

# The Takers

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R.W.  
RIDLEY

THE  
TAKERS

BOOK ONE OF THE OZ  
CHRONICLES



# The Takers



*For Mom, Dad, and Marianna*



## ONE

**W**e killed the retarded boy. He took his own life, but we killed him just the same. Everybody should have the right to go through life unnoticed, and we took that right away from him. We reminded him that he was different every chance we got. It was harmless fun, harassing the retarded kid, thrusting disgrace upon him everyday. We were kids. What did we know? He was like a dumb animal to us. He didn't absorb the abuse. He shed it like a snake sheds its skin, or so we thought. We didn't know that with each degrading remark and act of humiliation that we forced him to perform, a sense of tangible worthlessness was building up inside of him. He put the horrific pieces of his seemingly useless life together in his damaged mind. Slowly he saw that he was less than human, not because God made him that way but because we saw him that way.

His name was Stevie Dayton, and I think about him almost every minute of every day. In fact, it's pretty much all I think about since the world ended.

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On October 10, 2006, I had a fever of 104. I was 13 and the kissing disease, mono, had claimed me as one of its latest victims. Because I had never done more than kiss a girl on the cheek, the doctor was fairly certain I contracted the disease some other way, which to a 13-year-old boy, not quite interested in girls yet, is splendid news.

I don't remember much that following week. I was in and out of consciousness. You'd be surprised how much your brain shuts down when your body is fighting for your life. But I do remember bits and pieces. The first day or so my mother was constantly by my side, feeding me broth, keeping me cool with a cold compress, putting her soft cheek against my forehead and whispering, "Mamma's little baby," over and over again. If I had had full use of my faculties, I would have protested. But when you're sick, and helpless, you desperately want to be somebody's "little baby."

By the third day, my mother's presence by my bedside had become sporadic. I heard her talking with my father in the distance, but their voices were like distorted radio signals. I couldn't make out a word they were saying. I could sense a panic in their voices. I assumed it stemmed from their concern over my well being, but looking back it may have been because of what was happening in the outside world.

On day four, I could feel my father lifting me out of my bed and carrying me a short distance. Where he was carrying me I don't know because my vision was shot. I could only make out the simplest shapes of objects. When he put me down, I felt him stand and then my world suddenly went completely dark. I never felt the touch or heard the voices of my mother and father again.

Days later, I don't know how many, I broke the fever. I was still in total darkness. When I first opened my eyes, the only thing I could immediately determine was that I was buried under mounds of clothes. I sat up and realized that I was on the floor of my parents' walk-in closet. Finding yourself in such a place, after several days of a semi-conscious state, you tend to be beset by confusion, and if I did not have the almost intolerable urge to pee, I may have stayed in that closet forever.

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I pushed the door open and peered into my parents' bedroom. It was still. The air was dry and stale. I inhaled and could smell my mother's perfume. As I stepped out of the closet, I heard the familiar tap, tap, tap of my dog Kimball's claws on the hallway floor. The door leading to the hallway was shut. My need to piss trumped my desire to see Kimball's friendly face so I bolted to the bathroom as fast as I could.

I can't tell you how long it had been since I peed, but I can tell you I have never felt such relief in my entire life. It felt like I was making up for at least a week of missed opportunities to empty my bladder.

I flushed and stepped back into my parents' bedroom, anxious to see my old friend Kimball. The door leading to the hallway was locked. As I put my hand on the doorknob, I could hear Kimball's deep penetrating growl. Kimball was a good-natured old pup. I had only heard him growl a few times in my life, mostly at other dogs. So to hear him growling at that moment, when I felt confused and vulnerable, was very disturbing. Part of me didn't want to open the door, but a bigger part of me knew that Kimball would never hurt me. He certainly could if he wanted to. He was a 90-pound German shepherd with paws as big as dinner plates, but he was as sweet as a six-week-old kitten. With deep, deep feelings of doubt, I unlocked the door and slowly turned the knob. The door open just a crack, I peeked into the hallway. Kimball was crouched down, the hair on his back raised. His teeth were bared, and he was ready to attack, but not me. He was looking down the hall toward the entrance of the house.

I opened the door but could not will myself to look at what was making Kimball so upset. He was fixated on it. He gave no indication at all that he was even aware I had opened the bedroom door. "What is it, Kimball?" I asked. With that,

Kimball barreled down the hallway. The growl was replaced by a rapid series of barks. I turned to look at what he was chasing, but I could only make out a fast moving shadow. I heard the front door open. A sudden splash of sunlight reflected on the wall. Kimball's bark faded as he pursued the unknown intruder out of the house.

I was paralyzed by fear. With great hesitation, I moved down the long, dark hallway. The walls were decorated with family photos and framed inspirational passages from the Bible. My mother was a religious woman who endlessly sought to negate my father's blasphemous behavior with Biblical knickknacks throughout the entire house.

At the end of the hallway I turned and saw the open front door. Kimball was already making his way back. I could see the scowl was gone. He was grinning with his tongue dangling from his mouth. His ears were pinned down and his tail was wagging back and forth a million miles a minute. He leapt through the open doorway and nearly tackled me to the ground. He whined and covered my face with kisses. I had never seen him so happy.

I had awakened from a long sickly slumber, and as a result I was thin and gaunt. Getting a closer look at Kimball, I could see he was in the same condition. He had not eaten for a while. I suspected the source of his happiness was that my presence meant he would eat.

"Where are Mom and Pop?" I asked. He, of course, did not answer. They obviously had been gone for some time by the looks of his emaciated body. He was the best-fed dog in the county. Pop never let him miss a meal. Something was definitely wrong.

I didn't notice the electricity wasn't working until I tried to open a can of dog food for Kimball. The electric can opener

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was dead. I tried the light switch in the kitchen. Nothing. I retrieved a screwdriver and hammer from the utility drawer and pounded on the top of the can until I eventually opened it wide enough to stick a spoon in and dig the contents out. Mom would have killed me if she saw me use one of her good spoons like that.

While Kimball inhaled his food, I looked for something that I could keep down. My stomach was a gurgling volcano that I knew would accept only bland and light food that possessed little to no smell or taste. I found a can of broth with a pull back tab on the lid and considered it. Without electricity, I couldn't heat it up. The mere thought of cold broth almost made me vomit. I settled for some saltines and warm ginger ale. As I ate, I noticed that the kitchen was as clean and organized as my mother always kept it.

