

SIGNET

Hervoken
Halloween

By James Hornby



SIGNET

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It was Norah's favourite time of year. Racing around the living room on her plastic broom, she cackled with delight. The pointed tip of her witch's hat flopped from side to side, cape flapping behind.

"Now I'll turn you into a frog," she shrieked, pointing at her mother and cackling once more.

"No, please!" said Aoife, covering her eyes.

As Norah giggled with excitement, Aoife drank in every moment of her glee. The joy her daughter felt was magical, untainted by the woes of age and responsibility. Aoife had to admit she was jealous — her fun had to be planned around work, schedules, and babysitters. Any spontaneity in life was very much a thing of the past.

The chime of the doorbell roused Aoife from her thoughts. She checked her phone to find it was just after ten in the morning — it must be the postman. Walking to the door, she indeed found a smattering of letters poking through the letterbox. Placing them on the side, she opened the door to see what else had been delivered that couldn't fit through the door.

A plump, pristine pumpkin sat on the doorstep. Sinister jagged eyes and an eerie grimace had been carved through its pulp. The look it gave her was haunting, as though somehow it was mocking her. Who on earth had sent them this? However, what struck Aoife as the oddest part about the seasonal vegetable was that it lacked its traditional orange colour. This jack-o'-lantern was purple, not merely painted as such, but coloured right the way through.

"Olivia," Aoife mumbled. Her Gendar colleague was the prime candidate for sending such an odd gift. Olivia had left her homeworld with a burning desire to study everything about human culture she could get her purple-veined hands on. It came as no surprise that Halloween would become her latest obsession. Its purple tone was likely some garbled interpretation she had made of the holiday, as often seemed to be the case.

"A pumpkin!" yelled Norah from behind her. She raced to the doorstep and, with some strain, picked it up in both hands. "Mummy, it's perfect!"

As her daughter raced back into the lounge with her new pumpkin friend, Aoife closed the front door and again took to admiring her daughter's childish glee.

"Oh, to be young again."

** *

The engine roared as Aoife raced down the dual carriageway towards York. Endless croplands bordered each side of the road, glowing orange in the midday sun. Her commute was a short one — made even shorter by her blatant disregard for the speed limit — yet Aoife was careful not to take any second of it for granted. After her morning watching Norah play, she considered how blessed her life was.

Her journey came to its end in the car park of SIGNET HQ. From the moment she arrived, she noticed a strip of bunting was draped over the hangar doors saying, 'Happy Halloween!' As she had suspected, Olivia was already getting to grips with the holiday's theme.

Inside, the reception desk was littered with candles and cobwebs. Olivia was behind the desk ready to greet her, offering up her usual dose of unwavering cheer.

"Good afternoon, Aoife," she beamed.

"Hey." Aoife smiled, for the first time in a good while making time for Olivia's enthusiasm. "Thanks for sending Norah that pumpkin. She's over the moon with it."

Olivia frowned. At first Aoife thought it was because she'd used an idiom; her Gendar culture didn't seem to have an equivalent. Olivia continued to look at her, puzzled. Her heart skipped a beat as she wondered if she'd said something offensive. No, it definitely wasn't that... What if— oh. The realisation hit her. "The pumpkin wasn't from you, was it?"

SIGNET

The Gendar shook her head. "No." She gasped. "Was I meant to have, though? I can order some for you all on the computer?"

"No, no," Aoife backtracked. "Sorry, my mistake. We had an unexpected parcel in the post this morning and I assumed it was from you."

After a brief pause, Olivia put the facts together. "Oh, alright. I'm sorry, Aoife. It didn't come from me. Even if I had bought something, I wouldn't know where to send it."

Aoife smirked, knowing Olivia had access to everyone's address. She kept the thought to herself, not wanting to embarrass Olivia.

Charles called her from the next room. "Aoife, could you come through? We have a new case."

Ending their conversation with a polite smile, Aoife answered the summons, moving through the base to the operations room. Charles and Jae-Sun were waiting, arms folded. In the corner sat Xana with her usual penchant of skulking in the shadows.

