

A PACK OF TROUBLE

James Gauthier



**HOMEWORLD
PRESS**

River Forest, IL

CHAPTER ONE

BELL, BOOK & CANDLE

My name is Sid and I always thought I was a normal twelve year old boy but in the past month I have killed a dragon, ended a war, become a merboy, gotten super powers and also saved the world. Now I want it understood from the start that I have read many books on magic and sorcery, but I never believed in a million years that any type of adventure would happen to anyone I knew, let alone to me! I want to tell you what happened from the beginning, but it is a little hard to figure out when that was exactly. I mean, I thought that it probably began the first time I saw that strange magic store. But after thinking about it for some time I think that everything in my life has been adding up to that moment, and even my finding the store paled in comparison to what was to come.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I live in a pretty big city in Connecticut with my family, about whom you will learn more about real soon.

Shortly after my twelfth birthday I was walking home from school with my twin brother Coop. His real name is Cooper but everyone always calls him Coop. We live about a mile away from school so walk the same route home everyday. As always we were busy talking about manga, which is Japanese animation, and we almost didn't see the weird building across the street.

I nudged Coop and pointed at the building. "Hey, Coop, look at that."

Coop wasn't too impressed. "Yeah, so what? It's just a stupid old building."

"Yeah," I replied, "but it's never been there before. It's always been a vacant lot."

"No it hasn't."

"Yes it has," I said. "Don't you remember the pile of tires we used to play on?"

"Oh, yeah," Coop said.

I pointed again. "They used to be there."

"That building looks like it's over a hundred years old," Coop observed. "Nobody builds old buildings on vacant lots. You've got to be mistaken."

I pulled on his coat sleeve. "No I'm not, come on let's take a look."

As we crossed the street I could see a lot of stuff about the building I had missed before. It was small and had one store with a large dusty picture window. When I looked up I saw two big ugly stone gargoyles staring down from the roof. The window was so filthy that we could barely see inside. Above the door hung a faded sign in ancient corny lettering, and the name on it was "Merlin's Ye Olde Magik Shoppe."

I pointed the sign out to Coop but he was unimpressed.

"So what, it's just a stupid sign," he said. "And who the heck is Merlin, anyway?"

"Come on Coop, don't you remember? He was in that old movie that Dad showed us last week."

"Which one? He's always showing us old movies."

"It was the movie with all the knights in armor and King Arthur."

"I don't remember that one."

"That's 'cause you slept through it. You're always sleeping through his movies."

"That's 'cause they're always boring," Coop said defensively.

"Well this one wasn't. There was tons of fighting and killing."

Coop gave me a little shove. "Why didn't you wake me then? I would have stayed awake for that."

"That's not important. Let's go in."

"I don't want to," Coop said. "It looks stupid and boring. Besides, I don't care about magic."

"I do."

That's how different me and my brother could be. Even though we were twins we didn't look or act alike. When I say we didn't look alike I mean we weren't identical twins. There was a strong family resemblance, but nobody ever had any trouble telling us apart. We are short for our age and Coop has freckles over most of his body where I don't have any.

I was fascinated by magicians and I tried to read as much as I could about them. Unlike Coop, I liked the movies that Dad showed us. Not all of them were as cool as the movies that I saw in the theater but a lot of them were fun.

Coop was the opposite of me. He didn't like to read. He was too busy playing one sport or another. He liked to play basketball but he was too

short for any of the local teams. Instead Dad signed Coop up for gymnastics. He tried signing us both up but I really stunk at it. The one thing we did have in common was our love for manga. I love it because of all the imaginative characters and stories. Coop on the other hand loves it for all of the fights and battles. Coop's a great brother but sometimes he really gets in my hair. I heard that expression in one of Dad's old movies. He explained that it refers to someone who keeps bothering you or does irritating things. That describes Coop sometimes, because occasionally he does things that really can annoy me.

I grabbed Coop by his coat sleeve. "Come on, Coop. Just for a minute."

Coop easily pulled away from me. "No, I've got to go home and get somethin' to eat. You know it's Friday and I've got gymnastics right after dinner."



Coop started to walk away from me. I was almost going to go into the store without him but I decided that I would talk him into coming back with me later. We were almost past the store when I saw something in the window that I could swear hadn't been there the first time I looked. Hanging in the old dusty store window was a small sign that said, "Manga Cards and Paraphernalia Inside."

"Look," I shouted. "They've got manga in there."