The rest of the house was in order. Not one stick of furniture was out of place. My clothes were still neatly folded in my drawer and hanging in my closet. My Pop's office was as messy as usual. There was nothing to indicate that my parents wouldn't be home soon, that they hadn't just gone to visit the neighbors or driven to the store to do some shopping. I couldn't quite reconcile the fact that they left me, their extremely sick son, home alone. Was there some sort of emergency that required both of them to be present? There was no time to get a sitter, and I was obviously too sick to travel. Waking up in the closet was easy enough to explain. I had been known to sleepwalk. I must have gone on one of my nocturnal excursions and ended up in the closet.

Kimball was harder to explain. Why had he gone so long without food, and what or who did he chase out of the house? The more I thought about it, the more frightened I became. I deadbolted the back and front doors of the house, and made

sure every window was locked. I then sat in the den and tried to convince myself my parents would be home soon.

I sat there and listened to the ticking of the grandfather clock in the front foyer. It ticked away while Kimball and I sat there waiting for my parents to come home. The clock struck one. An hour had passed, and I had accomplished nothing except making myself more convinced that something was horribly wrong. I soon realized that sitting there wasn't the answer. Calling my parents' cell phone was out of the question because the phones were out of service. I had to do something.

The first order of business was to change out of my clothes. They reeked of sickness. I entered my room with Kimball following close behind. Neither one of us wanted to be out of the other's sight. We were both scared out of our minds. I grabbed a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt and moved to my bathroom. I took my first good look at myself in the mirror. My face was pale and drawn. My brown hair was matted and disheveled. My frame was built out of more bone than muscle. I wasn't the same Oz Griffin I was before I got mono. I must've shed twenty pounds.

I turned on the faucet and splashed water on my face. To my surprise, the water warmed up. That meant the water heater was working. Later I would determine that it was because the water heater was gas operated, but at the time, it didn't occur to me. I considered a shower, but concluded finding my parents was far more important than going out into the world clean and refreshed. I dressed as quickly as I could. I was still suffering some of the effects of the fever. My equilibrium was off and my head felt light. Doing anything quickly was a rather difficult task. When I finally finished dressing, I was weak-kneed and out of breath.

When I regained my energy, I ventured outside, uncertain,

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and unsteady. I carried a baseball bat with me, but given my physical state I had no confidence I'd be able to swing it with any kind of authority. Kimball was with me, but most of his strength had been zapped as well. We were two pathetic explorers entering a world of unknown dangers.

The neighborhood was vacant. There were cars in the driveways. A wind blew through the trees. Piles of leaves were scattered throughout the neighborhood. But there were no signs of life beyond Kimball and me. When the wind stopped, the silence set in, and the neighborhood felt less than empty, it felt dead.

I walked to the Mueller's. Their house was what my grandmother called a shotgun house. If you opened the front door, you could see the back door. It was small, but functional. The Mueller's, an older couple, were the unofficial overseers of the neighborhood. We had no neighborhood association or rules, but they let you know when they felt your yard was out of control or your house wasn't up to their standards. I figured if anyone knew where my parents were, they did. They knew everybody's business.

Their front door was open. Kimball and I slowly stepped up on their front porch. "Mr. Mueller?" I said. There was no answer. I looked at Kimball. He looked at me. "I don't like this." Kimball wagged his tail in agreement. "Mrs. Mueller?" I said, as if she would not have answered when I called out Mr. Mueller's name.

I entered the house. My heart was racing. I was sweating despite the cool fall temperature. Kimball was panting like he had just chased a rabbit for a mile and a half. It seemed neither of us wanted to enter the house, but we felt compelled to.

It was in shambles. Wallpaper was ripped from the walls. Furniture was torn apart. Garbage was strewn throughout

the entire house. There were stains on the carpet that my imagination immediately identified as blood. Whether it was or not is still a mystery to me, but given what I know now, it most likely was.

Kimball and I inched our way down the hall. Common sense told me to turn back at the first sign of trouble, but curiosity drove me farther into the house. I reached the bathroom. It was in the same condition as the rest of the house. The ceramic tile floor was cracked and the toilet was ripped from its molding and lying in the bathtub. I could see all this from the hallway. There was no reason to go inside, but I did. Till this day, I wish I hadn't because once inside I turned to my left and saw written in red on the shattered mirror, *Beware the Takers*.

The message jolted me and I backed out of the bathroom. I whispered the slogan to myself trying to make sense of it. "Beware the Takers." The front door slammed shut. I told myself it was a gust of wind, but tightened my grip on my bat just in case. Above me, in the attic, I heard what I thought were heavy footsteps. Thump. Thump. Thump. Kimball began to bark. Chaos was breaking out all around me. I dashed down the hall and through the kitchen. "C'mon, Kimball," I shouted. "C'mon!" He ran after me. I opened the back door, and we exited the house like runners out of the starting blocks.

The backyard was enclosed by a six-foot wood fence with a padlocked gate on the side of the house. I could scale it with some difficulty, but Kimball was another story. I couldn't get him out, and I wasn't about to leave him. I pushed on the gate to see if there was any give. To my surprise, the gate pushed back. Kimball's fur on his back stood straight up and he began to growl just as he had done before. The gate shook violently. I looked around me. We were trapped.

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“We’ve got to find a way out, Kimball.”

He looked at me as if he understood me and then took off towards the back of the fence that lined a patch of woods. There was an area where the ground dipped and left a small crawl space underneath the fence. Had I not been sick and just shed twenty pounds, I would never have been able to fit, but given my new slimmer build, I followed Kimball through the crawl space with no problem. Safely on the other side, I heard the gate to the fence crash open.

I was exhausted but knew that we could not hang around to find out if whatever was on the other side of the fence could fit through the crawl space. Kimball and I quickly navigated our way through the thick mass of trees and bush until the fence was out of sight. I fell to my knees gasping for air next to a large fallen oak. Kimball made a small circle around me, panting, his legs wobbly and unstable. He could have collapsed at any moment, but he remained vigilant.

I rested for no more than two minutes. When I pulled myself up on my feet, my thighs burned and itched. My legs were getting exercise for the first time in more than a week, and they were protesting.

There are sounds deep in the woods that don’t exist anywhere else on the planet. Traversing the dead pine needles and leaves, I heard crackles, crunches, pops, snaps, and thwacks coming from every direction. As long as Kimball wasn’t alarmed, I remained relatively calm. He would know if real danger was afoot.