"We're detecting some unusual psychic energy. Levels in the city have been slowly falling since we pushed back the Yssgaroth, but this morning we've noticed a steady rise."

"What does that mean?" asked Jae-Sun. "Is the Yssgaroth back?"

Xana winced at the suggestion. Aoife had no desire to face that particular threat again. She still had nightmares about being trapped inside her own body. The terror of being a back seat passenger, forced to watch as the Yssgaroth used her to... Her mind grappled with the memory, unwilling to approach it in the waking world. Thankfully for both of them, Charles quickly dismissed the notion.

"Psychic energy can be influenced by many things," he explained, "and the patterns so far don't seem to match what we saw that night."

"What is the pattern?" asked Xana.

"A very unique form of energy, very different to what we've come to expect from a telepathic entity operating on our plane."

Spotting a laptop behind Charles, Aoife opened it to take a look at things for herself. As she expected, Charles had used her program to detect the energy.

"Whatever is causing it has made its way around the city in a very unusual way. This map reading looks like spaghetti."

"Making it very hard to track," Jae-Sun noted.

Aoife sighed. This was just like the Galvodon: another incidence of an untraceable terror loose in York.

"What do you want us to do?" asked Xana, eager to please.

Charles pulled at the strands of his beard. "There's little more we can do other than scour the city."

Aoife gritted her teeth, trying to fight back her frustration, but it never took much for her to voice her opinions. "Charles, this is why we need better tech. What if someone dies while we're on this goose chase? That's on us. It's all well and good for SIGNET to have beliefs, but if we're going to stand for them, we need the right resources."

The others fell silent, a clear admission that they agreed with her point. Charles' eyes fell to the floor, and he soon followed with a nod. "The next bout of funding we receive will pay for what you need. I promise."

Aoife smiled. She understood the financial struggles they faced as a freelance organisation, but Charles was a good man, and she knew he would keep his word.

"Alright then," said Aoife, spinning her car keys around on her finger. "Who's riding with me?"

No volunteers were forthcoming. Charles' hand subconsciously pawed at the site of his whiplash, Jae-Sun blinking rapidly as he relived the breakneck car chase down the M1.

"Wimps," she laughed. "My driving gets results, alright?"

"And speeding tickets," Charles was quick to point out. "Which I'm not paying for if you want your tech!"

SIGNET

Aoife scoffed. "Alright boss, you have yourself a deal."

* * *

Night had fallen by the time Aoife opened her front door. The bags under her eyes spoke volumes about her day. Cases, she found, were much more rewarding when they came with a solution. Her endless drive around the city had produced no clear cause to the origin of the psychic energy. Intending to begin the search anew in the morning, Charles had sent everyone home.

To her surprise, she found her husband, Harvey, waiting for her when she entered, sporting his own bags of stress and fatigue.

"Is everything alright?" she asked.

"Norah's been driving me mad," he huffed. "She hasn't left that bloody pumpkin alone for five seconds. It took me over an hour to persuade her not to take it up with her at bedtime." He huffed to emphasise his point.

Aoife couldn't say she was at all surprised. Harvey had never expressed an interest in Halloween. One year she had suggested buying sweets for the trick-or-treaters, until Harvey abruptly shot the idea down under the pretence of 'money troubles'. It wasn't much more of a leap, therefore, for him to put a dampener on any enjoyment Norah found in the subject either.

After a fruitless day of driving around York, she had no desire to fight him on the topic. "Did she go down okay after?" she asked.

"She did, actually. The second the thing left her hands it was like she'd flipped a switch." He laughed. "If only she was like that every night."

Aoife's brow furrowed. That wasn't like Norah at all. Recently, she had become rebellious when it came to bedtime, and even after the lights had gone out, she'd be fighting back the tiredness for another few minutes of play.

Her mind soon drifted to the peculiar jack-o'-lantern, and its mysterious appearance on her doorstep.

"Where is it now?" Aoife asked.

"Norah?" Harvey leapt to the defensive. "In bed like I told you."

