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Storm Warning

1

Seth had never seen a storm gather so fast. It felt as though it was reaching towards him, a vast, dark hand to snatch him up. A choking sense of dread was growing inside him.

Thunder rolled across the sky as he ran down narrow roads and lanes. Black clouds slid over the horizon like spilled ink. A fine mist of cold rain began to speckle the tiny village of Hathern, deepening the chill of the October afternoon. A bitter wind had sprung up, whipping his untidy black hair around his ears.

He carried the ornament wrapped inside his jacket, held against his stomach as he ran. Something told him to keep it hidden. As if the darkening sky was full of unfriendly eyes.

The rain was falling hard by the time he got to his house. He shut the front door behind him and leaned against it, catching his breath. Mum and Dad were in the living room, in front of the TV as usual.

'It's really coming down out there, isn't it?' Mum commented. Dad made a half-interested grunt of agreement.

Didn't they feel it? Didn't they feel the terror of the storm, the awful sense that it was swallowing them up? No, they were unaware. Of course they were. If it wasn't on the TV or in the papers, they didn't want to know.

He hurried upstairs to his room. The wind was getting strong, rattling at his windows. Rain lashed the glass. It was getting dark as night outside, and it was barely four ‘o’ clock. He wasn’t the kind of kid that scared easily, but he was scared now.

He pulled the curtains shut, took out the ornament and laid it on his bed.

It made his skin creep to look at it. A fearsome, squidlike monster stared at him with a grey, dead eye. Its stone tentacles were clutched tightly around an egg-shaped piece of whitish, cloudy mineral.

It sat there in the gloom, unremarkable except for its ugliness. Lightning flickered outside the curtains. In the distance, a cat was yowling.

Slowly, he reached down and picked it up. It was cool to the touch. He peered at the egg, clutched in the tentacles of the monster.

There was a light inside it. A thin worm of brightness, that writhed and twisted like a restless serpent. The ornament became warm in his hand, and the light became brighter, until the egg lit up his face like a tiny sun.

It felt like life. Like there was something alive in there.

‘They’re coming for you, aren’t they?’ he said quietly. ‘They’re coming for both of us.’

2

Seth snatched up a backpack and hurriedly stuffed in a few clothes. He wrapped the ornament in a T-shirt and put it inside. The light faded as soon as it left his hands.

After that, he dug out the lockbox where he saved his pocket money. It was stashed behind a pile of junk that included a baseball bat, a basketball, and the front wheel of a BMX. Seth had always been an active kid, uninterested in computer games or TV, but he tended to give up on hobbies as fast as he started new ones. Nothing excited him enough, that was the problem. Everything was too regulated and safe.

Until he'd found out about the world of Malice. A world inside a comic book.

He opened up the box and stuffed a handful of crumpled notes into his pockets. No telling when he was coming back. Maybe never.

There was a skittering noise on the roof, as if a horde of little crabs had gone scampering across it. Seth looked up.

I know that sound.

There was no more time to delay. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed again. The storm was almost overhead now. He shrugged on a waterproof coat and slung his backpack over his shoulder. He was reaching for the door just as his mum opened it.

'Have you *heard* this *storm?*' she cried happily, bustling in. 'It's like the end of the -' She stopped abruptly as she saw him standing there with his coat and backpack on. 'You're going out in this weather?' she asked.

She was wearing a sweat top and tracksuit bottoms, her plump, jolly face wearing an expression of puzzlement. Her blonde hair was greying more by the day, it seemed. She kept it cut short, so as not to be a bother.

This is how I'll always remember her, he thought, sadly. *Looking just like this. Not quite getting it.*

'I have to go,' he said.

‘Go where?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. Away.’

She stared at him, uncomprehending. He could have made some excuse, just something to get past her and out of the house; but Seth prized honesty in people, and he was no liar.

‘Mum, I don’t have time,’ he said. She was blocking the doorway. ‘I have to go.’

He saw tears gathering in her eyes, and immediately regretted his tone. Most of the time, he only thought of his parents as a boring nuisance. Their lives seemed so dull to him that he couldn’t imagine they had the same kinds of feelings as he did. It was easy to forget that they were people, too.

‘No, you’re not,’ she said quietly. Then, louder: ‘No, you’re not! Not after what you put us through last time! You’re not leaving us again!’

She hurried over to him and began clumsily pulling the backpack off. He struggled against her, but his arm was caught in one of the straps.

‘Get off me!’

‘You’re not leaving us again!’

‘Mum, I-’

He pushed her away, harder than he intended. She stumbled back into his wardrobe, banged her elbow, and burst into tears.

‘Why are you *doing* this to us?’ she wailed.

The sight of his mother crying made Seth feel loathsome. They deserved a kid they could be proud of, instead of one who could barely stand to be in the same room as them. He reached out towards her, to comfort her somehow, but he stopped before he

touched her. How could he make her understand that he was doing it for them? That whatever was descending on them would destroy them all? How could he make her understand, when he didn't really understand himself?

'I'm sorry, Mum,' he said. 'I don't have a choice.'

He headed through the doorway, onto the landing and down the stairs. Mum came out after him, calling for Dad.

'Mike! Mike! Seth's running off again! Don't you let him!'

Seth had the front door open and was halfway out of it when a strong hand grabbed his wrist.

'No, you don't!' said Dad. His face was stern and his small eyes flashed with anger. Seth felt a surge of anger in return. He yanked his hand away. Why was his Dad only ever interested in him when there was discipline involved?

The two of them glared at each other in the doorway. Mum came halfway down the stairs and paused, her hand to her mouth, watching the scene. Seth wasn't old enough to take on his Dad, but he was old enough to defy him.

'I'm going,' he said. 'I'll be back when I can.'

'You're not going anywhere,' Dad warned. 'You broke your mother's heart last time, you ungrateful little sod.'

'Some things are more important than staying at home and watching TV, Dad,' Seth said, coldly.

His Dad opened his mouth to reply, but just at that moment there was a blood-chilling howl from outside, drifting over the village. It was like the lost, agonised hunting-call of a wolf, but a hundred times more terrible. Dad went pale.

‘What was that?’ Mum whispered from the stairs.

‘They’re coming for me, Mum,’ Seth said. ‘I have to run.’

‘Stay inside, eh?’ said Dad. His face was slack, and he was looking out into the storm. The sternness had gone from his voice. Now he was just a balding, middle-aged man, afraid of the dark. ‘Get inside and shut the door. It’s not safe out there.’

Lightning stunned the village in white, and the thunder hit at the same time. The storm was on top of them.

‘It’s not safe anywhere any more,’ Seth said. And with that, he turned and fled from the house.