

SOFIA'S ARMOR

A Special Gifts Story,
for friends and family.

by Bo Wilson,
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Sixth grade is the worst.

Are there studies which bear this out? Data? Perhaps, perhaps not, but regardless, let the assertion stand: Sixth grade is the worst.

Perhaps it's the year in which children learn that an insult can reach further than a fist, that a rumor can sting more than a slap. That mockery and its sibling, rejection, are among the cruelest weapons in the human arsenal.

Sixth grade is usually when you enter a new building, crammed with mysteries like lockers and gym class and showers and so very many kids who are so much older and wiser that they might as well be grownups. Even if you've gone to the same school your whole life, and known your classmates the entire time, sixth grade is when, overnight, all the rules seem to have changed. The game itself has changed.

And if you're new to the school? New to your classmates? You might as well have a bull's-eye painted on your forehead, a kick-me sign taped to that new, bright yellow backpack you were so proud of until you saw that all the other kids had dark colors.

Sofia was new. Her backpack was bright yellow. And her stomach felt full of eels, squirming and snapping. When she felt the eyes of all these strange girls sliding toward her and then innocently away, she felt pangs of uncertainty, edging toward outright fear.

(And when, in that single summer, had they learned these sly skills, this teflon subtlety? Back in fifth grade, a kid might stare at you, but this-- this practiced, casual disinterest--was a thousand times more difficult to combat, because you couldn't even ask about it. "Why are you looking at me like that?" was no longer on the menu of responses; if you dared suggest you'd been looked at, you were wide open for something like "Why would you think *anyone* was looking at *you*?")

Sofia wasn't even as old as the other sixth graders. She'd been promoted back at her old school, skipping third grade altogether. She was smart when it came to numbers and spelling and maps, but she was also good and kind, and goodness and kindness are always the slowest to recognize cruelty. What's more, even the brightest among us can be baffled by things which make no sense, and when has cruelty ever made sense? When has hurting someone for fun ever been the logical choice of action? Sofia was sweetness itself, and wanted only the chance to be a friend, and she could not understand such things. Not understanding them led to never being sure whether she was imagining them... and of course, that's the power of that slyness, that studied boredom: A bully with blood on his fists must surely have hit *something*, but those who learn to bully with a glance or a laugh? There's never any evidence. Only the hurt.

So when Sofia approached the group of girls, seeking only a seat, she couldn't *swear* that they moved specifically to get away from her. When later she saw them glancing her way and giggling, she couldn't *prove* that she was being mocked... and that's the real cruelty: never being sure, never being able to look and say "There, there is the stick that was used to hit me." The weapons were invisible, the bullies all masked, and the results too easy to blame on the person who had been hurt. "You mustn't be so sensitive," her father would say absently, and Sofia could only wonder: How do you teach yourself to *not* be hurt by things that cause pain?

Her mother's guidance was different but no better. "They just need to get to know you. You're new and different to them, and anything new and different draws attention. I know it's uncomfortable... but once they know you better, it will be like none of this ever happened."

The serenity with which her mother made these claims was a smooth, high wall, and none of Sofia's concerns could scale it. "When will that happen?" and "How will they get to know me when they always move away?" and "What can I do?" were all met with the same maddening answer which answered nothing:

"Just give it time."

You who are reading this know that time is different at different ages. By the point in life at which one has children of one's own, time seems blazingly fast, just blink and a week's gone by... but in sixth grade? Time is a glacier, its movement impossible to see or feel. Moreover, pain slows time even further, and there is no pain like isolation. We are not made to be alone, and when we are shunned, when we are held under the icy water of indifference, our hearts falter, and we would do anything for a gasp of belonging.

Which is why Sofia was so vulnerable to the next phase of things. It's why her heart leapt with happiness when some of those girls approached her at lunch.

She didn't understand that bullies are easily bored, forever in search of new evidence of their power. They approached her under the flag of "We want to get to know you" and Sofia felt like her mother was about to be proved right. She could not know they only wanted to know her the way an army wants to know a castle's weaknesses.

They asked where she'd lived before, so that they could mock it in vague, utterly deniable ways. They asked her whether her clothes had been hand made, which was merely a slippery way for them to call her poor. They asked her why her mother made her hair that way, feigning sympathy that such punishment would be inflicted by any truly loving parent.