Aoife groaned. "The *pumpkin*."

"Oh," said Harvey, relieved to be clear of the firing line. "In the kitchen with the rest of the veg."

Aoife marched over to the kitchen and turned on the light. There, on the counter at the end of the room, was the eerie gourd. It grinned at her, the sinister curvature of its mouth suggesting nefarious intent. Aoife frowned; something about its grimace seemed different to how it did in the morning. Before it had seemed lifeless, but now?

Aoife strode across the room, grabbed a chair, and sat down beside the jack-o'-lantern to perform a closer inspection. Its purple complexion indeed seemed natural to the pumpkin itself, rather than the product of dyes or paints. A vicious form of insecticide in the farming process could have yielded such a result, but even then there should have been blotches of the original pigmentation.

She whipped out her phone, and a quick Google search told her that purple pumpkins weren't a natural occurrence, only sometimes painted to indicate that a child has epilepsy. In her nine years Norah hadn't shown even the slightest indication of the condition, leaving her as far from answers as she had been when she'd started.

A commotion from the hallway caught her attention. Raised voices, one Harvey's, the other much higher pitched: Norah. *What was she doing up?* Feeling her heart begin to race, she rose to her feet and called upon the reservoir of anger reserved solely for cases of parental authority.

"What is going on here?" she boomed upon entering the room.

Harvey leapt in the air in surprise. Norah, on the other hand, failed to react. Only upon her father falling quiet did she turn her attention to her mother.

SIGNET

"You're playing with it, aren't you?" Norah snapped. "It's not yours to play with. It's mine and I want it back!"

Whilst Aoife was shocked by her daughter's tone, she didn't falter. "Norah Fitzgerald, you should be in bed! It is way past your bedtime, and you have school in the morning."

If Norah heard her, she wasn't letting on. "I want to see it," she snapped, bending left and right to peer around Aoife and into the kitchen. "Where is it? You better not have done anything to it!"

Panic began to rise. Out of caution, Aoife closed the kitchen door behind her. "Norah, you need to go to bed. You can play with your pumpkin in the morning."

"GIVE IT TO ME!" Norah screamed so loud it threatened to burst her eardrums.

Keeping herself as a barrier to the door, Aoife called Harvey to her and whispered in his ear. "I need you to keep her from going into the kitchen."

Harvey's face fell, as it often did when the time called for difficult parenting. "What are you going to be doing?"

"Something's not right here. I need to make a call."

Not giving her husband time to argue, Aoife opened the door and slipped back into the kitchen. The moment the handle turned she heard Norah scream, "Don't you go in there! Don't you do anything to my pumpkin!"

When she closed the door behind her, Aoife found that her hands were trembling. Something was very wrong with her daughter; maybe she had been at SIGNET too long, but all signs pointed to the pumpkin on the kitchen counter. When she looked at it, it appeared to be little more than a simple pumpkin, but Aoife knew appearances could be deceiving. Reaching into her pocket, she picked up her phone and hit the speed dial.

"Hi Charles, sorry to bother you so late. I was wondering if you could come by my house? It's urgent."

"Of course," came the aged voice on the other end. "Is everything alright?"

"We were gifted a pumpkin in the post this morning and—" she sighed "—I don't know. Something about it seems off." Luckily, Aoife knew Charles well; he always pulled through in a time of need.

"I'll be right there." The phone beeped as the call ended and Aoife released a deep breath. Her hands were still shaking. Beyond the door she could hear Harvey locked in a verbal joust with their daughter. What started as a perfect day had ended in chaos.

As Aoife went to aid her husband in his struggle, she remained completely unaware that the jack-o'-lantern behind her now smiled a perfect Cheshire Cat grin.

* * *

By the time Charles arrived, Aoife's head was ringing. Norah refused to listen to anything either she or Harvey had to say. Their arsenal of parental tricks dried up in minutes, yet still she continued to defy them. Even distractions didn't work; every conversation led back to the pumpkin — a chorus of pleas and threats, but thankfully nothing more. Being with the pumpkin again was all that mattered to her. Some parents would have given in to her demands in favour of an easy night, but not Aoife. The arrival of this pumpkin had done something to her daughter and until she knew what, she'd fight with every last breath.

