“Hey, would you go easy on the kid?” Calcifer chimed in. It wasn’t the first time the flame demon had stood in Turnip Head’s defence.

“This isn’t about the kid!” Sophie said, pulling herself to her feet with great effort. “I don’t care that Markl’s not here. He’s just a boy. This is about Turnip Head and his incessant bouncing!”

“I’m just saying that you haven’t been very nice to--”

“Nice? I’m sorry, who has been nice to me? I’ve been” she tried to say cursed, but the word wouldn’t come out, “working and working and I’ve had enough. I don’t have time for foolish things to get in my way.”

Sophie spun on Turnip Head, calling on her rage to hold back the tears from the outrage over her situation. She prodded him as she walked. With each step she could feel her age increasing, but she pushed through it. “You can’t come in here and bother me every day. You have no idea who I am or what I have been through. I’ve had enough, and you will leave me alone.” She shoved him as she spoke these last words, and though it was the tired push of an old woman, it didn’t take much to knock the stick off its balance.

Turnip Head crashed to the floor, and his old blue hat came rolling off his head and landed in the fire of the hearth. The motion that made him bounce as he stood now looked like cowering on the floor. Sophie looked from the pitiful scarecrow to the hat that caught flame... and suddenly she remembered how she knew him.

She was standing over Turnip Head in the same way a witch had once stood over a poor boy in front of Sophie's hat shop. The boy had gotten in the witch's way and she had struck him to the ground, knocking his hat free. The witch saw the desperation with which the boy had scrambled for his hat, and snapped her fingers, causing it to burn. The boy had laid there sobbing and rocking back and forth until the witch left. He was clearly one of the city's orphans from the war, and that hat had been his only prize.

All those years ago Sophie had seen this tragedy and acted without a thought for herself. She had walked to the boy, picked him up off his feet, and placed her own blue hat on his head until he stopped crying. She had even given him some vegetables to eat.

Seeing Turnip Head now, it wasn't hard to imagine that that boy had sought out the witch again, and walked away with a curse much greater than Sophie's. In that moment, she realized there was only one thing she could do, no matter how much it hurt her in her withered state. Sophie walked up to the twitching scarecrow and pulled him up off the ground. The effort became easier as she moved, and her arms began to feel stronger.

By the time they were both upright, Sophie was tall enough that she was able to take the white work-hat off her head and place it on the top of the scarecrow. Amazingly, a smile formed on the white base of the Turnip. Then the scarecrow was gone, replaced by a boy that Sophie still remembered.

"I knew you'd save me again," the boy said, tears rolling down his cheek. "I knew it from the first time I saw you."

Sophie was shocked that the boy recognized her, but then realized that her arms were once again smooth and young. She hadn't even noticed when the change occurred. For the first time since her curse she realized that it didn't matter if she looked like the person she *had* been, if she didn't act like the person she truly was.

"You're safe now," Sophie said to the boy, pulling him into a hug. And, at last, in her waking hours, Sophie knew that she was, too.