

House of the Meek

Sari didn't like the house.

She liked that they were moving, as it was the closest she could get to a new adventure. She had no friends she would miss and no place she would rather be. She had everything she wanted and needed with her; her parents, her books, and her peridot necklace.

But Sari didn't like the house.

She liked the moving to an island across the sea. She had never heard of Tenerife before, and it looked like a crowded tourist spot when they came out of the airport, but there was more of the island to see, like the ocean edges they were going to live by. She could see the ocean every day if she wanted.

Still, Sari didn't like the house.

Whatever excitement she had moving ended when they arrived and started unpacking. They had asked for directions from a local on the way and although she didn't remember what he said to her parents, the man looked nervous and uncomfortable pointing them to their new house. But the house was big, old, and grey with creaking, broken wood holding it together. There were so many weeds growing with the grass that the road was covered by them. It was three stories tall, square body and pointed roof with only five windows, all facing the front. There was only one door to get inside, and it was barely wide enough to move their furniture in. It was just as old looking inside too, but it was dusty all over, which was worse.

And that is why Sari didn't like the house.

But that was before she even spent the night in there.

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“Mom, why can’t we live somewhere else?” Sari asked her mother that night.

Sari’s mother smiled and brushed her daughter’s short brown hair. “It’s only temporary, dear. In a few months we’ll move back to North America after your father’s business deal settles through.”

Sari frowned and squirmed under her bed covers. She knew her parents travel business was important, and she didn’t mind it up until now. “I don’t care about moving. I just want to be somewhere other than a house.”

“Now Sari, I know this house is... unsanitary,” she winces recalling the time and effort it took to move everything in earlier today. “But believe me, we looked all over and this was the best place we could find. Besides, it’s nothing a little refurbishing can’t fix.”

“What’s re-fur-bashing?” the eleven year old asked.

“*Refurbishing*,” Her mother stressed. “Is when you fix something old and make it as good as new.”

“I think this house is too old to make new again, mom.”

“You never know unless you try,” she said with a smile, and then kissed Sari’s forehead. “Sleep well, my princess.”

“Goodnight, mom,” Sari said. She looked around the room once more to get used to what she would see for the next few months; a room with dry red paint on the walls, not light enough to be pink. One of the only windows in the house with a rusty old window frame holding red curtains.

She had only a few essentials so aside from her kinda-big bed, a small book rack, and a dresser with a mirror, the rather large room was bare and empty. Her gaze just caught sight of her reflection (pale skin, brown messy hair, green eyes that were squinting without her glasses) before the single lightbulb hanging above was turned off and the door closed.

Well, this was her new home, and there was nothing that could be done about it. Sari tucked herself deeper into the covers, trying to fight down the anxiety of the old house she was in. It was silly, really. The house was old, but it wasn't a monster or anything. Only little kids believed in monsters, and Sari read enough stories to know that monsters don't exist. Mostly because they were just mean and nasty and liked to gobble up little kids like her wherever they went.

"No such thing as monsters," she assured herself softly, and flattened herself closer to her pillow. Just as she closed her eyes, she heard a creak from outside her door.

"Mom?" she asked softly. "Dad? Is that you?"

What replied back instead was a loud grumbling noise. Sari really hoped it was just her dad's stomach. She gulped, gripping her covers tightly in her clenched hands. "There's no such thing as monsters," she whispered. "There's no such things as monsters. There's no--"

Another roar boomed louder and closer than before. Startled and scared, she quickly ducked her head under her covers and hugged her pillow. She didn't even think to call for her mom or dad to check on her.

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Sari liked the Wingate School because it allowed her time away and out of the house she didn't like. It was the only school around her area and it had students from every age coming here, even those older than her when they could have been to a "high school". As a young eleven year old girl, she was in junior group with other kids in her age group. But she would still rather be alone than getting together with the other kids working on math problems or singing in music class. Or any class, really, like when she was first introduced to the class.

She wore the same uniform attire as the other girls: white shirt and blue shorts. She stood before everyone on her first day and said, "My name is Sari Sholes."

Her classmates stared at her, waiting.

"And?" the teacher urged.

"That's it," she shrugged, already moving to her seat. She introduced herself and saw no need to say anything else.

