

TOMBQUEST

AMULET KEEPERS



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SCHOLASTIC INC.

**For my brother, Matthew,
and the Dungeons & Dragons games
that never really end.
— M.N.**

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Dead Man Walking

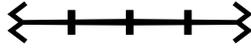
A large figure descended the steep slope of Swain's Lane in north London. The man's features were old, but his frame was strong and he moved in long, sure strides. Each step of his heavy, old boots brought him closer to the slumbering neighborhood below. The warm summer night was dark out here so far from the city's glittering center. The man brushed one heavy hand against the tall black fence posts as he passed.

Thick fingernails struck old iron: *Tik tik tik!*

On the other side lay a very old cemetery, built into the hillside. He looked in at the moss-shrouded grounds with ink-dark eyes: considering, remembering. The cemetery was mostly full now, had been since World War I. It was a sleepy place. Deathly quiet. *Tik tik tik!* He let his hand drop. The fence ended; the village began.

The man moved more quietly now, like a cat settling in for the hunt. The first little houses appeared, huddled close together, their windows dark. A few moments later, he saw

light up ahead, movement. The faintest hint of a smile formed on his death-parched lips.



“Aw, don’t eat that!” said Bennie Kemp, tugging on the leash. “Spitfire! Spitfire! Bad dog!”

The British bulldog looked back and, reluctantly, dropped the candy wrapper. *Empty anyway*, his little dog brain thought.

“Just do your business and let’s go,” said his owner. “Creepy out here.”

Spitfire looked back blankly. He understood several words — *food*, *walk*, *biscuit* — but none of those.

Bennie looked around the streets of his little neighborhood. He was surprised how deserted they were. He’d heard the rumors, of course. Everyone had. But having been raised on tales of British bravery, he was a little disappointed in his neighbors. *A few people go missing and the whole town shuts down*, he thought. He could barely manage half a thought for the reports of blood falling from the sky and other mysterious events. He chalked that all up to public hysteria stoked by the media.

“Bunch o’ nonsense,” he said grouchily to Spitfire’s back.

The dog didn’t even bother to turn around this time. *Talk to me when you’ve got a biscuit*. Instead, he kept feverishly

sniffing the ground with his blunt, slobber-covered snout. There was something dead up ahead, and he Had To Find It! Now he was the one tugging on the leash. It could be anything: a squirrel, a pigeon, a cat — oh, how he hoped it was a cat! He pulled his owner toward the smell.

As Bennie followed his lumpy little leader out of the glow of one streetlight and toward the glow of another, he saw a man. *It is a man, isn't it?* he thought. His face was creased with deep lines, but his body was large and solid. The combination reminded Bennie of a statue from a village green. The outfit, too. He looked like an explorer from the height of Britain's colonial might. *Dressed for the heat of India or Africa*, Bennie thought.

"You all right, then?" said Bennie. "Gave me a fright."

Spitfire finally peeled his stubby nose from the sidewalk. *Well, this is the dead thing*, he thought. *But it's all wrong.*

The man released a slow, ragged breath — air moving through damaged passageways like the hiss of old pipes — and then he looked up. Bennie got a better look at the man's skin now. Even in the faint light, he could see that it was horribly uneven, too leathery in some places, too loose in others. And then he saw the eyes.

Oh dear Lord, the eyes . . .

A scream pierced the night, followed by a few quick, sharp barks. One final yelp and the streets were silent again. And all around them, the houses were quiet, too. A bedside lamp

clicked on and then quickly clicked off again. The rest of the windows remained dark. The neighbors stayed in their beds, pulling the sheets a little closer.

And so none of them saw the powerful figure of one man drag the limp frame of another out of the light at the edge of the village and up the long rise of Swain's Lane.

The rest of the night crept by without incident. Heavy eyes closed again, troubled minds found a few hours of rest, and a frightened bulldog huddled against a locked door. But the horrors were not quite over for the lonely dog's former owner.