Sofia, who had no reason to feel badly about her old home or her clothes or her hair quickly realized that every aspect of her appearance was just another rock in their hands, and when one of the girls had uttered a particularly cutting assessment of parents who force their children to go out without decent shoes, Sofia burst into tears, and screamed at them that her parents were not bad, and they had better stop saying such things.

The surprise they feigned at her reaction was Oscar-worthy, and they moved quickly away under cover of apology, but the laughter began before they were even ten paces away.

Sofia's sobs grew.

And far, far to the north, her sobs were heard.

At the top of the world, hidden beneath hundreds of feet of ice, is a vast world of huge caverns and elaborate tunnels, filled with workshops of every description, bustling with strange beings called Makers. They are very quiet and very small, because small people can fit in more places and small fingers can do more things. As a race, they are astonishingly clever in every area of the Maker's craft, from sculpting to silversmithing to weaving to woodwork. They are able to make anything a mere mortal might imagine, but they have given themselves fully to the creation of a single type of thing:

Gifts.

Overseeing this secret kingdom of Makers is a creature as large as they are small, and as heartily loud as they are quiet. His girth is immense, and his laugh can jostle the moon from the sky. It's said by some that he was once a Maker himself, and that his making was so powerful that he remade his very form, becoming the being he now is. Across the centuries, he's been known by many names, but we shall call him the Saint. It is the Saint who guides the Makers in what they should make, directing them with attention and care, always ready with the next instruction whenever they are ready for it. He seems to be everywhere at once, always with a smile or a laugh, praising each effort and inspiring excellence wherever his gaze falls. The Makers love him, and he loves them.

Of course, not even a leader as gifted as the Saint could manage all of this without help, and his help for the last several hundred years has been a Maker named Blaine. Blaine's face betrays no age, but it's rumored that he's as old as the Saint, perhaps even older. Blaine has been the Saint's right hand for so long that he has come to feel quite safe about expressing all opinions clearly, from approval to incredulity, including the occasional arched eyebrow whenever the Saint makes a particularly odd request.... such as the one Blaine feels certain is about to be made.

"Blaine! My faithful friend, my loyal Maker-in-chief, I am in desperate need of your invaluable assistance!"

Blaine responds mildly, knowing that such effusive greetings always precede something particularly odd. He bows his head fractionally and says only "Of course, sir."

The Saint beckons him closer. "Come have a look at this," he rumbles merrily.

As Blaine crosses the Saint's private chambers, he sees the open chest in the corner, and he feels his breath catch; whatever is coming might be odd, but it will also be exciting, for that chest contains the materials used in creating Special Gifts.

The Special Gifts chest is unlike any other chest or trunk. For one thing, when it is closed the seal is impossible for even a Maker's sharp eyes to discern-- it seems to be perfectly solid. Should you detect, by some miracle, the point at which chest becomes lid, you might also encounter three magical locks. One opens only to a particular kind of light; another, to a precise musical note; the third, to a key so delicate that even the slightest undue pressure would leave you with nothing but a handful of dust. Should anyone somehow master all three locks, the chest would, upon opening, appear to be completely empty, for it is protected by many layers of magical spells and wards of every sort.

But the chest is not empty. No, the chest contains some of the rarest items and materials ever to exist, each of which carries a particular power which becomes a part of anything created from it. As he passes, Blaine can see the small compartments, labeled in the Saint's meticulous hand. "Creation," which Blaine knows holds a vial with a few drops from Shakespeare's quill, a shard of ivory from Mozart's favorite keyboard, a few hairs from the paintbrush Da Vinci used to paint the Mona Lisa, and many other such items. In the compartment labeled "Insight," there are three seeds from the apple that fell upon Newton, and a shard of the lens from Galileo's first telescope. In "Strength and Speed," a feather from Mercury's winged feet; in "Beauty," a single eyelash belonging to Cleopatra.

But the Saint is already holding something from the chest, a small piece of blackened metal; it seems little more than dross from a blacksmith's forge, but Blaine knows it must be more than it seems. "What do you make of this?" asks the Saint, his eyes a'twinkle.

Blaine won't be lured into guessing games. "I make whatever you ask me to make, sir."