We reached the vacant lot at the back of our neighborhood, which put us about three blocks from my house. I wanted to lie down and take a nap. I wanted to be back in my parents’ closet, still asleep, oblivious to what was happening outside. I wanted to be lying in my bed with my mother sitting next to

me saying “Momma’s little baby.” I closed my eyes and hoped against hope that when I opened them I would be back in my house awakening from a bad dream.

I opened my eyes and found myself still standing in the vacant lot. Kimball was looking up at me with a curious tilted gaze. He barked as if to tell me to get myself together and keep moving. He was right. I was standing in an open field like a sitting duck. I moved to the house next to the lot and stooped down behind the front bush. A quick scan of the immediate area told me the coast was clear, I moved to the next house and then the next and the next, each time stopping and hiding behind the biggest bush I could find.

When I got to the Chalmers’ house, just two houses down from mine, I did as I had done at all the others, I found a bush and bent down. I was about to move on when a noise caught my attention. It was a scream; a high-pitched squawk that at once chilled and confused me. I didn’t want to even think it, but it sounded human. It came in waves and every once in a while would end with a horrible breathless cough. I lost track of Kimball while I sat and listened to the sound. It wasn’t until I heard him scratching on the Chalmers’ front door that I realized he was trying to get in their house. “Kimball, no,” I whispered emphatically. He didn’t listen. He continued to scratch at the door. “Kimball.”

He worked his paw between the door and frame and finally got the door open enough to fit his body through. I jumped up and reluctantly moved up the porch and into the house. The Chalmers’ house was in disarray, too, though not nearly as much as the Mueller’s. The screaming was louder inside the house.

Kimball was at the top of the stairs by the time I walked through the door. With a great deal of difficulty I followed.

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The screaming grew more intense. Kimball galloped down the hall and stopped. When I reached him, he was calmly sitting at a door at the end of the hall. The screaming was clearly coming from the other side. I looked at Kimball. "A baby," I said. Before I had gotten sick, Mrs. Chalmers was pregnant. Had she had the baby while I was fighting my fever?

The door was locked. There was no way I could break it down. I ran into the bathroom and retrieved a bobby pin and straightened it out. I ran back to the door at the end of the hall and stuck it in the hole and jimmied the lock open. Kimball and I burst through the door only to find another flight of stairs. Kimball climbed them with ease. I did not. At the top of the stairs, I found a finished attic that had been turned into a recreation room. It had a pool table, a big screen TV, and a gaming computer.

Kimball's tail was sticking out from behind the big sectional sofa. The screaming had subsided. I walked over to investigate. I found what I was afraid I would find, a baby, and Kimball was licking its poor puckered little face.

I bent down and examined it. It was small, even small for a baby. I estimated it weighed maybe six pounds. It was wearing a diaper and blue shirt. A black crusty stub stuck out where its belly button should've been. I suspected the kid was hungry. A hungry, screaming baby is all I needed to worry about. I stood and scratched my head. I had no idea what a baby eats.

I turned to make my way down to the first floor of the house to find some baby food when I caught a fast moving blob rushing towards me out of the corner of my eye. I didn't even have time to raise my bat before it was on top of me. The weight of it sent me flying over the sofa. I lost my grip on the bat and it sailed over my head. Kimball started barking.

“Keep away from my baby,” I heard.

I scrambled back and tried to find the bat. The thing that attacked me stood with the baby in its arms and I saw for the first time that it was Mrs. Chalmers. “It’s me, Mrs. Chalmers. It’s Oz Griffin.”

She looked at me. “Oz?” She moved around the sofa. “Oz Griffin, is that really you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She fell to her knees still holding on tight to her baby. “Thank God. I thought we were the only ones left. Oh, thank the heavens above.” She began to cry.

Kimball moved around the sofa and sat beside her. “What’s going on, Mrs. Chalmers? I can’t find my parents.”

She gave me a strange look. “You don’t know?”

“No, ma’am. I woke up this morning and nobody was home. Something...” I didn’t want to say it.

“Something what?” she asked.

“Something chased me and Kimball at the Mueller’s house.”

She quickly stood and moved to the window. “It didn’t follow you here, did it?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t think...”

“Listen, to me, Oz,” she interrupted. “This is very important.” She was panicked which didn’t do much for soothing my already fragile state. “Did you see this... thing that was chasing you?”

“No, ma’am. It was practically breathing down our necks, but I never got a good look at it.”

“A good look at it or a look at all?”

“At all, I suppose.”

She raced back to my side. “Listen to me, you have to be certain. Did you see it at all?” Her voice was soft but demanding.

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“No, ma’am,” I said.

She collapsed on the sofa. “Thank God.”

“What’s going on, Mrs. Chalmers?”

To my surprise, she unbuttoned her blouse and began breast-feeding the baby. “I wish I knew, Oz. I wish I knew.” I turned away in embarrassment.

“Where is everybody? Where are my parents? Where’s Mr. Chalmers?”

She began to cry again. “I don’t know.” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “How are you still here?”

“I don’t know. I was sick. I don’t remember much.”

“That’s right. You had mono. Your mother was so worried.” The baby lay content in her arms. “The last time I saw her was when I went into labor with little Nate.”

“How long ago was that?”

“A week ago, I guess. I don’t know. It’s been hard to keep track of time. The clocks don’t work. The baby keeps me up most of the time. I think he’s colic. I’m exhausted. I don’t know if I’m coming or going half the time.” She spoke as if it took all her strength.

“What was chasing me, Mrs. Chalmers?”

She looked at me as if I had asked some horrible state secret. “Oz, you mustn’t speak of them. They... they know you when you know them.” She said it as if it made perfect sense. “The less you know the better off you are.”

“But I have to find my parents...”

“They’re gone,” she yelled. “Everybody’s gone. There is not one single soul left in Tullahoma or in Tennessee or in the world besides us. They got everybody.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“You don’t need to,” she said with a disturbing darkness in her voice. She had the look of someone who had gone completely

mad. I remembered her as a beautiful woman, but now her face was a horrid combination of red and gray. She had heavy bluish bags beneath her eyes, and she had broken out with an awful rash on her forehead. Asking her further questions was pointless. She lay back on the sofa with the baby still suckling at her breast. "I have to get some sleep," she said. "You'll watch over me, won't you, Oz?"

"Yes, ma'am, Kimball and me will keep watch."

She almost smiled. "The baby should sleep, too. He won't be any trouble." She barely could finish the sentence before she fell asleep. The baby continued to feed.