That stopped Coop in his tracks.

"Where?"

I pointed at the sign. "In there. Look."

Coop looked at the small sign. "What's para-fer-nalia?"

I shook my head. "How should I know? But it's got to have somethin' to do with manga. Come on, let's go in."

Coop shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Just for a few minutes. They probably don't have anything that we don't already have."

The inside of the store was even stranger than the outside. There were all sorts of unusual globes, weird stuffed creatures, statues, books, rings and other items either hanging from the ceiling or scattered around the room. But nothing looked like it had been put here recently or even within the past century. Most of it was covered with cobwebs and layers of dust, and it didn't look as if anyone had ever touched it.

The walls were filled with maps of all different places, some of which I had heard of, others I hadn't. Strange sounding places like Pern, Xanth, Narnia and Galifrey. The fact that some of these places were imaginary didn't bother me, it was that all of them looked like actual maps, like you would find if you actually went to these places, all the detail and such.

I was so busy looking at all the junk that I hadn't even noticed there was someone else in the room with us, until I heard him speak.

"Welcome, young friends, welcome, young friends, to the store where the law of science always bends. You'll find surprises and more, upon every shelf galore, but how you handle them is something to look forward to, forevermore. There's crystals exotic and sometimes demonic, tomes old and new, written especially for you. We sell mystical treasures that guarantee pleasures, and infinite possibilities beyond your measure."

"Look around young friends, look around young friends, to a store where your expectation never ends. We've got the teeth of a Minotaur that were lost in a war and the wings of a bat who was incredibly fat. Spells from a sorcerer's pen that number just ten and of course you will see many more wonders I know you'll agree. We take everything in trade, from worthless glass to precious jade. But remember, anything you're purchasing is more than it seems. You're buying the story of destiny and dreams."

I swear that while he was saying this I could almost hear weird music coming from all around. When he stopped long enough to take a breath, I

looked at him and said, "I'm just lookin'."

He kept calling us his young friends, but he looked like a kid, no older than us. He also had a very funny look about him. He was very strangely dressed, strange even for this day and age. He was wearing tights and boots and things that people wore hundreds of years ago when there were knights in shining armor.

"Fine, fine," the kid continued. "My name is Toby. Come in and relax, cool yourselves off."

That was the first strange thing that happened, because it was about thirty degrees outside, and I told him so.

"I'm sorry, my young friend. I didn't notice your coat. I never know what time of year it is outside when we arrive in a new location."

"Oh", I said, "You just recently set up shop here?"

"Well, not exactly. I don't think that I am allowed to, uh, that I am able to explain it to you. You'll have to talk to the owner about that. He should be back any minute."

Toby glanced at a strange wooden clock on the wall behind the counter. It took me a few seconds to realize just how weird it was -- mainly because it was running backwards!

I didn't have time to study it any further because a tall skinny old man with a very long beard suddenly came through the back door. He was almost seven feet tall. If I didn't know any better, I would have sworn that he could pass as the real Merlin from King Arthur's time. He wore a blue cloak covered in stars and a funny looking hat with a odd symbol on it.

What I didn't know at the time was that a large ugly python was beginning to uncoil from its perch on a nearby bookshelf. It slowly slithered closer behind me but I was too busy watching the man with the very long beard to notice it. It suddenly wrapped itself around my legs and was quickly moving up my body! A second later it was totally wrapped around my body and it began to squeeze me. Its grip on me tightened and I could feel the air being crushed out of my lungs. I couldn't even call out for help. Then I saw Coop grab a dusty book from the counter and strike the python's head with it. The snake immediately loosened its hold on me and it quickly unwrapped itself from me and began to slither away. But before it could get too far Toby came over and grabbed it. He looked at it and shook his head and even though he wasn't saying anything it looked like he was communicating with the snake somehow. He then recited some words that I couldn't understand and the python began to shrink until it was so small that I couldn't see it any longer.

"Sorry about that," Toby apologized. "He thought you were somebody else. Monty is getting a bit nearsighted in his old age."

The old man walked behind the counter and snapped his fingers. Toby ran over to him. The tall man opened his hand, revealing a small, strange

looking creature. It looked like a tiny dragon from one of Dad's old movies. A small puff of smoke and fire shot out of its mouth. Toby reached up and took it from his hand, then disappeared into the back room.

The tall man then turned his attention to me and Coop. "May I be of assistance?" he asked. He said this in a voice that was so commanding I couldn't do anything but meekly answer back. I was even too afraid to mention the snake that had just attacked me.