The Saint rolls his eyes in a show of exasperation. "Where's your sense of fun, have you no ideas at all?"

Blaine issues the tiniest sigh, because he knows it will please the Saint (and indeed, a low chuckle ensues immediately) then offers "It seems to be the remnant of some sort of metallurgy."

The Saint points at his friend in triumph. "Well done! Exactly!"

This particular game being almost as old as the two beings enacting it, Blaine knows that his next move is inquiry. "May one venture to ask, sir, the particular nature of this artifact?"

The Saint nods happily. "Of course, old friend. Tell me-- what do you know of Hephaestus?"

Blaine adopts the required expression of regret and says "Not nearly enough, I'm sure." The concluding move is Invitation: "Perhaps, sir, you'd be good enough to enlighten me?"

Their game now complete, the Saint is free to tell the story he has been practically bursting to tell since summoning the Maker to his chambers. His voice becomes professorial: "Hephaestus was the armorer to the Gods. Greek, with the later Roman tales calling him Vulcan. Son of Hera and Zeus, a wonderfully gifted Maker in his own right, especially anything relating to metal. Made Aphrodite's girdle, Hermes' helmet, Helios' chariot, so on and so forth."

"Also Achilles' armor, I believe," ventures Blaine.

The Saint points again, as though having caught Blaine out. "Aha! So you *do* know him! Although," the Saint's rumbling voice drops an octave, "He didn't do poor Achilles any favors, leaving those heels exposed, eh? Eh?" The Saint's laugh grows, then he continues. "And! It turns out that while he might have been an expert smith, he was a disaster at archery. I once shot against him for the chance to pick over the leavings from his forge. Beat him three flights out of three!"

Blaine isn't interested in letting the conversation drift toward a rehashing of old contests, so he points to the small bit of metal in the Saint's enormous hand. "And that is a part of what you were allowed to carry away?"

The Saint nods, and his voice softens. "It is, Blaine, and there is a mortal girl who I believe needs its particular protections. Do you think you might fashion a simple necklace with a pendant which can contain this relic?"

Blaine nods, all business, accepting the bit of metal and studying it for a moment before nodding again. "I'll need an hour, sir."

The Saint regards him kindly. "Then an hour you shall have."

On Christmas morning, Sofia was quiet. She had told her parents that the only thing she wanted for Christmas was to transfer to a different school, but they had answered that such a change would be very difficult to arrange, and would be no guarantee of improvement. "After all," her father had said, "there are mean kids at every school."

So that morning, the family opened their gifts, and Sofia tried to act as though the dolls and books and video games made her happy, but it was a poor performance, and no one was really fooled. When she noticed the tiny box bearing only her name and no tag saying who it was from ("must be from Santa!" her father had said) each of her parents assumed that the other had given it. Inside the box was a simply necklace-- a pendant on a chain-- and a small square of paper, on which a single line of beautiful handwriting said "Reflection is useful."

This didn't make much sense to Sofia, and the pendant wasn't exactly pretty... but the more she looked at it, the more she liked it. Surrounding a tiny lump of odd-looking metal was a silver circle, bearing beautiful inscriptions that looked like writing, but in no alphabet she recognized. The chain was so thin and fine it seemed almost invisible, but it felt very strong. When she slipped it over her head, a strange feeling came over her.

It was a feeling of safety.

As the date for her to return to school drew near, Sofia couldn't help her growing sense of dread... but when the feeling threatened to overwhelm her, she would take the pendant into her hand, and the feeling would lessen, like a noisy room when a door closes-- still there, but manageable.

When the day arrived, Sofia wore some of her new Christmas clothes, even though she was certain they would draw the scorn of her tormentors. The necklace was tucked under a new sweater and blouse set; for some reason, it was the one gift she wanted to keep hidden. It felt to her like something no one should be allowed to make fun of.

The day proceeded without incident-- social studies, then art, then earth science-- until lunchtime, when Sofia saw the other girls eying her, and she knew that their approach was not a question of "if," but only of "when." Sure enough, they causally drew themselves to standing, and sidled over to Sofia's table, their faces all innocence.

Amanda, who always led their forays, smiled brightly and said "Sofia, hi! Good Christmas?"

