

SKYLANDS: STORM WARNING

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Antonia, if she'd still had a father, would have—no doubt—been prevented from running off. Her father, by his mere presence, would have instilled the fear of God into her or loomed tall and strong in her mind in a way her soft-hearted mother never could. Despite her age, she fantasized that had her father remained in her life, she wouldn't feel so alone, always straying from the other children. She believed she wouldn't be breaking the rules if he was still a part of her life. Her mother hadn't raised her voice or overly chastised Antonia in the two years since her father had left. Antonia knew she was being spared the sharp discipline that used to come when she was bad but didn't attribute it to Dad's departure. Despite her freedoms, however, she knew something was missing.

That was why she broke the rules against wandering away.

That was why she didn't glance back at the other children laughing and running and shrieking as they played during recess.

That was why she searched, instead, for her One True Friend.

She peered beneath the bushes and behind the grounds-keeper's tool shed. She searched the sandbox, jungle gym, and cafeteria dumpsters. She even snuck down to the edge of the swampland at the northern edge of school property to investigate the reed-filled waters.

There was no sign of Rahne.

She knew that any number of things could be occupying his flighty attentions but she still felt annoyed that he was nowhere to be found. Her teachers called her “more mature than most third-graders,” but she still got bored when things didn't go as planned. Rahne wasn't there when she wanted him to be.

She stalked back towards the playground as recess approached its end. Deciding that if she couldn't play with her One True Friend she wouldn't play at all, she sat by herself near the far edge of the school by the sixth-grader's classrooms. She kicked at a few white dandelions and sent their seeds soaring.

"Antonia!"

The hissed whisper startled her. She looked around for a few moments before spying the well-camouflaged speaker. Peering from around the edge of her brick schoolhouse was the mouse-like face of her missing friend.

"Rahne!" she cried. She caught herself and glanced towards the crowd of playing kids and watching teachers.

Rahne winced, looking around as she did, but no one seemed to have noticed.

She would have to remind herself to be more careful. Crawling over, getting grass stains on her blue jeans, she sat against the edge of the school building, letting Rahne hide around the corner, just out of sight from her classmates.

"Where *were* you?" she asked. Her voice was both annoyed and relieved. "I looked everywhere!"

"Things have gotten ... complicated," he said, quietly. He reached around the corner and put his small, mouse-like hand in hers. His long tail twitched in the grass. "I'm afraid ... I'm afraid something bad is coming."

Antonia's eyes squinted. This wasn't like her friend. The two-foot-tall mouse was usually full of jokes and play and adventure and stories about far-away lands.

"What sort of 'bad'?" she asked.

She knew what "bad" meant, of course but was old enough to know that "bad" came in many flavors. Even a first-grader would have known that the "bad" that came from Brussels sprouts was nothing compared to the "bad" of parents arguing.

"'Bad' bad," the humanoid mouse responded. "Really bad." He looked over his shoulder in the direction of the trees towards the swamp's edge. His nose twitched and his whiskers wriggled. Apparently satisfied that no one was within hearing distance in that direction either, he continued. Still, he lowered his voice. "The world is going to end."

Antonia's brown eyes grew wide. "What?"

"The world's going to end," he repeated. His earnest expression might have been lost on someone who'd never seen a two-foot-tall talking mouse, before, but Antonia had known him for what seemed like forever. "And I can't do anything about it."

Ignoring threat of discovery, she got on her hands and knees and looked into the eyes of her secret friend. "How? When?" she asked.

"Soon," he replied. "And as for how..." He looked at the blue sky with its narrow wisps of lazy clouds drifting along. "A storm is coming; a big storm." He paused for a moment before finally adding, "and dragons ... giant dragons."

"Mom says there's no such thing," Antonia said, eyes narrowing. "Not good, not bad: no dragons, monsters, or ghosts. "Nervous, she cast her gaze skywards, half-expecting to see a giant, reptilian form lazily flying up beyond the birds. She twined her fingers in one of her black pig-tails in a way Gram always said she shouldn't. She didn't care about messing up her hair, though; not if Rahne was acting so scared. She looked into his little, rodent's eyes as he put his hands in hers.

"I'm sorry, but dragons are very real," he said, whiskers twitching.

A sudden wind blew up, tossing the branches of nearby trees into a slowly growing frenzy. She cast her glance to the sky once more but still saw nothing even vaguely draconic. However, dark clouds were rolling in. Half-heard, the shrill sounds of playing children peaked as teachers started to bring them inside. A few large raindrops splattered against Antonia's upturned face. She decided to trust Rahne for now. If this was an elaborate joke or something, she'd tease him back, later.

"What do they want?" she asked, her voice growing quieter.

The mouse shrugged. "Who knows? Dragons have always been mysterious. They're the biggest creatures in the world: they do what they want."

Antonia nodded.

A gust of wind rattled the school windows as the raindrops increased. She knew she should be running to get indoors but she didn't want to leave her friend. More than that, what about her Mother? She felt a pang of guilt; she should be with Mom and not breaking the rules. Looking to Rahne, she saw him gazing up at the clouds, intently. "And I think they're here," he said, quietly.