"Uh, we're here about the sign in the window."

"Oh yes. That!" He waved his hand and the sign flew out of the window, slowed down and hovered in the air before his face. He looked at it for a few seconds as if he had never seen it before.

"Hmmm," he said softly. "Manga. I am not familiar with that word. I will need to consult the book." He snapped his fingers. "Toby! THE book!"

Toby scampered out of the back room and swiftly searched for the book. I went over to Coop, who was on his cell phone.

"Who are you callin'?" I asked.

Coop snapped his phone shut. "Nobody! There's no reception in here. So where is the manga you promised, Sid?"

"The owner is looking for it now."

At that moment Toby ran past me carrying the largest book I have ever seen. The dusty thick leather cover looked like it hadn't been opened in years. Toby struggled as he held it in both hands as high as he could. The owner waved his hand and the book opened and the pages flipped back and forth by themselves.

"Do you see that Coop?"

"Yeah, so what? They do that in the *Harry Potter* movies all the time."

"That's done with special effects in the movies. This isn't a movie!"

"He's doin' it with wires or somethin'," Coop replied. "There's no such thing as magic."

The owner smiled as the pages stopped flipping and flapping. He seemed to find what he was looking for.

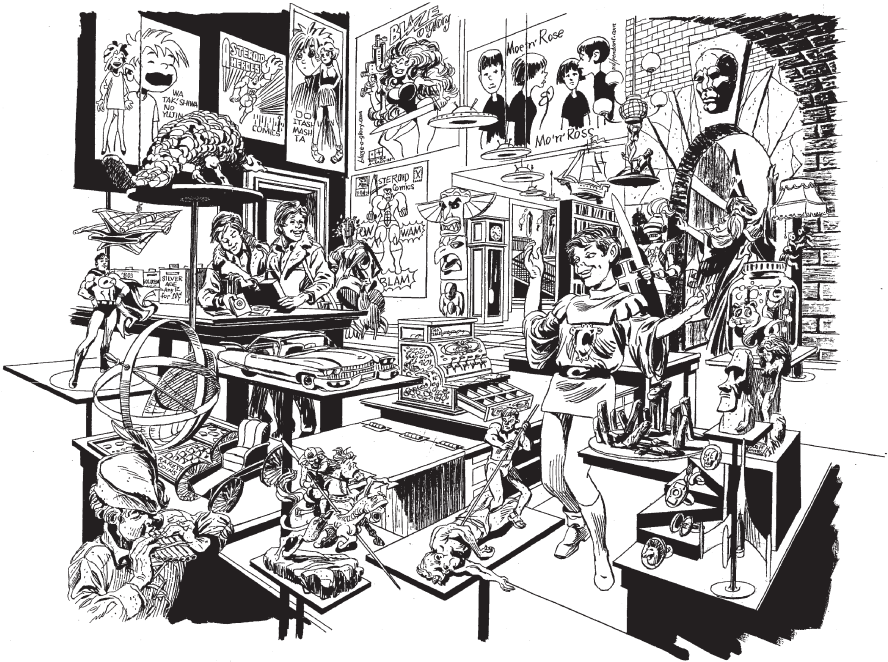
"Here it is," the man said. "Manga!" He slowly nodded his head as he softly read from the book. For a few seconds I thought there was a bright light behind us and when I turned there was a large assortment of items on the counter that hadn't been there before. I was pretty sure that they hadn't been there.

Coop's eyes opened wide. He had that silly grin on his face that he gets when he's found something that he's been looking for. He ran over to the counter and grabbed several of the items.

"Dang," Coop exclaimed. "Look at these things, Sid. They've got a ton of rare manga stuff here!"

I was tempted to go over and look at the objects, but instead I turned around to see what the owner and Toby were doing. Toby and the book





were gone and the owner was walking back towards the counter. As he approached I noticed something else very odd happening. The maps on the walls began to change and the images were no longer places of exotic lands but instead they became posters of different manga characters. In fact the longer I watched the more I saw things in the store transform into something else. I tried pointing this out to Coop but he was too engrossed in rummaging through all the manga stuff on the counter to pay any attention to me or what was going on around him.

"Normally I don't deal directly with the customer," the owner of the store said. "But I thought that Toby could use some assistance, since he practically runs the shop himself, in addition to all the time he spends learning his, ahem, lessons. We don't get many customers, but the ones that we do get are pretty reliable, and they have been coming here for years." As he said those last few words, a peculiar smile appeared on his face.