Aoife welcomed her boss inside. "Thank God you're here. Come in."

Charles stepped inside, followed closely by Xana. The moment they were over the threshold the latest addition to their team began to scan every corner of the room with her eyes. Aoife pitied her: she must have had her fair share of hardships before entering their lives.

"Where is Norah?" asked Charles.

Aoife could see the concern in his eyes. The moment she had joined SIGNET, Charles had become a surrogate uncle to Norah. It clearly pained him to hear she was in distress.

SIGNET

"Harvey managed to get her into the sitting room — it was a struggle, let me tell you. I've never seen a tantrum cause bruising before."

"On Norah or Harvey?"

Aoife shot him a look. "Who do you think?"

The sound of muffled shouting removed any doubt of where Norah was. Charles headed for the door, and she anxiously followed behind.

Little had changed since Aoife had left to answer the door. Norah continued to scream and shout, with no sign of tiring. After the day of play she'd had, she should have been out like a light hours ago. Harvey was showing signs of fatigue, blinking rapidly to make sure he stayed alert enough to make sure Norah caused herself no harm.

Xana caught Aoife's eye. "Is she normally a violent child?"

The comment caught Aoife blindsided. Her daughter was the epitome of kindheartedness, yet given the current circumstances she could see Xana's concern. Norah pressed her entire weight against Harvey's chest, pushing with all her meagre might to push past and reunite with her pumpkin friend. Aoife's heart sank, and she longed for her sweet girl to return.

A whimper of "no" was all she could muster in response.

Charles moved closer to Norah, his stature appearing quite menacing when towering over a child. Nevertheless, Aoife trusted him implicitly, and knew he wished no harm on anyone, least of all her daughter.

"Norah, it's me, Uncle Charles. Would you like to play a game? I've brought Mr Fizzle." Charles reached into the inside pocket of his coat and produced a sizable puppet of a ferret. It danced around in front of her, but yielded no results.

Norah refused to acknowledge the mass of synthetic fur passing back and forth across her vision. She kept her gaze fixed on Charles, unblinking. "I don't want tricks," she cried. "I want my friend!"

Disappointed, Charles tucked the puppet back into his pocket and crouched down to Norah's level. "Alright, Norah, I'm listening. Could you tell me about your friend? Does he have a name?"

To their surprise, Norah paused. She frowned, as though trying to assess Charles' motives. "He told me his name, but I call him Hervy. It sounds better."

Aoife choked back tears as, for a brief moment, she could hear her child again. She took solace in the hope that all may not be lost.

"Hervy sounds like a very nice name," agreed Charles. "Did he tell you where he was from?"

Norah pursed her lips and thought hard. "He doesn't want me talking to you." She paused and her eyes widened. "He says not to tell you anything more. You want to take him away from me!"

Charles smiled reassuringly. "It's not that at all, Norah. We just want to make sure your friends are being nice to you. You see, none of us have gotten to know Hervy like you have."

Xana was getting antsy, jumping from toe to toe. She looked from Norah to the door, over and over.

"What is it?" Aoife hissed, trying not to disturb Charles.

"I need to see it," said Xana. Again she looked to the door.

"The pumpkin?" queried Aoife.

Norah's attention fell in their direction. "He's right, isn't he? You do want to take him away from me!"

Xana snapped into action and bolted for the door.

"He was right!" cried Norah, racing towards the door until Charles held her back, supported by Harvey. "Get off me, old man and GIVE ME BACK MY FRIEND!"

Being in the room with Norah was becoming too much. As Charles and Harvey had a handle on Norah, Aoife left to find Xana, in the hope of returning to her daughter with a solution to her plight.

SIGNET

* * *

Aoife entered the kitchen to find Xana hunched over the counter, poking the pumpkin with her index finger.

