

TO THE RESCUE – CHAPTER 2

Dangerous flames licked the house roof. William was forced to turn back as searing heat singed his face. He raced to his cottage. After shutting the door, he panicked, unsure of what to do. He hid for hours, fearful that the one responsible for the destruction of Winklebourne would harm him too. As he waited, he pondered what to do. Then he remembered what Marge had told him, long ago: *Should anything ever happen to Penelope and me ... find the bell and ring it. Ring it louder than thunder rolls during a raging storm.*

He ran for his bedroom, ten steps away. He dove under his bed. There, amid the dust bunnies, he spied the small wooden chest tucked next to the wall. He pulled it out and flung it open, grasping a velvet bag covering a wood-handled brass bell. He rang it.

At first it tinkled, sounding like a call to tea. Then its tone deepened to a clanging doom. Its timbre grew louder and more hollow as it echoed deeper. BONG! BONG! BONG! It soon sounded like Big Ben.

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Far away from the leaping flames at Winklebourne was the elf realm of Die Sterntaler at the rim of the Grand Canyon, where the renowned elf wizard Niles Sitnalta—usually referred to reverently in the elf world as simply Sinalta—resided. He was a rather handsome elf (when he wasn't half asleep and dressed in his pajamas, anyway). He had long, blond hair, small lips and a small nose, striking blue eyes, and an athletic build for his six-foot-tall elf frame.

A tinkling noise shook the cobwebs of sleep from his mind. His first inclination was to hit his snooze button; he thought the alarm was waking him much too soon. It was pitch black outside, and the clock registered 11 PM.

Sitnalta turned on the light and grabbed his bathrobe. After pulling it on, he walked toward the unrelenting sound. Suddenly he realized: *That's the tolling bell of mortal danger!* A small brass bell with a wooden handle levitated and tinkled a foreboding chime. The peal grew longer and deeper and soon Sitnalta's ears echoed with the BONG! BONG! BONG! of the bell. The next thing Sitnalta knew, a large bubble engulfed him. With a resounding crack, he disappeared.

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William the caretaker stood dumbstruck as a growing bubble emerged out of thin air. After a loud cracking noise, an elf with long, blond hair stood before him, dressed in pajamas, a robe, and slippers. They stared at each other: Niles Sitnalta with his captivating blue eyes, and William with his elderly, bloodshot eyes.

In fear William collapsed.

Sitnalta dashed to catch him. "Take it easy. I'm here to help."

Out of the corner of his eye, Sitnalta noticed flames reflecting off William's windowpane. Turning his head, he saw the fire licking the roof's weather vane. "Oh no!" he cried. He let go of the recovering William and rushed outside.

He raised his hands to the sky and bellowed, "Cirith Thoronath Rivil Rauros!"

Clouds gathered around the fully engulfed mansion. Within seconds the fire was extinguished, the charred structure cooled by liquid magic from the sky. A few hanging timbers smoldered.

Sitnalta cautiously walked forward, mumbling as he went. He ducked his head around fallen boards. William followed a few short steps behind. The crack and crunch of footsteps broke the eerie silence.

Sitnalta asked, “What happened? Where are Penelope and Marge?”

“I’ve no idea,” William replied. “I heard a commotion and came to see what it was. I yelled for Penelope and Marge. They didn’t answer. I hesitated ... thought I smelled fire. I went a little closer and yelled again. Next thing I knew, the house exploded in flames. Didn’t see a soul.”

Sitnalta grew a worrisome frown. “Hmmm ... curious. Well, come help me find Penelope and Marge.”

Behind him, William asked, “Begging your pardon, but ... who are you?”

“Oh, um, sorry. I’m Niles Sitnalta; I’m with the realm. I’m sure Marge and Penelope told you about us.”

“Uh, yes, but it was so long ago. I’m glad you’re here. I didn’t know what to do.”

Just then Sitnalta spotted the two large marble statues. The faces were undeniably those of Penelope and Marge; there was no mistaking Penelope’s large ears.

Sitnalta began chattering as if William wasn’t there. “Oh my! It’s them, sure as the devil. So the rumors are true. Goodness me, we should have been more careful. Oh ... the younglings! I pray Chessie is safe. Then again, maybe this is just a coincidence, a chance encounter with some deranged monster. We can live in hope.”

Sadly, for elf wizard Niles Sitnalta and the rest of the elves, circumstances could not be worse.

Sitnalta continued searching as he stepped over fallen timbers and debris.

William asked, “Uh, excuse me, sir ... are you looking for something else?”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to be so preoccupied or insensitive that I seemed to be ignoring you,” Sitnalta replied. “You’re William Pertle. Isn’t that right?”

William was so frightened he was shaking. “Y-yes, sir,” he replied.

Sitnalta walked a few more steps until he reached the remains of the fireplace. After crouching down, he reached inside the hearth and tapped on one of the bricks. A trapdoor opened, and he pulled out a rolled-up scroll. He tucked it under his arm and said, “I know this may seem a bit hasty, William, but you no longer seem to be in any danger. Whoever did this is probably long gone. If you don’t mind, I’m going to return to Die Sterntaler—the place where I live. I’ll send someone back to gather the statues and arrange for the cleanup. He’ll be here within the hour. Do you think you’ll be all right until then?”