"Customers?" I asked in disbelief. "You actually get customers in here?"

The owner smiled. "My young friend, this is the finest and largest stocked magic shop in existence."

"How do you get any customers?" I asked. "First off, I don't see a single magic trick, and I've seen enough professional magic acts to know what kind of stuff they use. And another thing: This is the first time that we've seen this store here, and we go by this lot every day to and from school."

"To begin with my young friend, the customers we get are not what

you would call mere stage magicians, and we do not sell their cheap and phony apparatus here," the owner replied. "We have too much integrity for that! And as for your second point, may I ask you what was in this spot, if we were not?"

"It was an empty field with a large pile of tires," I answered.

"An empty field? Then what you seem to be telling me is that this building just appeared out of thin air, overnight?"

"Well, no, it couldn't have." I was getting nervous.

"Then we must have been here for quite some time, and you just never noticed us before," the owner said with sudden authority. Toby had come back and he was keeping an eye on Coop. He probably thought that Coop was going to steal something.

"Would it set your mind at ease if I told you that this store only appears to those people that have a need of its services, and that, to the rest of the world, it just doesn't exist?"

"Yeah, right!" I laughed. "Look, I know that that kind of stuff only happens in books, and not in real life, so just give me a break. And how come a lot of the stuff in the store looks different now. The store didn't look like this when we walked in."

"My establishment adjusts itself to the needs of the customer," the owner said. "Whether you know of the need or not."

Coop came over and he had both hands full of stuff. "Hey, how much for all of this? There's no prices on anything."

"I'm sorry my young friend, but you are only permitted to buy one item a day," the owner replied.

I could tell that Coop was starting to get upset. "One!?" he asked. "What kind of crazy place is this? How can you sell only one thing to a customer?"

"That is how it has always been and that is how it shall always be," the owner said. "Magic has its own rules. I merely follow them. I do not create them."

"What are you talking about?" Coop said. "I don't want magic. I just want this stuff."

"Everything in this store is magical," the owner replied. "If you cannot abide by the rules then you will not be permitted to purchase anything."

He clapped his hands and Toby began to take stuff away from Coop.

"Okay!" Coop said. "Fine! I'll just get one thing. Will that make you happy?"

"That is our policy," the owner said. "You may return some other day and purchase another item if you wish."

Coop looked through the stuff that he had left in his hands. I could tell that he was having a hard time deciding what to get. He finally had it down to three things: A video game, a DVD and a pack of manga cards.

He reluctantly put down the DVD and video game and held up the pack of cards. "How much is this?"

"A wise choice, my young friend," the owner said. "That is yours for the small price of one drachma."

Coop looked at me. I just shrugged. I had no idea how much that was. "Come again?" Coop asked.

"Ah, I see, wrong currency," the owner replied. "How about a farthing?" Coop just shook his head.

"A sou?" the owner tried another time.

Coop shook his head again.

"Franc? Dinar? Peso? Shilling? Rupee? Lira? Yen?"

The owner looked wearily at Toby. "What is the local means of exchange?" he asked.

Toby closed his eyes and he looked like he was concentrating real hard. "Cents! Dollars! Cents are the lowest denomination. One hundred cents equals one dollar."

"Very well, my young friend, the price is one dollar."

Coop reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar. Even I knew that the cards were worth a lot more than that. He turned to me.

"I got what I want, now you get somethin', Sid."

The owner raised his hand and shook his head. "No! You have your one purchase and that is all that you are allowed. It does not matter how many there are of you. You are only entitled to one item."

"That's not fair," Coop complained.

"That is not my concern." The owner looked directly at me. "Tomorrow, if you wish, it will be your time to choose," he said. Then he waved his hand and the front door swung open. "Now it is time for both of you to leave."

Before we could protest further we both started walking to the front door. I tried to stop but it was like I had no control over my legs. One look at Coop and I could tell he was also moving somewhat against his will. When we got to the sidewalk the door slammed behind us. We tried to open the door but it wouldn't budge.

"That's weird," I said.

"Whatever," Coop replied. "Let's go home and check out what cards I got."

Coop began running in the direction of our home as fast as he could. I tried to keep up with him because I didn't want him opening the cards before I got there. If I had known what was going to happen when he finally opened the pack I might not have run as hard as I did.