I wandered over to the window to see if anything was happening outside. The streets were still deserted. I couldn't comprehend what was happening. Mrs. Chalmers only confused the matter more. She gave me more questions than answers. How could everyone be gone? Where did they go? This entire thing was insane. It occurred to me that this all could be a dream. That maybe the fever had driven me crazy. Maybe I was strapped to a bed in a hospital somewhere and this entire thing was just some demented fantasy of a brain that had been cooked by an abnormally high temperature.

I looked around the room. It was all too real to be a dream. This was happening. I couldn't deny that. I didn't know why or how, but it was real, and wishing it weren't wasn't going to get me anywhere. Mrs. Chalmers may have been right, my Mom and Pop were gone, but that didn't mean I couldn't find them or at the very least find out what happened to them.

I plopped down on a beanbag chair and watched Mrs. Chalmers and the baby. The little guy had zonked out just as she said he would. Kimball lay down beside them on the floor. His ears erect and scanning the immediate area for any unusual sounds. As my eyelids grew heavier and heavier, I struggled to

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stay awake and keep watch over Mrs. Chalmers and the baby as I had promised, but my desire to sleep grew more intense with each passing moment until finally, I slept.

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I awoke to the sound of a door slamming. I shot out of the beanbag chair as quickly as I could. Mrs. Chalmers and the baby remained asleep. Kimball was up at the ready. The slam came again. It was coming from outside. I ran to the window and looked out. The door to the Wentleys' house across the street was opening and closing on its own. The trees were not swaying in a strong wind, and the piles of leaves on the side of the street remained intact. There was no wind. It was as calm as I had ever seen it.

Mrs. Chalmers woke up. "What is it?" she whispered. She carefully lifted the baby and gently laid him on the sofa. She stood with some difficulty.

"The Wentleys' front door," I said. "It's opening and closing... on its own."

"Get away from the window," she demanded, running in my direction. I didn't comply quickly enough so she yanked me aside. "They're trying to get you to notice them."

"Who?" I said. This time my voice was raised. I left no room for doubt. I was tired of the cryptic references. I wanted some answers.

"Never you mind," she said. "You have to stop thinking about them."

"Who..." I suddenly remembered the shattered bathroom mirror in the Mueller's house. "The Takers, is that what they're called?"

The gray and red coloring of her face was replaced by a pale shade of white. "How do you know their name?"

The slamming stopped.

She looked out the window. "They know we're here. They're coming." She ran to get her baby.

I turned to see who "they" were. I saw a shadow zip across the tree line in front of the Wentleys' front lawn. I could not see what or who cast the shadow, but judging by the trees, it was big, eight or nine feet tall. "What do we do?" I asked.

"Why did you say their name?" Mrs. Chalmers cried. "Why?" She held her baby and paced back and forth. "I won't let them get my baby. I won't let them," she said.

"We need a place to hide," I said. I had the bat back in my hand and nervously tightened my grip on it.

We heard a noise coming from the first floor. Kimball let out a short heavy "woof."

"They're in the house," Mrs. Chalmers said.

"We have to hide," I insisted.

"It's no use." She held out her baby. "Take him." A sudden calm had come over her.

"Mrs. Chalmers..."

"Take him," she said, her voice steady and forceful.

"But I don't know how to hold a baby."

She walked over to me. "Make a cradle with your arm."

I did as she said.

"Now, support his head in the crook of your arm."

He fit in my arm like he was made to go there. "Like this?"

"Perfect." She smiled and kissed him on the forehead. "His name is Nate," she said. "There's formula in the pantry in the kitchen." She backed away. "You stay here. I'll lock the door behind me."

"No, Mrs. Chalmers..." I started to cry. "Don't go down there. I don't want to be alone. I'm scared."

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She stopped and smiled again. "Oz, take care of my son. He's your responsibility now."

"No..."

She moved to the stairs. "Once they've taken me, they'll leave. They always do. No matter what you hear, don't open the door." She started down the stairs and stopped. "Oh, and Oz, remember they can't see you if you don't notice them." With that she hurried down the stairs. I heard the door open and shut. Minutes later, all I could hear were the sounds of Mrs. Chalmers screaming.



## TWO

Hours passed after Mrs. Chalmers's last scream before I dared to leave the attic. Had it not been for the baby crying and throwing a general fit, I probably would have waited even longer. As it was, he was in desperate need of a diaper change, and I suspected he was hungry again.

With Nate in my left arm, the baseball bat in my right hand, and Kimball at my feet, I descended the stairs as frightened as I have ever been. Mrs. Chalmers said they would leave after they took her, but I couldn't be absolutely sure she knew what she was talking about. She wasn't exactly firing on all cylinders.

Standing in the hallway of the second floor, I knew she was right. I don't know how exactly, but I could sense that they were gone. They brought with them the stench of terror, a sharp sour effervescence that seeps into your bones and sends a horrible sense of doom up and down your spine. If they'd remained in the house, I would have smelled them. Instead all I smelled was the kid's foul and disgusting diaper.

I moved into the Chalmers' master bedroom where they had set up a changing table. I had never changed a diaper before, but I had seen my aunt change my cousin's diaper when we visited them the Christmas before last. Until I woke up from my bout with mono to find that everybody in the world had disappeared, I counted that experience as my most horrible ever.

I set my bat down on the bed and laid Nate down on the flat cushioned top of the changing table. Kimball looked at me as if I were insane to even attempt to change the kid's diaper, but my only other option was to let him keep his soiled diaper on and learn to live with the awful, awful smell. It wasn't an option. I pulled back the adhesive tab on the diaper and lifted Nate's feet to get his hindquarters high enough to slip the diaper out. I was absolutely appalled at the milky green deposit Nate had made. Its consistency defied reason. I quickly wrapped the diaper up tight and tossed it in the nearby trashcan.

Nate kicked and thrashed about on the changing table. His eyes were closed tight. I cleaned his bottom with about a hundred baby wipes, and after several attempts, successfully put a clean diaper on him. Then before picking him up and heading down the stairs to the kitchen, I prayed that I would come across an adult before the kid crapped again. I was through with diaper-changing duty.

The kid gulped down his formula like he hadn't eaten in a month. After he finished the last drop, I soon learned that Nate's favorite thing to do after downing a bottle of formula was vomit. The little brat threw up all over my shirt. I was absolutely convinced he was the most disgusting baby ever born.