Early the next morning, hidden from the freshly risen sun, an ancient ritual began. The residents woke from broken sleep and bad dreams to the sound of rain thumping on their roofs, spattering against their windowpanes. If there's one thing the English know, it's the sound of rain. And these drops were too thick, by the sound of them, to be mere water.



Night Flight

The big airliner flew through the night, and Alex Sennefer sat in the dark cabin and thought about the dead and the missing. The dead: the Death Walker he had put to rest back in New York, and the one he was almost certainly flying toward. The missing: his mom.

The plane would arrive in London early the next morning. Right now, it was somewhere over the vast, cold Atlantic Ocean. Alex drummed his fingers on his thigh, impatient, wanting to be there already, wanting to get started. He looked over at his best friend, Renata Duran. Ren was conked out in the window seat. She'd placed the cheap airline pillow against the wall and crumpled sideways into it. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was just slightly open, almost touching the little window. Alex looked through the safety glass, but all he saw was moonlight and a spiderweb of frost from the minus-eighty-degree temps outside. *How can she sleep with everything that's going on?* he thought. But he knew he should try to get some rest, too.

He took one last look up the aisle toward first class, where he was pretty sure his cousin Luke was already asleep. His cousin wasn't the type to stay up thinking. He honestly wasn't the type to think all that much while he was awake. Technically, he was headed to London to attend an elite track-and-field camp, but Alex was pretty sure he was also going to keep an official family eye on him. *What's left of the family*, he thought.

He fished his pillow off the floor, stuck it behind his head, and muscled his eyes closed. He forced himself to take slow, even breaths. In the unguarded borderland between awake and asleep, a memory of his mom slipped in. His whole class had been invited to a birthday party, which was probably the only reason *he* had been. This was toward the end, when he was absent from school as often as he was present. And sure enough, he was too sick to go. His mom brought home ice cream and sat next to him as he curled up on the couch. He managed only one bite, but she finished the bowl and pretended they'd "shared" it. "Thanks for the ice cream," he'd said. "It was good." She'd reached over and smoothed out his hair, the worry lines around her eyes bunching up as she smiled.

But sleep came and took her away from him again. In her place, a nightmare. Alex was back in the Stung Man's underground tomb, carved out of an abandoned subway station and furnished with stolen luxuries. A large black scorpion scabbled over the fringe of a rug, and then a shadow fell

over it. Alex looked up and there he was: the Stung Man, his face bloated with ancient stings and his robes smelling faintly of decay. He raised his left arm, which ended not in a hand but a massive scorpion stinger. The barbed point was the size of a carving knife. The stinger flashed forward —

Alex woke with a start. He sat up so fast that he nearly hit his forehead on the little TV screen in the seat in front of him. *So much for getting some shut-eye*, he thought. He looked around. The problem was the plane, this long, dark cabin. It was too much like one of the stone sarcophagi back at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where his mom had worked as a curator before she disappeared.

He looked at the little screen, feeling both tired and restless. TV would be a good distraction.

He glanced around to make sure no one was looking. The businessman in the aisle seat was fast asleep, chin on shirt, drool on chin. Alex reached into his collar and fished his amulet out from under his blue polo shirt. It was made of polished stone and refined copper and shaped like a sacred scarab beetle, a symbol of regeneration in ancient Egypt. It had been his mom's, and now, it seemed, it was his.

Alex was still learning what the ancient artifact could do. He knew one thing, though. Considering it had been made in a time and place where towering stone pyramids were the height of technology, the amulet made a surprisingly good remote. He closed his hand around the stone scarab and felt the rush

he did whenever he used the amulet. His pulse revved and his mind focused; he felt like a race car driver rounding a curve.

The little screen blinked to life and he selected MOVIES, not with his fingers but with his eyes, and began flipping through his choices.

“What’re you watchin’?”

Alex gasped.

“Must be a scary movie,” said Ren, poking him in the shoulder.

“You just, kind of — you shouldn’t surprise people like that,” said Alex, keeping his voice low so he wouldn’t wake the beefy businessman.

“You shouldn’t zone out playing with your toy,” said Ren.