"It seems to be some form of living matter," said Xana. "Looks more like food to me than anything sentient."

Aoife scowled. "That's because it's a vegeta—" The sight of the pumpkin made her eyes widen in terror.

"What is it?" asked Xana, quickly withdrawing her finger.

Aoife blinked to make sure she wasn't mistaken. She took a step closer. Sure enough, specks of orange were now visible across the surface of the pumpkin. "It didn't look like that before," she said.

Xana reeled back in terror. "Like what?"

"Well..." said Aoife, searching for the right word. "Normal. It was completely purple earlier."

"What do you mean by earlier?" said Xana. "Give me times."

Aoife scratched her scalp. "I don't know. Half an hour, maybe? The last time I was in here was just before I called you."

"Alright," said Xana, nodding. "That's good. Did anything happen around then?"

Aoife thought back. "Just what I told you over the phone. I came in here to look at the thing and then Norah came downstairs acting... well, like she was in there."

Xana beamed. "And then this thing started changing colour. Don't you see? Somehow it's using Norah to heal itself."

"The psychic energy!" Aoife clasped a hand over her mouth. "Xana, you have to help her."

"That's why I'm here. If we start by—" As she turned back to the pumpkin, she was shocked to find it was no longer on the counter.

Aoife was similarly startled, and the two of them searched frantically about the room.

"Over there, in the corner!"

Lopsided on the laminate floor lay the pumpkin. Its regular grimace now seemed strained, as though a gargantuan effort was occurring within. Cautiously, Aoife and Xana approached, Aoife removing a frying pan from the oven rack ready to squash it into mulch.

Without warning, a thin black shoot sprouted from the pumpkin's base, stopping inches from Xana's toes. Aoife swiped with the frying pan as the shoot splintered to form twig-like limbs, which in turn grew taloned hands. The pan quickly proved ineffective, as one such talon whipped out to bat it aside.

Like a vampire rising from its coffin, the pumpkin's body rose to standing height. Instinctively, Aoife and Xana backed away, eyes glancing to the counter for something new to use as protection. From the other room Norah screamed and, as they watched, the purple of the pumpkin's complexion turned back to orange.

"Norah!" Aoife cried, not willing to take her eyes off the pumpkin-man for a second.

Reacting to her cry, the creature's body twitched, and it began gesticulating with long, taloned hands. The motion created symbols in the air, which glowed a deep green.

Hervoken.

Aoife felt the word enter her mind like it had been pushed through her skull. The pain was agonising, like a jackhammer bashing her brain. It tasted like batteries, giving a rush of tang and regret. Somehow Aoife could understand the pumpkin, as though its actions forced its language upon her.

"Did you hear that?" asked Xana, rubbing her forehead.

Aoife ignored her, squaring up to the figure. "That's your name, isn't it?"

The Hervoken twitched some more, confirming it to be the case.

"What are you doing to my daughter?"

A chant of an ancient tongue began to stream from the Hervoken's sinister lips. Its fingers danced in the air, creating

SIGNET

sigils of immense complexity. When it was finished, Aoife's arms fell to her side, her composure cracking under the weight of the creature's words.

"You can't... I'm sorry you were injured, but that doesn't mean you can use my daughter as medicine!"

The jack-o'-lantern eyes stared at her blankly.

Spotting a drawer beside her, Aoife opened it and pulled out a carving knife. "I'm serious!" she shouted, holding the weapon out in front of her, hands trembling with fear.

The Hervoken traced a circular symbol in the air, and something began to stir in the hallway. Without warning, the door burst open, a slender object careering through the room like a dart. It collided with Aoife's hand and sprung the knife from her grasp, the blade impaling the laminate floor. The object stopped mid-air — long enough for Aoife to recognise it as Norah's toy broomstick — before it spun around and headed back towards her. Mere inches from Aoife's face, the object stopped again, this time not of its own will. Xana gripped the broom firm, casting it aside like the toy it was.

Undeterred, the Hervoken started to sing. Its voice was like that of a child in a horror movie, devious and deranged. In the next room, Norah's screams intensified, before falling deathly silent.