As Nate lay on the kitchen floor with Kimball watching over him, I washed my shirt out in the kitchen sink, and watched out the window as the sun sank in the sky. It would be completely dark soon. I decided that I would spend the night in the Chalmers' rather than slink through the neighborhood in the dead of night carrying a squirming baby the short distance to my house.

I raided the pantry for whatever looked edible and stuffed everything into a plastic garbage bag. My appetite was slowly

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returning to its old form. Much to my delight, the Chalmers were really into junk food. It seemed like they had every kind of chip, chocolate, and soda known to man. There was no dog food, but they did have a lot of canned tuna and chicken. Luckily, they all had pull-up tabs so no can opener would be needed.

The bag full, I scooped up the little kid and headed back up to the master bedroom where I would hole up for the night. I didn't like the attic. It made me feel trapped and boxed in. The master bedroom connected to Mr. Chalmers's office through a large walk-in closet, which gave me two exits. Besides, the baby was set up to sleep in the master bedroom. I figured if he was in familiar surroundings he might have an easier time of it.

By nine o'clock that night (I knew the correct time because I found Mr. Chalmers's watch on the desk in his office), it was obvious I was wrong. The kid howled and wailed from the moment I set foot back in the master bedroom. Mrs. Chalmers said he was colic. I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but if it meant an enormous pain in the ass, he was definitely colic.

I paced the floor of the bedroom rocking the kid back and forth so long that my arm went numb. It was then that I found something that was labeled a baby sling. It was a device that hung around my shoulder and across my belly and had a pocket big enough to lay the kid in. As soon as he was inside, Nate went out like a light. From that moment on, that baby sling was always in my sight. As far as I was concerned, it was the most miraculous invention ever made.

I stretched out on the bed and drifted to sleep as Kimball took a spot next to me and closed his eyes.

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At two in the morning, Nate woke up hungry. I fed him some formula and fought hard to stay awake. He was an annoying little bugger. There was a time when I was five or six years old that I begged my Mom to give me a kid brother. Lying there with one eye open, propped up on the Chalmers' bed feeding a flailing little blob some crap that he was going to throw up about two seconds after he got done, I was glad she didn't listen to me.

Despite my best efforts, I dozed off and let my head drop. I quickly jerked awake and breathed out deeply trying to will myself to stay alert. I stood and immediately froze as I looked out the window and saw a large pair of green eyes staring back at me. They were back.

Nate fed unaware of the danger. Kimball hopped out of the bed and charged the window. The eyes didn't move. Nor did I. We were locked in a stare. Mrs. Chalmers's words came back to me. "They can't see you if you don't notice them."

How could I not notice them? All I could see in the darkness were the eerie green eyes. They were there. I couldn't deny that. A tapping came at the window, then I could hear scratching. I looked closer at the green eyes. The thing turned its head, and they disappeared only to reappear seconds later. Kimball barked. I heard a hiss and a low raspy meow. I let out a sigh of relief. The glowing green eyes belonged to a cat. Kimball lunged at the window and the cat took off. I laid back down and Nate and I were asleep before Kimball returned to the bed.

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I woke up the next morning thinking about Stevie Dayton. Six months earlier, he was found in his basement with a noose around his neck hanging from some pipes. My Mom told me

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like she expected me to crumple over in a grief-stricken heap. I could sense her disappointment when my only reply was, "Okay," and I went on about the important task of playing Madden on my Xbox.

Stevie was on my mind at that particular moment because I remembered his stories. He was retarded, or "mentally challenged" as my mother used to correct me, but he had an incredible imagination. He wrote comic books about bizarre worlds where people had three heads and eighty-six toes or potato peelers for fingers. It was crazy stuff that never made any sense. He worked on them constantly at school. His drawings were surprisingly good, but his handwriting was barely legible. The stories meant something to him. We, of course, teased him mercilessly about them. Looking back, it was perhaps the cruelest thing we did to him, making fun of his stories. To him, they were the only places he felt real solace, and we set out to destroy them.

There was one story that haunted me this particular morning, a story about a group of creatures that hunted people. The details were vague to me, but I seemed to recall that they were invisible until you could see them. That was Stevie's logic, "invisible until you could see them." At the time, I thought it was the rambling reasoning of a retarded kid, but at that moment, hearing Mrs. Chalmers's voice in my head saying, "they can't see you if you don't notice them," I was beginning to wonder if Stevie knew something the rest of us didn't.

I put a fresh diaper on Nate, and packed up all the baby supplies that would fit in the garbage bag. With a great deal of hesitation, I exited the Chalmers' house with Nate in his sling and Kimball by my side. We made the short trip to my house without incident.

I struggled to come up with a plan for survival. I was

thirteen, and I felt like I didn't know anything about anything that was important. Put me in front of a video game and I could tell you how to defeat the invading Xoran army on planet K-Zap and save the Chalathiun race from extinction. But I couldn't tell you squat about how to pack only the most essential food and other items to keep you alive on planet Earth when it appears you and a baby were the only humans left. I say appears because I had made up my mind that Mrs. Chalmers was wrong. Everyone wasn't gone. After all, what were the chances that three people in the same neighborhood were the only ones that survived? Somebody else had to be out there. I could either wait until they came to me, or I could go out and find them. I never was much for waiting.

I could not drive. I didn't know the first thing about the mechanics of making a car go and more importantly stop. I knew cars had a gas pedal and a brake pedal, but when I tried to imagine how much pressure was the proper amount to apply to either, I convinced myself that not knowing the exact answer to that question would result in a horrible wreck that would leave me either dead or badly injured. So, taking my parents' car was not an option, and since carrying a lot of equipment and Nate on my bike was impossible, I was left with my only mode of transportation being my feet.

I loaded my mom's garden wagon full of supplies; food, clothes, diapers, tools, kitchen knives, flashlights, matches, anything I could think of that would be useful. At one point, the wagon was so full I could hardly pull it. I unloaded it and eliminated whatever I could to make the load lighter. It was a process I repeated several times, until I got it down to a weight I was comfortable with.

With Nate in his sling and dangling from my shoulder, I made one last pass through my house. I stared at the family

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photos as long as I could, burning them into my memory. They were pictures of happy times, and I wanted those memories to be the ones I carried with me on my journey. I took the photo of my Mom and Pop's last anniversary, all three of us at Baskin Robbins eating our weight in ice cream, and stuffed it in my pocket. That's when I realized that I had not taken a picture of Nate's parents with me. It would be our first stop before we headed out of town.