The teacher stopped her, lightly tugging her arm so she could stay standing by the chalkboard. "What are your hobbies? I'm sure the class would love to know."

"Reading," the bespectacled girl answered.

"What's your favorite book?"

"*Dragon Rider*," she said. "Can I sit down now?"

"Now Sari, I know you're a little shy, but we all want to know you better."

"I don't really care," she said, heading to her seat again. By now the kid's stares were less welcoming and more smiling and confused, not used to seeing anyone act this way.

The teacher's hand held her forcefully again. "Sari, that's not a very nice thing to say. Do you really want no one to know who you are, or remember your name?"

"I don't care," she said again. "I don't even remember your name."

A couple students laughed. Flustered and more than a tad annoyed, the teacher introduced herself again. Sari drowned it out. There were too many words, sounds, and she knew she couldn't say it right if she tried.

“I won’t remember it,” she insisted. “I just want to have fun while I’m here.”

“But making friends is fun, Sari.”

“Not when you have to leave and make new friends all over again.”

Sari left for her seat for a third time, but this time the teacher didn’t stop her.

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After two weeks of living in Tenerife, Sari only seemed to enjoy herself whenever she was alone; scribbling her off-beat pictures, jotting down nonsensical private fantasies, and exploring the worlds in her books. Whenever school would end, she would run past her bus stop by her house and run by the grassy fields and towards the cliff edges of the beach. Sometimes she would go to the north or the south end, and maybe even try looking for a forest.

Going on adventures was exciting, but also scary. She could only go forward, and even then not by choice. She couldn’t go back to the old places she lived or visited, but could only move to the next destination. At the very least, she would do so and try to make it feel fun.

Up until she would go back to the home she would live in, anyway.

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“Sari,” the teacher with the long name said to her one day. “We know you’re a very smart girl, but you always seem to solve everything on your own.”

Sari looked up from her teal-framed glasses. “Is that the wrong thing to do?”

“Not necessarily. What I’m trying to say is that there have been times where you really struggled trying to solve a math equation or explain a science problem. It’s not uncommon for children to not know what to do and ask for help. That’s what we’re here for; to help you learn.”

Sari glanced down to her current problem, $27 \times (10 \div 2)$

Her intended answer was “135”, but it had been marked wrong when she turned it in. The teacher intended to help Sari figure it out but she just snatched the paper back and went to her desk.

“Well, why don’t you ask one of your friends instead? Like Sarah or John? They’re really good at math.”

“They’re not my friends,” Sari said.

“Maybe not now, but maybe you will after spending some time together.”

“I don’t want to.”

“What can I do to convince you to ask for help, Sari?”

Sari didn’t reply, for there was no answer to give. She still couldn’t find the right answer to the problem.

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Weeks passed, and Sari’s wanderlust of the island began to dull. She tried to pass time reading or sitting outside, but as the weather grew colder she was forced to stay inside the house.

The house she was trying to convince herself wasn’t haunted or possessed or anything else silly other kids would assume.

Her parents would usually work late. Sari didn’t ask much as to why, but she knew it meant she was alone in the house almost all the time. Crying wouldn’t help; crying never helped. It didn’t bring them

any closer to getting home, and it would make things harder for them. They had told her that their job was important, and that she could do whatever she wanted as long as it was safe and within reason.

Whatever it was, the stay in this house would end soon, she hoped. Until then, Sari would just try to sleep early to not hear the growling noises at night.

But then one night, Sari awoke to the sound of loud gargling sound, much like the first night. Her first thought was to try and sleep again. It was so dark out that she couldn't even see the moon out her window. She fiddled with her peridot strapped around her neck, taking comfort in a souvenir her dad bought for her. He said he found it while treasure hunting, and even told her a story about it.

"A deep ruin," he explained. "That goes as far as the center of the earth. Through bottomless chasms, rickety mine rails, and vicious piranhas, I found a large room full of sparkling stones! All of the different colors and qualities you could name of: rubies, sapphires, turquoises, garnets, moonstones, sunstones! Even the diamonds were there, large and flawless as they lit the room like the sun itself! And yet, despite the glory and glamour of the large stones, there were just as many stones decorating the ground like stars.