Sofia knew the false flag of friendship was only camouflage, but she could see no way to avoid answering in kind: "Hi, Amanda! Yeah, it was okay, how was yours?"

Amanda rolled her eyes in a show of suffering and said "You know, you never get any of the stuff you really want, right? Like that sweater you've got on, lemme guess-- your mom made you wear it because some relative of yours gave it to you, and she has no idea how embarrassing it is for you to have to wear it, right?"

The other girls giggled, and Sofia tried to parse the insult as rapidly as she could-- should she agree? Protest?-- but before she could even decide how to reply, a strange thing happened: Amanda's eyes grew large, and startled, and...were those *tears* that Sofia could see pooling in them?

The other girls, who could not see whatever was happening to their leader, were eager to test their own claws. Joss, known to be Amanda's best friend, was giving huge nods of false understanding, and said "Oh my god, right? I *hate* when my mom tries to make me wear something hideous, it's the absolute wor-- whuh..." and here again, a strange change occurred, but apparently it was even more powerful than whatever had happened to Amanda. Joss looked as though she were experiencing a kind of panic attack; she heaved as if trying to draw a breath, and her face was a mask of hurt surprise.

Sofia's brow was knit as she tried to make sense of what even the other girls could now tell was something very strange, and very wrong. Amanda and Joss both turned from her, and made vague waves of farewell while battling whatever had come upon them.

Around the cafeteria, others took note. Some people like to watch when a pack of dogs chases someone, but even the ones who aren't interested in such things look up when the dogs inexplicably turn tail and run away yelping. They had seen the approach... and now they saw the odd retreat, and they all saw Sofia still there, and they noticed that she didn't seem at all bothered by whatever had happened.

Right they were. Sofia was baffled...but bothered? Oh no. Not at all.

Both of Sofia's parents were struck by the difference in her that night at dinner when they asked about her day. They were braced for sorrow, or for silence... but they were not at all prepared for the bemused shrug she gave them, accompanied by the simple "All right, I guess." They discussed it in quiet murmurs as they got ready for bed later; something was different, and it was hard to say what it was, but it was certainly better than tears.

Meanwhile, in her bed, Sofia thought about the looks on the girls' faces after they'd said the mean things. Surprise. Confusion. Pain.

Her hand went to her pendant without her even being aware of it.

The next day, Sofia found that her old companion, Dread, had been replaced by a new feeling: Curiosity. She had no doubt that the other girls would again try to establish their dominance, but she could no longer tell whether this was anything she should fear.

The answer came quickly, over several smaller events throughout the day.

There was the encounter with Emily, in the hallway between classes. Emily was a big girl who enjoyed physical cruelties she shrugged off as "pranks," and her favorite was to knock all the schoolbooks out of her victim's arms. The books themselves were already slippery when held together, and when Emily's hand came swatting down like a club, it was very nearly impossible to maintain one's grip. Sofia saw Emily, then saw Emily see *her*, then saw her approach, and braced herself to spend the next several minutes picking up her books and papers from among the indifferent, shuffling feet.

Emily's arm came up....Sofia winced, shutting her eyes tightly against the impending blow....

... and nothing happened.

When Sofia opened her eyes, she first thought Emily was gone, but then realized that no, she was not gone, she was merely sprawled on the floor, with her books and papers strewn everywhere and a shocked look on her face.

While passers-by would barely have bothered looking at Sofia if things had unfolded the way they usually did, this brought them to a near standstill, with puzzled looks on every face. How had Emily ended up down there? What had Sofia done? And then-- oh, this was a puzzle!-- why was Sofia *helping* her? For she certainly was doing exactly that, she was kneeling at Emily's side, asking whether she was all right, and reaching to pluck papers and books from the hall floor.

"I'm so sorry, I must have bumped you, here, this is your science book, are you sure you're okay?" Sofia asked, and it was clear to all who heard her that the questions weren't sarcastic, that this wasn't regular mean-girl pretending, she was really concerned! (you will recall that I told you Sofia was good and kind; those traits had not been bullied out of her.)

But the strangest thing? The most incredible thing? Emily burst into tears.... and *hugged* Sofia! After the briefest instant, Sofia hugged back, and the image carried away by all those onlookers was of that embrace, a tenderness which seemed to have come from nowhere and which was suddenly stronger than any bully's hand.