Aoife's tears blossomed anew. "Norah!" she screamed.

Charles came stumbling into the room, face flushed. "Norah has collapsed, whatever—" He saw the long-limbed Hervoken dominating the room. "Ah. Things are suddenly starting to make sense."

Aoife looked past Charles to see Norah's limp body in Harvey's arms. Her heart hung heavy in her chest. Rage building, she rounded on the Hervoken with fury in her eyes.

Before she could speak, Xana stepped in. "Let us offer you an alternative," she began. "We work for an organisation that can help you."

The Hervoken began uttering its complex language once more. The words hit like bullets, tearing her psyche to

ribbons. One word in particular hit harder than the others, leaving her in no doubt of how the creature felt.

"I understand that you're alone," Xana continued. "Trust me, I really do. But that doesn't mean you can do terrible things to make it right. Tell us what you want and we'll do everything we can to help you."

Its twig-like limbs jerked and trembled. The translation was instantaneous: a deep cloud of despair fell over everyone in the room. A memory ignited in the back of Aoife's mind: a concrete playground, tyres and swings. A group of girls danced and skipped, clapped and waved. But not Aoife. She sat in the corner against the green wire gate, longing to join them, be one of them, not quite sure why.

A deep wave of understanding washed over her. It collided with her own feelings of maternal fury, leaving her confused, conflicted and, most importantly, lost.

"I understand your pain," said Charles. "Let us help you. Working together we can reunite you with your people, and help you return to your home."

The cocktail of emotions swished and swirled inside: anger, sympathy, conflict. It was only upon seeing her daughter's helpless form once more that the mixture settled, and Aoife's seething rage returned. "What about Norah?" she snapped. "Look at what this thing has done to her. You can't honestly be considering helping it?"

"Aoife," Charles pleaded. "We have to do what's best, not just for Norah, but this lost soul as well."

"Lost soul?" Aoife couldn't believe what she was hearing. She tensed her fists until her knuckles went white. Why should this creature take any sort of priority over her own daughter? "This 'lost soul' manipulated my daughter to make her think it was her friend, all the while draining her to suit its own agenda. There's nothing lost about it — this thing is evil."

Picking up on Aoife's resentment, the Hervoken stirred. Its slender fingers pulsating, with green sparks flying from their tips. A murmur of panic erupted from the other room.

SIGNET

"Aoife!" Harvey called. "Norah's going pale."

Pangs of panic erupted from Aoife's stomach. She felt queasy, unable to cope with much more. If something happened to Norah, her world would come crashing down around her. "Charles, look at what it's doing to her. We have to do something!"

"I'm trying," Charles pleaded. "There has to be a way for both sides to win."

The storm raging within Aoife turned thunderous. "The only way for this Hervoken to win is if Norah loses. And I can't let that happen."

The carving knife sat where it had landed, just a few short steps away. Fury fueling her every move, Aoife ran to the blade, plucking it from the laminate like the sword from the stone. Her weapon ready, Aoife charged at the Hervoken, ready to carve it a feature it would never forget.

Having already picked up on her emotions, the Hervoken was ready. Its teeth clacked like a herd of horses, talons tracing jagged patterns in the air. The breadbin leapt off a nearby counter, shattering against her wrists. The knife hit the laminate and skated out of reach.

Backing away, Aoife's eyes turned red as she looked daggers at her employer. "You choose now and you choose quickly: this thing or my daughter." Fury flushed tears down her face. "Before it's too late."

Sullen, Charles looked to the creature, and knew his decision was made.

Unfortunately, the Hervoken also knew it, and renewed its assault. The plastic broom lifted from the floor once more and hurtled towards Aoife. Kitchen utensils joined it: chopping boards, spatulas, knives — anything in its proximity. Reaching for similar implements to protect themselves, the SIGNET trio scoured the cupboards, launching cups, plates, and cereal at the Hervoken.

Amidst the danger, Aoife saw Harvey and Norah in the other room. Thinking only of them, she ran to the door, slamming it shut to protect them from the devastation.