Just in case, I left a note for my parents on the refrigerator. "Gone looking for you. Love, Oz." I think it was the first time I ever signed a note to my Mom and Pop with the word "love." It saddened me that they would probably never see it.

I took a picture from Nate's father's office. It was a picture of Mr. Chalmers, Mrs. Chalmers, and Nate at the hospital. Mr. Chalmers had the biggest smile I think I had ever seen. They all looked tired and on the verge of collapse, but I felt like it was their happiest moment. Nate should know that he made them happy.

As I was about to leave Mr. Chalmers's office, I noticed that he had a sword hanging on his wall. According to its plaque, it belonged to a Union Officer in the Civil War by the name of James J. Petty. I pulled it off the wall and was surprised at how heavy it was. It looked as if it were brand new. I dubbed the sword J.J. and brought it with me.

I positioned myself in the middle of the road. The temperature hovered somewhere in the high 50s. I put on my Tennessee Titans sweatshirt and made sure that Nate was bundled up tight in his blanket. I figured my body temperature would keep him warm. I gave my house one last look over my shoulder and then started pulling my wagon down Harper Street.

We crossed over to Collinwood and then Fremont Avenue

where I made my next stop. I stood in front of Stevie Dayton's house, and felt a chill race through my bones. I avoided this house like the plague whenever I went bike riding for fear Stevie would see me and come running out after me, begging me to come in and read his latest story. It was the only time I was polite to him because his mom was always within earshot, and I didn't want her to know how I really treated her son.

I walked inside and like all the other houses it was empty. It was left intact like my house, but it was just as disturbing as all the other houses that had been ransacked. The faint odor of terror was in the air. I quickly made my way to Stevie's room and found his collection of stories in a series of boxes underneath his bed. Amazingly, they were all neatly filed away. I overturned the first box and rifled through the mound of monster and mutant stories. Stevie had written hundreds of comic books. I dumped the next box, and then the next. It wasn't there. All the boxes empty, I stood and backed out of his room.

At the end of the hall, I saw the door to the basement. "That's where they found him," I told myself. "He had it with him." I said it with a knowing that made no sense to me. How I thought I knew that he had the comic book I was looking for with him the day he killed himself, I don't know, but I was sure of it. I took a step toward the door and stopped. It was foolish to go down there without protection. I ran back to the wagon and got J.J. and a flashlight.

A rush of cold air struck me when I opened the door to the basement. Nate must have felt it too because he squirmed in his sling. I took one step down and looked at Kimball. He backed away from the door. "Kimball, c'mon," I said, but he backed away even farther. He would not make the trip downstairs with me.

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Each stair creaked and sagged as I stepped on it. The beam from my flashlight created a bent tunnel of light surrounded by total darkness. I felt as if I were entering hell.

My feet touched the cement floor. I scanned my flashlight back and forth. It was an unfinished basement that served as the Dayton's laundry room. A basket of laundry sat on top of the dryer. I turned to my right. A series of pipes snaked across the ceiling to the far corner of the room. To the left, there were six metal shelves that contained tools and spare parts for various household items.

Back to the right, I followed the pipes to the corner of the room. J.J. shook in my trembling hand as I approached the area where I was certain Stevie had taken his own life. A musky smell grew stronger and stronger as I got closer. A group of fast moving spiders scurried in front of the beam from my flashlight. I followed their frantic journey and stopped when my light illuminated an overturned chair. "It was the one he was standing on," I told myself. The guilt that I had been, in part, the cause of his death started to boil inside of me. The chair represented to me his last stand. It was where he gave in to the constant bombardment of abuse from my friends and me. We caused the pain he wanted to end. As I looked at the chair, I knew that worse than never recognizing my culpability in his death was recognizing it too late.

I shined my flashlight up at the ceiling and was relieved the noose wasn't there. I imagine Stevie's parents ripped it down the first chance they got.

I bent down and examined the immediate area. The floor was damp so I didn't hold out much hope that the comic book would survive in that environment. I zipped the flashlight to the left wall. A man, crouched down on the floor was looking at me. I screamed and fell back. Nate screamed along with

me. I looked at the man closer. He was holding a sword and a flashlight and had a sling across his shoulders. The man wasn't a man. He was me. I was looking in a full-length mirror.

I stood. My pants were now covered in the muck from the damp floor. I stepped to the mirror. That's where I saw it. In the mirror, I saw a stack of paper on the washing machine. I turned and hurried to retrieve it. My blood ran cold as I read the name of the comic book, *The Takers*. Without thinking, I whispered the name out loud.

As I looked up from the homemade comic book, the mirror crashed to the floor. Kimball began to bark. Nate kicked and cried. I felt the ground begin to shake. I stuffed the comic book in Nate's sling and held tight to JJ. and the flashlight as I sprinted up the stairs only to have the door slam shut in my face.

I whipped my flashlight around to face the bottom of the stairs. I could hear something digging its way through the concrete floor. I rammed my shoulder into the door. Kimball barked frantically. He scratched at the door. I turned and grabbed the knob. The flashlight fell out of my hand and bounced down the stairs. It landed with the beam facing into the room. I threw my shoulder into the door again. This time it gave way. As if someone were pushing against me, I forced the door opened wide enough so I could fit through. I gave the basement one last look and saw the shadow of a hand breaking through the floor. It was all the impetus I needed to dash down the hallway and out of the house.

I grabbed my wagonload of supplies and bolted down Freemont Avenue until my lungs felt as if they were going to burst. Whatever was in the basement had not followed me. Without looking at the comic book, I took it from Nate's

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sling, rolled it up tight and buried it in the wagon under the supplies.

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Before leaving Tullahoma, I went to all my friends' houses, Gordy Flynn, Larry Barr, and Tim Sanders, just to check if by chance any of them had survived. They had not. I was tempted to take Gordy's dad's hunting rifle, but I could not bring myself to do it. The truth is it intimidated the hell out of me. It was long and shiny, and by the looks of all the deer heads on the wall was a very efficient killing tool, but I had never fired a gun. I was convinced if I took it, I would end up shooting myself before I shot one of the creatures.

I left the only hometown I had ever known behind me. It was a peculiar little Southern village that was for the most part a great place to grow up. There wasn't much to it, but it was my world, and I would miss it.