Other things happened. Later that day, Mackenzie Davenport tried to mock Sofia's soft voice in gym class, but ended up stammering so badly that it was she who was laughed at, and she'd turned bright red and darted away. Taffy Gardner had sneered at Sofia, asking why her nails were so filthy (they weren't, of course) but then looked at her own hands in horror and rushed to the restroom, where she was found a half-hour later scrubbing desperately at her own fingers.

There was also three tiny incidents in which classmates spoke to Sofia with tentative friendliness, and instantly felt warmer, and happier, and more sure of their places in the world. Perhaps they had only spoken to Sofia because her mysterious new resistance to bullying made her an object of interest... but however superficially their overtures might have begun, the good feeling which filled them made all three quite eager to be friends with this girl who had suffered so patiently and who now seemed too serene to ever have been hurt by anyone. Being Sofia's friend felt good. Being her enemy, well...that no longer seemed like it worked out very well.

Why were these things happening? To understand, we need only revisit that critical hour Blaine had asked for in fashioning the pendant. He had taken the bit of enchanted metal to his own private workshop, sending ahead word that he would like the help of a Maker named Prymme. Prymme had only been a full vested Maker for a hundred years, but she was possessed of two remarkable talents: She was expert at the delicate work required for jewelry, and she was extraordinarily insightful when it came to marrying intention and design.

It took only a moment for Blaine to know he had chosen wisely in asking for her. He had laid out the situation-- a bullied girl, and a fragment of armor endowed with reflection magic-- any attack was sent back against itself. Arrows would turn in midflight to return and pierce the archer, and even the verbal arrows we call "insults" would bend their way back to their source, and only the attacker would be wounded. "It is the Saint's intent," Blaine had explained, "that the girls who mean Sofia injury should themselves suffer whatever pain they try to inflict."

"Enforced empathy," Prymme had murmured.

Blaine's eyebrows had lifted a fraction as he considered this before nodding. Yes indeed, this was a very fine summation of the Saint's desire. "Of the very deepest sort," he agreed. "If mortals believed that they themselves will feel any pain they attempted to inflict, their entire world would quickly become a kinder place."

Prymme nodded, and had quietly begun "Yes, but..." and then stopped herself, clearly unsure of whether she had leave to offer her own thoughts.

Blaine made a slight bow toward her. "Please speak your mind, Maker. Your ideas might prove an even greater assistance than your fingers."

She nodded, gathering her thoughts carefully before speaking softly. "Empathy need not be so narrow a path. To reflect an attack might be useful... but mightn't we fashion something that also reflects the better intentions of mortal action? Mightn't this small bit of metal be harnessed to redouble and return things like generosity, and compassion, and love?"

Blaine stood very still for perhaps a count of three, and then nodded briskly. "Show me what you mean," he asked.

As Prymme quickly sketched the encircling disk of silver and the necessary runes to be inscribed upon it, Blaine felt satisfaction. He would have to see to it that young Prymme was given her own shop and staff. Making is a very special skill, but knowing exactly what to make? That is the place where skill becomes art.

And so the pendant Sofia wore not only changed her own life but the lives of almost every other person at the school. At first, the lessons were limited to those who interacted directly with her, but it soon became understood that these lessons were available to every person. The students learned that bullying has many victims, and that in the end, none were hurt worse than the bully herself. They learned that kindness and laughter have no limits, and can be shared with every person you meet without ever reducing how much remains.

They learned that the soul itself is a reflector, and that what we give shall always return to us.

There came a day when Sofia returned home from school, and realized that the slim chain holding the pendant had broken, and that the pendant had been lost. She cried when she realized it was gone, and her parents-- who had not heard her cry in months-- comforted her, and told her that perhaps it would be found by someone who would treasure it as much as she had.

Perhaps they were right. Sofia no longer needed the pendant for her own safety, for she had provided living proof of its lessons long enough for those lessons to take root and grow in the fertile soil that is the heart of every child. Perhaps, in some time to come, another child would find the pendant, and keep it close, and feel its protection flow to his life, and into the lives of every person that child met.

Such is the way of all truth, and it may be given year round.

Merry Christmas.