A childish cackle filled the room as nearby ornaments sprung to life, leaping from the shelves and onto Charles and Xana, shattering into sharp shards. All the while the Hervoken looked on, revelling in the destruction it caused. Standing by the door, Aoife was far enough away to avoid the epicentre of the carnage, granting her the opportunity to flank the creature.

Heading for the store cupboard, Aoife launched as much as she could muster in the direction of the giggling Hervoken. Bottles of ketchup, vinegar and olive oil smashed into the pumpkin-like cranium, breaking its destructive reverie.

Granted a break from the onslaught, Xana called to Aoife. "Try some salt!"

Beaming, Aoife followed the advice. Reaching for the shaker, she launched it at the Hervoken, all the while wishing she had paid more attention in gym class. The shaker collided with the Hervoken's smirking face, spraying a small mountain of salt into its open mouth.

The effect was instantaneous. The plethora of animated objects fell to the floor. The Hervoken staggered backwards, stumbling into the pedal bin.

Spotting her discarded carving knife on the floor, Aoife wasted no time in seizing her chance. Reaching for the weapon, she raced towards the weakened creature and brought it down over the nearest limb. The Hervoken howled in pain, but Aoife showed no remorse. All she cared about was Norah, and nothing would stop her until she knew she was safe. Another blow severed its abdomen, causing what remained to shrink back into its head. Her final target now obvious, Aoife held the knife in both hands and drove it through its terror-stricken face.

Her ordeal over, Aoife dropped to the floor, the knife clattering on the laminate beside her. Charles was at her side in seconds.

"Aoife, are you alright?"

"That's not what matters, Charles. How is Norah?"

SIGNET

The kitchen door swung open, and Harvey entered, Norah still cradled in his arms.

"Mum?" said a voice.

Through floods of tears Aoife saw her daughter staring down at her, the colour already returning to her cheeks. Knowing she would be alright, Aoife howled with emotion, refusing to stop until everything had been released.

* * *

Over the next few days, Aoife was a barrel of worries. Norah regained her strength, slowly, though all the while her mother feared some ramification of the Hervoken's influence would emerge. To her relief, when Halloween finally did arrive, Norah was better than ever. Dressed in her PVC witch outfit, she raced around the house as though she had never even encountered the Hervoken.

Across from her at the kitchen table, Charles pawed at the mug of coffee in his bear-like hands. "How are you coping?" he asked, reluctant to make eye contact.

Aoife pursed her lips. "I've been better," she admitted. "But trust me, I've also been a lot worse. Don't get me wrong, I've had my fair share of harrowing experiences with SIGNET, but when your daughter's thrown into the mix... things take a whole new level of crazy."

"Norah seems fine," said Charles, taking a sip of his drink. "Amazing, considering she's wanting to go trick-or-treating."

Aoife's face fell. "But she almost wasn't, that's what bothers me." She looked her employer dead in the eyes. "I'm all for protecting the life forms we encounter, Charles, but not at the cost of my family. If you *ever* hesitate like that when someone I love is in danger, consider my resignation well and truly tendered."

Her words cut Charles deep, but Aoife felt no remorse. He was about to respond, when Norah burst into the room on her broomstick, grinning with glee.

"Abracadabra!" she giggled, swishing her toy wand at each of them.

Aoife chuckled, and the tension in the room dissipated. Harvey wandered in behind their daughter, zipping up his coat.

Norah looked at her, eyes brimming with excitement. "Mum, are you coming?"

Harvey looked at her expectantly.

"I'm going to sit this one out." She smiled at her husband before turning to her daughter "I'm sorry, darling. Mummy's not quite ready for any more scary things just yet."

A look of disappointment drooped across Norah's brow, but it was gone in moments. "Okay, I'll make sure to bring you back lots of sweets!"

With that she was off, riding her broom through the front door and beyond.

Aoife smiled, realising that if her daughter could weather the storms life threw at her, then maybe so could she.

SIGNET

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