Alex looked down at the scarab. He knew she was just joking. It wasn’t a toy: It had already saved both their lives. He slipped it back under his collar.

Ren reached up and touched the screen in front of her. The first thing that came up was the flight map. Alex saw her scan the screen and read the numbers along the side. It was a British airline, and the distances were all in kilometers.

He watched her eyes narrow, her brow crease. She got one very distinct line right between her eyebrows when she concentrated. Alex thought of it as the ON button of a brown-eyed computer.

“You’re converting kilometers to miles, aren’t you?” he said.

“Yep,” she said. “It’s easy.”

“Oh yeah?” he said. He knew her too well to believe her.

Ren wasn't the type of brainiac for whom things came easy; Ren was the type who worked problems to death. "What's 2,389 kilometers?" he said, reading the screen.

Again, the crease. "About 1,500 miles," she said. "Maybe a little less."

Alex didn't doubt her math. Her dad was one of the chief engineers at the Metropolitan Museum, and the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. It's just that it was a very small apple — almost a crab apple, really. She was twelve, like him, but not quite four and a half feet tall. From her seat, she had to look not only over at Alex, but also up.

There was a rumbling next to them. The businessman was climbing to his feet, looking back over his shoulder to see if there was a line for the restrooms. Alex turned back to Ren. "Wanna watch a movie?"

But Ren's eyes were on the businessman. "Let's go over the plan while he's away," she said as soon as he headed down the aisle.

Alex rolled his eyes.

"What?" said Ren.

"Never mind," said Alex, but then he said it anyway. "What good will going over the plan up here do? We need to get down on the ground and start looking."

"We need to know what we're doing before we do it!" she countered.

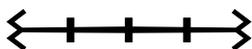
Alex almost rolled his eyes again. It was such a Ren thing to say. A phrase the other kids used to say popped into his

mind: Plus Ten Ren. Ren the planner, Ren the extra-credit gobbler . . .

“So, no movie?” he said.

She shook her head again. “This is *important*, Alex.”

He took one last look at the screen and let out an exaggerated sigh. They’d been over all this before they left, but he knew she wouldn’t yield. “Fine,” he said.



Ren heard the sigh but ignored it. She knew Alex wasn’t much of a planner. She even sort of understood it: For most of his life, his unpredictable health had made planning a waste of time. But he was better now, and this was serious. The Lost Spells his mom had used to bring him back from the brink of death had brought others back, too: Death Walkers. And the next one, they believed, was in London.

When she thought about it, she got the same flash of fear she got before tests. A pit-of-the-stomach panic she could almost taste. It used to be: *Was she ready? Had she prepared enough to keep up with her classmates? What kind of grade would she bring home to her brilliant parents?* She swallowed hard, knowing how much higher the stakes were now. The new questions: *Was she ready? Had she prepared enough to face the new dangers ahead of them? Would she make it home at all?*

“Okay,” she said, leaning in and lowering her voice. She began with what she already knew. That always settled her

down some. “The Stung Man came from the museum. Which makes sense, because where else are you going to find a mummified ancient Egyptian? And we needed your scarab amulet and the spell — the *right* spell — from the Book of the Dead to send him back. That came from the museum, too.”

She paused to see if Alex wanted to add anything, but all he said was, “Obviously.”

She shot him a look. His expression was flat, and he was drumming his fingers on his thigh in a way that was starting to annoy her. *What part of an evil spirit clinging to the edge of the afterlife and escaping at the first opportunity is obvious?* she thought. *Since when?*

She went on. “And things started to happen all over the world as soon as the Spells were used. So things have been happening in London for a while now.”

Alex perked up, finally met Ren’s eyes. “This one’s been awake longer,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “So?”

But he was thinking about it now, and all he did was repeat that one word: “Longer . . .”

He hadn’t even been paying attention, but he’d figured something out. Something important. Ren hated it when people did that to her. *WHAT?* she wanted to say, but she didn’t want to look stupid. She hated that even more. “Anyway,” she said, “the main thing is the Death Walker.”