William hesitated, giving him a fearful look, then nodded.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine,” Sitnalta reassured him. Pulling a bell out of a pocket, Sitnalta rang it. As the bell tinkled, the large bubble reappeared and engulfed him. William looked on in awe.

With a sudden crack, Sitnalta was gone.

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The moment Sitnalta returned, he heard someone urgently knocking at his door. Mabel Grimsneed, Marge’s identical twin sister, pleaded to come inside. Upon opening the door and looking at her face, Sitnalta was reminded of Marge, whose statue bore those same eyes, same pouty mouth, same triple chins. The resemblance sent a shiver up his spine.

“Come on in, Mabel,” he said as she burst through the doorway.

“I can’t sleep. Something is horribly wrong. I can’t stop dreaming about my sister Marge! The poor dear ... something terrible has happened, I just know it!” She wiped tears on the sleeve of her plaid flannel nightgown. Her plump face was a feverish red, her eyes swollen from crying.

Sitnalta grimaced. “Goodness! How on earth did you know? Mabel, my dear, I’m sorry to say your sister Marge and her roommate Penelope have been turned into marble statues.”

Mabel wailed, “Who could do such a thing?” Tears streamed down her face. “I knew she was in trouble! We always know when the other twin needs us. Oh, poor Marge ... what will I do?”

“We’ll think of something, dear,” Sitnalta replied, as he moved the unwieldy scroll tucked under his arm into his hand so he could put an arm around Mabel. “First thing in the morning, I’ll gather all the elves. I hope that we can formulate a plan to bring them back. I’m fearful that ... once word gets out ... mass panic will ensue.”

“Who do think did this? Who would hurt my poor, defenseless sister?”

“That’s the whole point: your sister and Penelope are not defenseless. Whoever did this must have strong magical powers. Someone was after something ... probably this scroll.”

Sitnalta aimed it at her. “I have no idea what was taken from Winklebourne. Maybe something, maybe nothing. Sadly I didn’t have time to find out.”

“So you think some rogue elf is to blame?” Marge asked.

“I have no doubt. Not only an elf ... but an elf wizard. Had to be, because he or she was able to overpower your sister and Penelope—two of our most accomplished wizards and translators. Knowing Penelope and Marge, I’m certain they put up quite a fight. William told me he heard something and yelled for them. Perhaps whoever did this thought William might be another elf wizard coming to help and wanted to frighten him off. To hide any trace of his or her identity, this devil burned the house down. But he or she must have known the scroll was safe. Turning Pen and Marge to stone was a warning ... a threat. Whoever did this didn’t want them killed. Didn’t want to risk losing a translator.

“I’m almost certain whoever did this is very anxious to interpret this scroll, and fortunately I spoke with your sister only yesterday,” Sitnalta continued. “She told me she and Penelope were getting close to deciphering pieces of it. She mentioned that one of their important discoveries puts the youngling Chessie in grave trouble. Chessie is linked to a prophecy. They’ll be after her. Out there on her own, she is vulnerable; if she is discovered, she’s doomed. She is too young and too inexperienced. We have to retrieve her and the rest of the younglings from their mortal hideouts as soon as possible.”

“What if we’re too late? Like we were for my poor sister.”

Sitnalta walked over to a nearby curio cabinet and pulled on the knob. He reached in and took out a softball-sized crystal ball. It sat cradled in a wooden stand. He said, “I’ll know soon enough. With this crystal ball, I’ll be able to see if they are safe ... especially Chessie. I’ll infuse a thought in her mind to come to Sterntaler. She should arrive within the next few days.”

“And your promise? You’ll bring back my sister?” Marge’s bottom lip quivered as she spoke.

“Yes, Marge. We’ll do everything elfly possible.”

He walked her to the door. “You try to get an hour or two of rest. I’ve much work to do before dawn.” He spread his arms, and a shower of glittering dust swirled around her as he said, “Guide us in truth and trust.”

She left his room, and Sitnalta hurriedly returned to his crystal ball. He conjured spells—spells that cast threads of consciousness into the minds of each youngling, including Chessie. He summoned them all to gather at Die Sterntaler. The wicked elf wizard had not found them ... yet.

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And so it began: an attack on the elves by a mysterious stranger. Miles away in San Francisco, California, Chessie Bligh slept. Curled up beside her was her fluffy companion Wuggbert, a Shih Tzu puppy. Chessie dreamed of a mysterious stranger—one who was setting events into motion for her to travel far away from her home. She drew courage and conviction that she would go, thus causing her dream to evaporate into a swirl of glittering bits of crystalline dust.

Chessie had yet to learn that her life would take her down a mysterious and magical path. From this point forward, she and the members of the realm had entered a new age, and their once-familiar lives would never be the same again.