She couldn't see any dragons but felt a fearful chill the unnaturally warm spring air. The winds blew across the swamp, warm and heavy, like on a summer afternoon.

"I've got to go home," she said. Rahne looked startled as she jumped up. Her fear for her mother conflicted with her loyalty to her strange, little friend. She waved to the mouse and headed towards the front of the school building. "I've gotta get Mom!"

"Stop! Antonia! There's nothing you can do! Let me protect you!" the

mouse cried out.

"I have to find Mom!" she shouted back. When she glanced over her shoulder, though, Rahne was gone.

She dashed past the school's windows each populated with hollow, fear-filled faces of classmates and friends. She ignored them even as some of them called out to her. If she ran fast enough, if she didn't let fear control her, maybe there was time.

She didn't live far from school. It was too far to walk, normally, but today she ran. The wind buffeted her. Rain splattered against her pale, yellow shirt. Down the boulevard by the lake and across to the old church, she flew like the wind. Several times, with a roaring moan, the skies would unleash downward gusts of air and nearly pummel her to the ground with their fury. She felt as if her legs and arms were slogging through taffy as she tried to fight the elements. Her panic collapsed the perceived duration of her flight to mere moments. Had it been a half hour? Sixty minutes? Nearly two miles blurred together compressed by senses of foreboding and urgency.

As she ran through the Cutter's backyard into her own, the ground began to shake. The rumbling pitched her forward onto the wet grass, skinning her knee. She looked up in time to see the back of her house and, framed in the kitchen window, her mother's anxious face.

"Mommy!" Antonia cried, trying to get up.

A shadow—darker than that cast by the storm clouds overhead—fell over the suburban street. She felt the chill of the impossible, of a monster her mother told her could never exist, as a shadow descended. She could hear the flapping of its giant wings and hear the roaring intake of hot breath. She couldn't move. She didn't dare. Fear and guilt paralyzed her. Her wet eyes peered through the gusting winds, swirling leaves, and cacophony of debris swept from nearby houses to her mother's face.

In world of sound and flame Antonia watched as her house exploded. The roof, the walls, her room, and her mother were consumed in a maelstrom of carnage. The wind then swept up the ashen debris high into the sky as if it had never been there. The ground continued to quake and, just as she turned her terrified eyes to the thing blacking out the sky, a wave of wind struck her down.

The roar of the beast sounded like thunder.

She awoke, stifling her startled cry with one hand. The dream had been the same as it had been for twenty years. The low light of the campfire flickered against her dark skin and leather vest. She calmed her breathing and glanced around in the night. Seeing nothing had been attracted by her restless awakening, she silently cursed herself for having fallen asleep on watch. It had been almost a

year since she'd last dreamed of that day; far better than when she'd used to suffer through the memories every time she went to sleep. In the days following The Storm, her life had changed.

She stood and walked over to where Rahne slept, huddled in his blankets. The old mouse's fur was greying, these days, but his injuries from the day's hunting hadn't gotten any worse.

"Don't worry," she said quietly, "I'll take care of you. . ."

Of course Rahne hadn't actually been there when The Storm had come to whisk her away, but he had been the one to find her. Taking pity on the poor, lost child, he had sheltered her in the weeks, months, and years, following. She had grown into a teenager and young woman under his protection and owed him everything.

She looked up at the lightening sky.

The great Day Guardian, Masshurotef, colored the thin clouds with dawn. She knew it was just the sun but in these lands he was venerated as a quasi-deity. Even Rahne treated it—or "Him", as he would correct her—with reverence and respect, so she did likewise: not quite a God, but revered.

In the distance she spied the edge of an island drifting through the Lightlands above. Was it the remnants of her home; that fragment of Earth that got whisked through space and time to this strange land of dragons, floating islands, and magic? She didn't know. She'd been searching for what was left of it ever since Rahne had rescued her and gotten her away from the chaos of those first days. Thousands had been brought to this world; many had been captured by opportunistic slavers. Still others had perished, no doubt, in the cold, thin atmosphere where all newcomer islands arrived.

Maybe there were still some survivors. Just maybe she could find the home she'd never actually tried to reach, rather than sitting huddled and scared with her classmates in the gymnasium. Just maybe she could find some sign that her Mother, too, had survived the cataclysm.

Just maybe she could find it in her heart to forgive the small child who didn't run home to Mommy when she knew she should.

She knelt next to the warrior mouse—a "thaylene", they were called—and petted his round ears, idly.

"Is it morning?" he asked groggily without opening his eyes.

"It will be soon," she answered.

"I think . . . I'll sleep a bit longer, child," he muttered, already drifting off. "And then, we'll see about chartering passage to the Lightlands. Acceptable?"

She nodded and pressed her lips to his tiny forehead. She'd lost her Dad when he had abandoned her and her mother, years before. She'd lost her mother

in The Storm. Rahne was her family, now. Rahne had spent his youth as a lost child's guide and guard. Now, it was Antonia's turn to return the favor.

"Of course, father," she said. Smiling, she rose to start making breakfast over the campfire.

The End