Alex looked at her, bug-eyed. “The main thing is my mom!”

“Right,” said Ren. “But we don’t even know if she’s in London.”

“She’s there,” said Alex.

“Okay, but let’s just —”

“Right, right, right,” said Alex, not bothering to hide his impatience. “We know The Order is working with the Death Walkers. And we know The Order has my mom, so if we find them, we’ll find her.”

Ren didn’t argue. They were pretty sure the ancient death cult had kidnapped Alex’s mom when they’d stolen the Lost Spells. But *pretty sure* wasn’t the same as *knowing* — and she really wished he’d stop drumming his fingers like that.

“*Anyway*,” she said, glancing down at the offending digits. “The first thing we need to find out is who — or what, I guess — this Death Walker is —”

“We need to get down there and get started,” said Alex, cutting her off.

She opened her mouth to respond, but he cut her off again. “All right?” he said. “Period.”

“All right,” she said, sitting back in her seat. “But stop doing that thing with your fingers. It’s annoying.”

Both their seats were jolted as the bulky businessman thumped back down. If the conversation wasn’t over before, it was now.

Alex went back to picking his movie, and Ren stared silently out her window at the red light of dawn. She’d go over it all one more time, on her own.



Crash Landing

Before Alex's movie even ended in Row 22, another drama began to unfold in the cockpit. "I don't like the look of those clouds," said the copilot.

The captain glanced over and then did a quick double take, his eyes zeroing in on the radar screen. "Those weren't there a minute ago," said Captain Martin Hadley. He was one of the airline's most experienced pilots, but as he watched the new clouds spinning slowly in the opposite direction of the ones around them, he got the sinking feeling he was about to experience something entirely new.

The copilot swallowed hard. He was nervous for the opposite reason: very little experience. They were both watching the small screen closely when air traffic control came on over the cockpit radio. They were watching the same thing in the tower.

"What *is* that?" said Captain Hadley.

For a few long moments, there was no reply, then: "Be advised, Flight 768 . . ." The voice started strong and official

but then seemed to break under its own weight: “We have no idea what that is . . . but you’re heading directly into it.”

The copilot reached up and loosened the collar of his crisp white shirt. The captain crossed himself. “Reroute?” he said into the handset. He took a look at the fuel gauge, did some quick calculations: How long could they circle? What other airports could they make it to?

Another pause on the other end and then: “Negative. It’s small, low speed. Let’s just get you down.”

“Roger that,” said the captain.

“It *is* small, isn’t it?” said the copilot, seeking reassurance.

“I suppose,” said Hadley, peering into the rosy morning light ahead of them. “But what is it?”

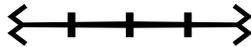
An hour later, descending through light rain into their final approach, they found out.

Thick drops of something red hit the cockpit windows, staining them pink as it mixed with the wind and water. The engines began to choke on the stuff, and the big plane bucked like a spooked horse. The captain wrestled with the U-shaped yoke, his knuckles turning white as the windows began to turn red.

“Pull up! Pull up!” shouted the copilot, but Hadley ignored him. There’d be no pulling up now: too late for that. They were landing, one way or the other.

“As a precaution due to extreme conditions, we have to ask you to prepare for a potential crash landing.” The

announcement sounded through the cabin and cut into people's headphones. A thunderous noise filled the air as questions were shouted and a hundred urgent conversations began. The announcement continued, momentarily drowning it all out: "Please make sure your seat belts are fastened securely and your window shades are closed."



Ren had, quite possibly, been the only one paying attention when the flight crew went over emergency procedures pre-flight. Even so, it was hard to remember all the details with her pulse suddenly pounding wildly in her ears. She reached over and flicked down the plastic shade, catching one more glimpse of the rosy morning light.

She looked at Alex. "This is bad," she shouted over the frantic voices filling the cabin.

Alex looked over and agreed wordlessly, his wide-open eyes and slowly bobbing head doing the talking.

