

The Bookfly

The bookfly mended its wing with a page out of an old book of fairy tales, moistening and attaching the page with delicate webbing extruded from a pouch in its cheek by the dexterous movements of a fore-palp. It wouldn't be able to fly, not yet, but the makeshift repair would serve as a start.

It had torn the page out of the first story in a collection titled *Tales from Exersa*, recounting the adventures of a young boy tasked with returning a sacred medallion to a golden dragon. The bookfly knew this story, of course, just as it knew all the stories it kept in its library. The words folded into its broken wing flared with white light, burning, speeding the healing.

The boy traveled day and night, the medallion in his pocket

Through the lands of Fee, past the garrulous forest,

For days and days the boy walked,

Along the mighty River of Twilight

*Through the lands of the strong men
That fished the leviathans in the Sparkling Sea
Toward the faraway land of the dragons.
The boy stopped only to eat his meager ration
And sleep a few hours each night
And the medallion lay heavy.*

A noise turned the bookfly's head, its compound eyes focusing on the door to the burning islands that lay outside the library's protection.

The noise started as a kind of fluid static, a white sound, an incorporeal buzzing. The bookfly tuned its aureals to match frequencies with the sound, the sensitive organs twisting and vibrating in the bookfly's head, trying to decode the sound's meaning.

The sound changed shape again, and now the bookfly understood. It was the language of the magma sprites that swam in the oceans of cursed fire surrounding the library. The language was that of liquid rocks melting and reshaping, a percussive code just this side of sentient speech.

The magma sprites wanted to see the library, wanted to touch it, lick it with tongues of flame, consume it the only way they knew how. But the bookfly would not allow them to enter. It had channeled the power of the words to create a literary barrier between the library and the burning islands, a barrier the bookfly had maintained for as long as it knew itself.

The damage to the bookfly's wing had weakened the barrier, giving the magma sprites a sense that they might have a way in. But the bookfly steeled itself, determined to maintain its barrier, drawing on all its strength, channeling the power of all the millions of words in the library.

The magma sprites would not burn the library today.

The bookfly flexed the translucent membrane of its damaged front wing. The page patch held, for now, and the wing felt stronger, not truly healed, but reinforced, scaffolded. The bookfly refocused the library's shield, the glow of the patched wing's words helping to strengthen the shield against the tentative probing of the magma sprites.

But the noise from outside grew stronger, a cacophonous grating, a tectonic shuffling, a grinding and yearning. The library floor shook with the rhythm of the magma sprites' insistent cries. The weakened barrier crackled with damaged language, slowly erasing the encasement of words that gave the barrier its power. Words crackled, broke apart, reformed, took on new meaning. Some words disappeared, burned as fuel to bolster the barrier.

The bookfly crawled toward the door, its six slim feet tapping a soft tattoo on the marble floor of the library. It flexed all six of its wings, channeling even more power into the barrier. Its damaged forewing needled with a tang of pain, but the bookfly remembered more of the story of the boy and the medallion and the dragon, and it sent those words out, and the barrier glowed with renewed power. The bookfly felt new words settle on his damaged wing, knitting together a story of healing, of strengthening, of mending.

The dragon smiled when it saw the boy

The shining medallion in the boy's hand

Reaching out to the dragon

The boy, tired from his walk, dirty, hungry,

Looked the dragon in the eye and said

"Why do you need this medallion?"

And the dragon responded,

"I do not, but the burden should not be yours."

The crystalline doorway to the library shook and crackled, the magma sprites' probing increasing. The bookfly began to shiver its wings, faster, and faster, a keening vibration increasing in volume and pitch, picturing in its mind the sound sliding through the subatomic gaps in the solid structure of the library, a sonic wind pushing past the protective barrier and blowing the magma sprites back into the flaming sea. But its damaged wing wouldn't sing the same notes as the others, and the bookfly's sonic assault crackled with dissonance, collapsing against the inner wall of the library. The bookfly tried again, willing its damaged wing to sing with the others, but it felt the page patch weakening and beginning to tear, despite the newfound power of the words from the story of the boy and the dragon.

The bookfly tried to remember the end of the story.

And the dragon reached out a golden talon

And plucked the medallion from the boy's hand,

And swallowed it whole.

And the boy sighed and collapsed to the ground

And slept the sleep of the just

And the dragon curled itself around the boy

To protect him from all the burdens

that children shouldn't have to bear.

The final words of the story soaked into the bookfly's broken wing, and the bookfly felt stronger. It tried again, shaking and straining with the effort, its six wings now signing in unison, and the sonic wind shot outward through the cracks in the solid and through the strengthening barrier, blowing the magma sprites away from the library and plunging them back into the sea of fire.

This done, the bookfly collapsed to the floor, exhausted from its defense of the library,
and slept the sleep of the just.

And the library curled itself around the bookfly.