By eight o'clock that night, I had reached Manchester, a small town located off of I-26 that was only fifteen miles from Tullahoma, but considering my weakened condition and sizeable load my progress was severely impeded. Once I was on the interstate I would head east toward Chattanooga. I decided to head east because I had an uncle in Charleston, South Carolina. I had no idea if he was alive, but there was only one way to find out.

The sky had been overcast all day, but now the sun was completely gone, and the moon didn't provide much light. I pushed on until I reached a Kroger's grocery store, an ideal place to set up camp for the night, or so I thought. As it turns out, meat doesn't keep too well when the refrigeration system fails. It stunk to high heaven. I covered my mouth and nose with my hand, grabbed a couple of plastic bags at the end of the

first register, and went from aisle to aisle taking what I thought were useful supplies, including five packages of Oreos.

I was tearing open a box of chocolate frosted Pop Tarts when I heard a noise from the other end of the aisle. I turned and was greeted with a bright light in my eyes.

“What’cha doing in my store, boy?” I heard a thick hoarse voice say.

Kimball growled.

“Sir?” I tried to sound unafraid.

“I said, what’cha doing in my store?”

“Nothing.” The light hid him from my view.

“Nothing? Looks like you’re eatin’ my food.” I heard him suck in a huge gob of snot through his nose and spit it out.

Kimball stalked toward him.

“Call your dog off.”

“Kimball, stop,” I yelled. He obeyed. “Listen mister, I don’t want any trouble. I didn’t know this was your food.”

A small grubby hand snuck in under my nose and ripped the Pop Tart out of my grasp. I turned to see a girl, maybe twelve-years-old, gobbling up the chocolate breakfast food. Her clothes and face were filthy, and her hair was wild and unruly.

“Ignorance of the law ain’t no excuse,” the man said. “That there’s Lou. Don’t bother saying nothing to her. She can’t talk. She’s mute or something.”

Lou noticed the sling around my shoulder moving. She stepped closer and reached out. I backed away. “Me and Kimball will just go.”

“Where you going?” The man asked. He started to walk down the aisle.

“Headed east,” I said.

“What’s east?”

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"I got an uncle in Charleston."

"Charleston?" He started to laugh. "You figurin' on getting there tonight?" He took the flashlight from my eyes, and I could finally see him. He was in his forties. He had more belly than anything else. He wore a rough three-day old beard that spread across both his chins. He had a name patch on his shirt that read "Wes." By the looks of his uniform and oil-covered hands, he was a mechanic by trade. I could see now that he was holding a large hunting knife.

"I was going to camp near the interstate."

Lou stepped up again and peeked inside the sling. She let out a gurgled scream of joy.

"What'cha got there?" Wes asked.

"Supplies." I said.

He chuckled. "Lou don't get that excited about supplies."

Lou reached for the sling. I slapped her hand away. She wailed.

"Watch it, boy!" Wes reached around me and opened up the sling. "Good lord almighty, boy. That's a baby. Newborn from the looks of it." Kimball watched him suspiciously. "You best come with us."

"I don't want any trouble."

"And you ain't going to get none either, unless you brought some of them damn Greasywhoppers with you."

"Greasywhoppers?" I said.

"Them ugly buggers," he said. "The ones that done all this." He waved his knife around to indicate the devastation that surrounded us.

"No, sir, I didn't bring any Greasywhoppers with me."

"Well, c'mon then," he said. "We're holed up at the mattress store down the way." He moved past me, grabbing a box of breakfast bars as he headed for the exit.

Lou stood in front of me eating the Pop Tart. She looked like a wild animal tearing into its prey. I wondered if she had always been like that or if she had just gone crazy because of what was happening to the world. I carefully moved around her and followed Wes. As I passed her, I saw her break off a chunk of her Pop Tart and try to give it to Kimball. I quickly grabbed her arm. "Don't do that," I said.

She ripped her hand away and screamed so loud I thought she was going to puncture my eardrums.

"I didn't mean anything by it," I said. "It's just that dogs aren't supposed to have chocolate. It could kill him."

She threw the remaining Pop Tart at me and took off towards the door, screaming all the way. It must have been a regular occurrence because Wes had no reaction to it at all. I could see him through the window calmly walking toward the mattress store at the end of the shopping center.

Kimball and I looked at each other. We were both confused by what had just happened. The thought of going outside, grabbing the wagon and pulling it all the way to the interstate crossed my mind. These people were strangers after all, and they didn't exactly make a great first impression. In the end, I decided my opportunity to spend time with people might be limited over the course of my journey. I might as well take advantage of it whenever I could. I exited the building, grabbed the wagon, and headed towards the mattress store.

When I got there Wes was sitting on a mattress at the back of the store. "Take whichever you like," he said. "Lou sleeps on the floor."

There were probably twenty mattresses to choose from. I picked one at random and put the grocery bags on it. Kimball jumped up on top of it and lay down.

"I figured this is good as place as any to hole up," Wes

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said. "Got a nice place to sleep. Food store right next door. Hell, I got enough stuff over there to go a year or more without a peep from my old hungry stomach."

I lay Nate on the bed and started to change his diaper. Lou popped up from behind the bed and watched with great interest. She moved around the bed to stand next to me, never taking her eyes off Nate.

"You related to that little fella?" Wes asked.

"No, sir," I said. "He belonged to my neighbors, the Chalmers." I said it like he may have heard of them.

"That's a big job, taking care of a little one like that. You up for it?" He asked.

"Got no choice," I said. Without prompting, Lou handed me a diaper from the wagon. "Are you Lou's daddy?"

He laughed. "Me? No. Found her in an RV off the interstate, bout a week ago. She was hiding in the toilet. Her parents must've got took." He leaned forward. "I figure they's alien or something."

"Lou's parents?" I said.

"No, the Greasywhoppers. They's aliens."

"Why do you call them Greasywhoppers?"

"Cause that's what they is," he said. "They're big hairy whoppers covered in grease and grime, and they're all kinds of foul smelling." He leaned down and picked up a can of beer from the floor and popped it open. "Greasy-whoppers," he said just before he took a sip of beer.

I looked at him in disbelief. "You've seen them?"

"Damn right I did," he said. "Killed one of the suckers."

"You did?"

"Hell, yeah. One of them come into my shop while I was working on Mrs. Jervy's Olds 88's brakes. Had me by the neck. Claws diggin' into me." He pulled his shirt collar away

to show me four puncture wounds on his neck. "He was a big ugly fella'. Dead red eyes. Long sharp teeth. He was slobbering and foaming at the mouth."

"How'd you kill him?" I asked, enthralled by his story.