"And there, sitting nicely in the corner of earthen stone nearly forgotten, was a beautiful lime green stone. It was shy, yet I knew it wanted to be noticed. So, out of all the stones I could ever need or want, I choose that one because it reminded me of you, my special little peridot."

"I'm a parrot-dot?" she had asked, never hearing the word before. Her mom and dad both laughed good-heartedly.

She didn't care it was an obvious lie, because her dad always told great stories. She always wore the stone and when asked, she just said her dad bought it. No one else could appreciate how special the

story was to her, how it made *her* feel special. Sari wanted nothing more than to make her own adventure. She would make a story real one day; something like her father's fairy tale even.

But even as she thought back to that pleasant memory with the stone clenched in her hands, the growling didn't stop or go away.

Sari slowly poked her head out of her bed cover. The room was just as dark as it was under her cover, nearly bare and empty. Slowly she reached stepped out of her bed and tiptoed to her dresser across from it, fetching her glasses and a flashlight. Although she didn't look like an explorer in her white flower pattern pajama set, Sari didn't want to try and change her clothes this late either.

"There's no such thing as monsters," she said to herself, clenching her necklaced stone in her free hand.

"And I'm going to prove that tonight."

With her building confidence, the young girl left her room to find the noise. She memorized the house after living in it for so long, but the darkness made it feel like she was exploring a cave. Her flashlight was her only guide, spread out side to side to light her path. She took extra precautions to step lightly on the wood and avoiding any small holes that might rip her socks.

By the time Sari got to the stairway, she could tell the growling noise was at the bottom floor. Her climb down was just as slow and cautious as her exit from her room, yet she took care not to move her light as much out of fear of actually seeing a monster.

"There's no such thing as monsters," she whispered. "There's no such thing as monsters."

She turned the corner to what she remembered to be the dining room. Just beyond the square table where she and her family would eat at, there was a faint light bounced off from the house window.

Across the room and against the wall, she saw the monster's shadow by the window's light refraction.

The shadow towered over her; long claws, huge ears, a long pointed nose, and a whip-like tail rising up from behind. She slowly followed the direction of the shadow, to see who it belonged to. Her gaze kept going down, from the roof it reached to the floor itself, and saw that the shadow belonged to... a mouse.

Sari let out the breath she didn't know she had. It was a mouse. This whole time, she was scared of a little hungry white mouse.

Still, the rodent looked just as scared as she did towards her. She walked over to the mouse slowly before kneeling down and gently picking it up. The mouse shivered in her touch, and then quickly calmed down and started smelling her necklace and stone. It was almost cute, really.

Sari smiled and stood up, heading for the door. "You're cute, but no monster. I knew there was no monster in the--"

She suddenly bumped into something big and hairy. She stepped back, too startled to notice her glasses slipping off. She stopped and stared at the figure before her, aiming her flashlight in front of her.

Before her were three large bulbous eyes set up like a pyramid. Each was a different color; red, blue, and yellow. Despite having the flashlight aiming right at them, the eyes blinked once, and turned clockwise like gears. They were attached on a large head with a single horn pointing above the top, a dark hairy lion's mane, and a two long tusks pointing up from its large mouth. The mouth opened slightly, and the familiar, growling noise escaped its lips as if it was a simple sigh.

Sari gasped and the mouse squeaked. She clenched the mouse closer to her body. She never felt so scared in her life. The monster was *real*.

She didn't scream; she couldn't scream.

Slowly, the monster reached for her with one of its claws. It had six fingers for a hand, six! And each finger was longer than the last, not at all shaped like a human hand. The longest finger reached for her head, slowly moving forward.

Sari acted before the monster could touch her, and slammed the door. She immediately ran, climbing the stairs and closed the door to her room. After locking it for good measure, she dived for her bed, hid under the covers, and hugged the mouse as close and comforting as possible.

She was a fool. Of course monsters were real. Of course there was a monster in her house, and now it was going to eat her up! Just like that boy in the story!

The growling was louder, and she felt her heart drop when the door to her room opened. She held the mouse closer to her neck, huddling her knees tighter to her stomach. She didn't dare look to see the monster coming after her.

It was going to find her. It was going to eat her.

Sari didn't want to get eaten, so for the first time, she screamed.

