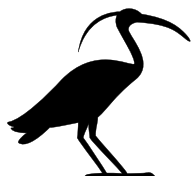


**AMULET KEEPERS**



**MICHAEL NORTHROP**

**SCHOLASTIC INC.**

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

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# Dead Man Walking

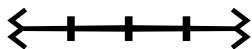
A large figure descended the steep slope of Swain's Lane in north London. The man's features were old, but his frame was strong and he moved in long, sure strides. Each step of his heavy, old boots brought him closer to the slumbering neighborhood below. The warm summer night was dark out here so far 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 grouchyly 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.