

Sophie Patulny

Bio: Sophie Patulny enjoys writing short stories and novels of the fantasy genre, as well as historical and contemporary fiction. Sophie's short story, "Once A Jolly Swagwoman" was the winner of the Better Read Than Dead 2018 Summer Writing competition. Her novella "Earthians" was shortlisted for the 2020 National Somerset Storyfest Novella Competition; she was one of nine high school student finalists of the NSW and ACT area. She also loves dragons. Probably a bit too much.

Aragog The Huntsman

Most school lunch breaks are monotonous and boring. Especially when the playground is a concrete slab, because your school thinks that play equipment is dangerous. It means that even the smallest thing becomes such a massive fuss; you'd think Voldemort was here to kill us all. Even stupid gossip was better than nothing, although still pretty boring. I'd much rather fight witches or ride unicorns.

One particular day, I was telling Victoria and Joyce, my two best friends, about my pet dragon, Norbert. The same one from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which I had read not long ago.

"He's small, and brown," I said to them, stroking the air where I thought my dragon would be. I imagined him sitting beside me regally, scales shimmering.

"I have a pet. He's a phoenix," Victoria said. She pointed at the concrete in front of her. In my mind's eye, I saw a fiery red bird with long crooked talons and sharp black eyes standing there, just like Fawkes the phoenix. Victoria had just started *The Chamber of Secrets*. Her copy had a super cool front cover of a green snake hissing. I had always liked that cover more than my own, which was a drawing of Ron and Harry in the flying car. It looked a bit silly, to be honest.

I decided it was time to play a game, so I pointed to the library block across the playground, a big brown brick building. "The Giant Octopus!" I cried.

The Giant Octopus was our most dreaded enemy. He loved to wreak havoc wherever he went. It was our job, as the guardians of the human world, to protect it from him. Often, entire lunchtimes were devoted to fighting him, and any other creature that took a fancy to our school.

Joyce gasped. "I can see him!"

He was blue, dangerously huge, and strong enough to rip apart a house as if it were paper. He sat upon the library roof, smashing the building with his tentacles. Masonry came crashing down upon unaware children. Had the monster been real, they would be running for their lives, but he was only a figment of our ridiculously bored minds.

"I'm sending my phoenix to try and take out the octopus's eyes!" Victoria said. We watched the fiery bird sweep through the air, but before he could even get close, the octopus slapped him away like a fly.

"Something stronger! Cast a spell!" I cried.

"Fire!" Joyce yelled.

Other kids near us turned. "Is there a fire?" the ringleader, Allison, asked. They were the popular girls, I think? I could never be bothered with that nonsense. Who cared if you were popular or not, if you had no imagination? A popular robot is still a robot.

"No," I replied. "Why?"

"Joyce just yelled 'fire'," another girl, Emma, said.

"It's our game," Victoria began. "We're pretending to fight a giant octopus using fire."

Emma frowned. "Giant octopuses don't exist, you know?"

"We're *pretending*," I echoed.

"Also its octopi, not octopuses," Victoria said.

Allison looked irritated. "That's dumb. Why pretend to fight something that doesn't exist?"

"Because it's *fun*," I spat. We exchanged frowns, and then I turned back to Victoria.

"Use the fire spell!" I told her.

She turned and pointed at the monster, muttering incomprehensible incantations.

Suddenly all the octopus's tentacles burst into flame. He roared. Smoke mixed with the dust that rose from the building. Howling in defeat, he slid off of the library roof, and faded from our minds.

We all sagged with relief, and dug through our lunchboxes for a celebratory sandwich to revive our energy.

But our imaginary problems were barely gone when we heard real ones. On the far side of the playground, a group of kindergarteners were standing in a circle, pointing at the ground and screaming.

From behind us, other kids ran over to see what was wrong, and then recoiled in fright as well.

Victoria, Joyce and I hurried over, but couldn't see past all the people what was causing the commotion. I tried to push through to get a better look, seeing as I was the smallest and most agile.

Suddenly there was movement on the ground, and everyone jumped back, screaming. I was finally able to see the source of the trouble.

It was a Huntsman spider! No wonder they were scared. Rumour had it that years ago, a girl had been bitten by one while locked in the last cubicle of the bathrooms, and she had died, her ghost forever haunting that cubicle. No one ever went in there now, even if they were busting and there were no other cubicles available. Not because they were scared of the ghost, but because they didn't want to get bitten by the spider.

Apparently, if you leave a Huntsman alone, they'll leave you alone. Just like the giant spider from *The Chamber of Secrets*, Aragog. He only tried to hurt humans who trespassed into his secret forest home.

I turned to see Allison and Emma behind me, looking completely terrified. Urgh. The robots. Aragog would have loved to eat them.

That gave me an idea. I grinned at them wickedly, and pointed to the spider on the ground. "It's Aragog!"

Emma, frowned. "Who's Arrowgog?"

"*Aragog* is a giant spider!" Victoria said. "He's bigger than an adult!"

"He eats children for dinner!" I told Emma. "And he doesn't even cook them first, he eats them *raw*!"

A couple of other kids nearby stopped screaming to listen.

"You're saying that this spider is him?" Lily-Lu-May, a girl in my class, asked, pointing at the Huntsman on the ground.

I nodded.

She looked horrified.

"Hang on," Allison said. "You said Aragog was a giant spider, but this one is tiny."

"He wouldn't be tiny to ants." Joyce said.

"But he still couldn't eat us. It's just a made-up character from *Harry Potter*."

"Wait!" I cried. I whipped out a stick from my pocket. Victoria, Joyce and I each had one. They were our 'wands'. We had found them in Victoria's backyard.

Everyone gasped.

Victoria and Joyce pulled out theirs too.

"It's a wand!" Emma cried.

"No," Allison replied. "It's a stick."

"A wand *is* a stick," Victoria said.

Now the huddle was around *us*, rather than the spider.

"Aragog has stopped moving," I said, pointing my wand at it. "I think he's dead."

Everyone peered forward to see if that was true.

"*Expelliamus!*" I cried, waving my wand at it.

To my amazement, the spider skittered forward a few centimetres.

Everyone jumped back another step, screaming.

I grinned at Allison.

"What's going on here?" a deep voice pierced our conversation.

Mr O'Scott had arrived.

Everyone suddenly dispersed, leaving Victoria, Joyce and I alone with Aragog and the teacher.

Mr O'Scott saw the spider. "Goodness! All that fuss over such a tiny creature?" He turned to us. "What have you three been stirring up everyone for?"

He was trying to tell us off, but he said it so calmly that it sounded more like he was wondering if we liked sherbet lemons. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from laughing.

Then the bell rang. He sighed. "Go on. Off to class."

As we hurried away I saw him gently pick up Aragog with a plastic container from his first aid bag. I was glad the spider would be alright. Hopefully my spell hadn't hurt him too much.

Then I felt someone tap my shoulder, and I turned to see Allison.

"Hey could you teach me how to cast a spell like that?" Allison asked. "I know it's not real, but it's still cool."

"I'll help fight the giant octopi," Emma added from behind her.

Joyce, Victoria and I grinned at each other.

"Alright," Joyce said. "If you like."

"But there's one rule..." Victoria continued.

They leaned forward eagerly.

"Don't be robots," I said.