"Mommy! Daddy! Help me! There's a monster in my room and it's going to eat me! Mommy! Daddy!"

She cried until tears rolled down her eyes. She cried her fear aloud, cried for help and to get rescued.

She cried non-stop and surprisingly cried herself to sleep.

The next morning she found herself under her bed covers, with the rescued mouse still nuzzled next to her. She was in her same room, and yet her glasses were on the floor, as if dropped there.

The door opened, and Sari almost cried again.

"Sari, are you up? It's almost time for school."

And Sari cried. This time, however, she cried out of relief, relief that her mother was back. She jumped out of bed and cried into her arms, the mouse forgotten as it scampered under her bed. Sari's mother, although startled, quickly comforted her with soothing backrubs and soft whispers. "It's okay, princess. It's okay."

Sari believed every word.

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"What's with the mouse?"

Sari didn't look away from the mouse in question and just kept feeding him pieces of cheese from her sandwich. She took the mouse with her to school out of concern of it being eaten while she was away, and didn't even think to give it, or him, a name.

Watching him eat gave her an idea for one. "I found Nibble at my house."

"You would just make friends with a wild mouse?"

"He looked lonely and scared."

The person talking to Sari suddenly moved closer to her; she was a blond haired girl about her age, staring at the mouse. "Are you sure you found him in a house? He looks like he was kept nice and well in a hamster home."

Sari glanced between her and Nibble. Did someone really take care of the mouse before she found him?

The only one living the house before her family moved in was... nah, couldn't be.

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

“My dad owns a pet shop, and I get to see and play with a lot of animals there. He doesn’t let me near the snakes though.”

Normally Sari would think of something to be alone, but what happened last night still scared her. She didn’t want to be alone, or at the very least be stuck without knowing how to take care of a mouse. “Do you know what he needs then?”

“Uh-huh. Plenty of fruit, cheese, and a wheelie-ball to run in. My dad’s store has all sorts of stuff.

“I’d like to see it, if that’s okay.”

“Sure! My name’s Carrie, by the way. What’s yours?”

“Sari.”

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One of the first books she had remembered reading was a simple, silly story, about a boy that kept trying to talk to his mom and dad only to get brushed off. He said there was a monster outside ready to eat him but they ignored him saying, “Not now.”

In the end, the monster did eat him. Sari reasoned that it was his own fault for confronting the monster, and yet the rest the book would go on with the monster trying to eat the parents only to get told what to do and end up taking the boy’s place.

A part of her was scared the monster of the house would take her place too.

After visiting Carrie’s dad’s pet shop, she brought her new mouse-centric gifts, as well as Nibble, back home. She would have to explain to her parents that she found a pet mouse to take care of, but that immediately went to the back of her mind when she saw a familiar face opening the door.

She almost screamed seeing the monster. Yet to her surprise, the monster flinched and hid further away from behind the staircase.

“Uh,” she squeaked, holding her backpack and shopping bag steady. “Aren’t you going to eat me? Or the mouse?”

Slowly, the monster shook its head. The growling noise escaping its lips this time was almost ashamed.

She was talking to the monster, and it understood her. Weren’t all monsters supposed to eat children?

That’s what all the books and stories say about monsters.

But... were they just stories in the end?

“You found my glasses last night, didn’t you? I dropped them, and then you returned them to my room.”

The monster nodded.

“You didn’t have to, yet you did anyway. Why?”

The monster didn’t say anything, but continued to heave. Sari started to suspect the monster couldn’t talk.

“I’m sorry I screamed,” she said. “You just scared me at first.”

The monster nodded sadly.

“But you’re not so scary now. You’re nice.”

The monster’s eyes spun completely around its face. Slowly it crept out of its hiding spot until it was in front of her.

Sari didn't like making friends, only to have them go and leave her. Someday she would leave Carrie too, and even the monster, whenever her parents wanted to move somewhere else. But that didn't mean she couldn't still make her own friends or own adventures. All this time she had been sitting and waiting for the adventure to find her, to see if the best story would come along before she would jump for it. Rather, the best stories were the ones made on your own.

She extended her hand out to the monster. "My name's Sari. Would you like to be my friend?"

All six of the monster's fingers grasped her hand, and a smile grew on its face. Sari returned it in earnest.