The plane bucked again, sending a flight attendant who'd been trying to demonstrate the crash-landing position into a crash landing on her backside. Half a dozen passengers screamed as if they'd just witnessed a murder.

Others had already assumed the position, determined to ride this thing out, for better or worse, with their heads between their knees. The burly businessman next to them

was sitting bolt upright and releasing odd, high-pitched yelps as he began to hyperventilate.

“Should we, you know?” shouted Alex. His voice cracked on the last part, giving away his fear. He mimed assuming the crash-landing position, raising both fists up toward his ears and ducking his head down between them.

Ren felt a sudden, desperate need to know how close they were to the ground. She cracked open the shade, noticing, as if from a distance, that her hands were shaking. In the two-inch gap, she saw a line of red briefly streak across the pink background.

“Oh, please no,” she murmured. The small sound was swallowed up by the hysteria all around her, but Alex had seen her reaction. He followed her eyes to the window as she reached over and flicked up the shade.

They both saw it now. The morning light was too rosy — and too dark. Two more long tendrils of red snaked across the surface of the window.

They’d heard about this: red rain in London. Some people said it was blood; others said it couldn’t possibly be. It had always turned back to regular rain in the end — and the few samples people had managed to collect had turned right back with it.

Magic, Ren knew, was always hard to pin down.

BOOOOM!

A sound like artillery roared from the massive jet engine on the opposite wing. Whatever was falling out there, the

plane didn't like it one bit. The engines on both wings began to groan and shake. A sound like a dying giant filled the cabin.

"We can't land in this stuff!" shouted Alex.

Ren looked down. Through the red haze, she could see the ground now. Rooftops whizzed by below, like a city of dollhouses. The houses ended. The airport was just up ahead, the slick, red runway . . .

"We're about to!" she called back.

One final announcement rang out, shouted and amplified but barely audible over the commotion: "Crash-landing positions!"

Ren's head was swirling with panic and confusion as she buried it in her lap.

What was falling out there?

Would it turn back to regular rain?

The plane was shaking so violently it seemed on the verge of flying apart.

Would it be too late when it did?

She laced her fingers behind her head, pictured her parents, and braced for impact.



The wheels were down and the time was up. Captain Hadley surveyed the scene ahead of him. The wind whipped the red rain across the cockpit windows as he stared at the runway

with wide-open, unblinking eyes. The white lines had turned pink and the lights glowed red, but he thought he could see them well enough.

“What am I looking at?” he yelled into the radio. It wasn’t an idle question. If it was just red rain, that was one thing. He’d landed in rain more times than he could count. But if it was what it looked like . . .

“Unclassified meteorological phenomenon,” came the reply.

The copilot spat out a reply of his own: “Unclassified, my —”

“Not now!” barked Hadley, cutting him off. “Eyes on the instruments!”

The plane touched down with a heavy bang. A sick hiss rose as the wheels met the tarmac and the red liquid. That much speed and power and weight would vaporize water, the captain knew, effectively taking it out of the equation. But this seemed to be a stickier, trickier substance.

The wheels burned and hissed along the runway, and the plane began to turn. Captain Hadley got a sick, empty feeling in his gut as the big airliner went into a skid.

He took one last look over at his copilot. The man was folded over in crash-landing position and screaming into his own knees. So Hadley was on his own, then: on his own and in charge of the lives of hundreds. He let out a long, slow breath.

He had the wings on his collar, and he had the responsibility.

Instead of a death grip on the control yoke, he forced himself to take a light one as the plane veered to the side. *Muscle it and you'll end up upside down*, he told himself. Instead of squinting his eyes half shut, he opened them. *Look. Watch.*

He made himself breathe. He made himself think.

Don't think of it as water; think of it as mud.

The massive plane corrected, the nose began to straighten out slightly. Still too much of an angle, still heading toward the edge of the runway, but with every foot that passed, the massive plane slowed just a little more.

The captain stayed calm. He remembered his training and, against all odds, he brought the big bird home to its nest. The plane came to a halt, slightly sideways and a stone's throw from the edge of the runway.

Safe.