Wes pulled his hunting knife from its sheath. "I had this on me. I always do. Used to creep some people out, but by God, where are them people now? They got took, that's where they is. I stuck this in that Greasywhopper's belly and gutted the sucker."

"Wow," I said, unable to contain my amazement at his bravery.

"They took everybody else that same day. You and Lou's the only ones I've seen since." He took another sip of beer.

"Where do you suppose they take everybody?"

"Don't know," he said. "But this whole thing is a military operation. You can count on that."

"Military?"

"Yes, sir. They cut power and communications first. Isolated everybody. Our chain of command didn't have no way to get instructions to our soldiers. Then they done something to the guns. Won't none of them fire."

I filled a bottle with formula. Lou was hovering over Nate. I reached around her, picked him up and started to feed him. Lou stood inches away from me watching every move the baby made.

"Saw a few planes from the air force base down the road fly over in the beginning," Wes said. "I guess jet fuel worked for some reason or another. But I ain't seen one in about five days now. I reckon there ain't nothing left of our military."

I tried to move away from Lou, but she followed me wherever I went. A thought came to me. "How do you know her name's Lou if she can't talk?"

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“I don’t,” he said. “She looks like my sister Louise.” He stretched out on his mattress. “You missed dinner. Lou and me cooked us up some beans and rice.”

“Cooked?” I said, surprised.

“We got us a propane deluxe grill from the Wal-Mart across the way. He closed his eyes. “Can’t fire it up, though. Not ‘til tomorrow morning. We’re rationin’ the propane.” Within seconds I heard him snoring.

Nate finished his formula, and I put him on the bed. Lou quickly walked over, picked up the baby and gently put him over her shoulder. She started to pat his back. Nate let out a loud belch. Lou looked at me and smiled. “You’ve got to burp him,” she whispered.

I raised an eyebrow. “You can talk?”

She nodded.

“But Wes said...”

“They can hear you talk,” she whispered even lower.

I looked out the front window of the store. “You mean...”

She nodded. “They don’t hear screaming or laughing or dogs barking or cats meowing or most anything else, but they can hear people talk.”

I sat down on the bed. “Why can’t they hear us now?”

“I don’t know. I guess they’re not looking for us.” She started to rock Nate back and forth.

“They took your parents?” I asked.

“My Mom and Stepdad. We were going to Disney World.” She sat next to me. “I don’t know about the rest of my family. My little brother and grandparents were going to meet us there.” A sudden sadness covered her eyes. “What about you?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I’ve been kind of out of it with a fever for the last week or so. I woke up and everybody was gone.”

Kimball jumped off the bed and started sniffing the wagon. I knew that meant he was hungry so I opened one of the grocery bags and retrieved a pouch of wet dog food and tore it open. I dumped the contents on the floor and Kimball devoured it.

I looked at Lou. "What is your name, by the way?"

She frowned and looked at Wes. "Call me Lou. I think it makes him feel better."

I looked down and much to my delight she had rocked little Nate to sleep. "Thanks, Lou," I said.

She looked at me with tears in her eyes. "I miss my family."

"Me, too," I said.

She stood and handed me the baby. "You should get some sleep while you can. He'll be awake in a couple of hours ready to eat again." She stood and moved to the back corner of the store. She disappeared behind an adjustable bed.

I lay down and tucked Nate between my arm and body. Kimball jumped up and lay at the foot of the mattress. I did not fall asleep immediately. I thought about Wes's story. I wondered if it was a load of crap or if he really had killed one of the Greasywhoppers, as he called them. I had only seen a few shadows. I hadn't seen the actual creatures. I had no idea if his description was accurate. As I drifted off to sleep, I thought about Stevie's comic book in the wagon. It was possible the answers I needed were in there, but Mrs. Chalmers had told me the less I knew the better off I was.

"Hey," I heard Lou whisper.

I carefully sat up. She was peeking over the adjustable bed. "Yeah?" I said.

"What's your name?"

"Oz Griffin."

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“The baby?”

“Nate.”

“Good night, Nate, good night, Oz Griffin,” she said. “Try not to dream about the Greasywhoppers. They can get you there, too.” She disappeared behind the adjustable bed again.

I closed my eyes and tried not dream about the Greasywhoppers.



## THREE

**A**s promised, Wes fired up the grill behind the mattress store the next morning and roasted half a dozen corn-on-the-cobs. They tasted fantastic. We each took two and ate them in record time. Wes warmed himself a pot of coffee on the grill. Had somebody seen a snapshot of us they may have guessed we were on a camping trip having the time of our lives.

“Sure could go for a steak right about now,” Wes said, corn stuck between his teeth. “Meat in the store’s done turned on me.”

“What about a generator?” I asked. “Doesn’t Wal-Mart have one of those?”

“Course it does,” he said. “But they don’t work.”

“They don’t?”

“No, sir,” he said. “They run on gas and the gas ain’t no good no more. Them Greasywhoppers ruined just about everything.”

Nate let out a cry from inside the mattress store. I started to stand, but Lou beat me to it. She ran inside the store.

Wes burped and threw his stripped corncob behind him. “You still figurin’ on heading east?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“It ain’t gonna be easy. You got Monteagle to cross. It could take you two, three days to make it to the other side. Temperature’s about twenty degrees cooler up there. You get stuck up there, that baby’s liable to freeze to death.”

"I'll just stick to the interstate. We'll be fine."

"Maybe," he said. "Course you could just stay here. Me and the girl will help you with the baby."

He said it casually, but I had a feeling he really wanted me to stay. "Maybe a day or two."

"Suit yourself, but the girl ain't going to be none too happy..."

A crash came from the other end of the building. Wes and I jumped to our feet. Kimball stood point, sniffing the air, his ears straight up. Wes held his hunting knife in front of him. I thought about running to get J.J., but I decided there wasn't time. I searched the immediate area and found a board from a broken palette. We waited. Another crash came. This time Kimball took off like a shot towards it.

"Kimball," I shouted. "Stop!" He didn't obey.

"We best get inside," Wes said.

"I can't..." Before I could protest a large fast moving animal with black fur burst out from the corner of the building and charged Kimball. Kimball didn't waver. I moved in closer. Wes grabbed my arm. "Get inside," he insisted. I ripped my arm from his grasp and chased after Kimball.

Suddenly the animal and Kimball stopped. They faced each other. I got within ten feet of them and finally could tell what the animal was. I could recognize it, but I couldn't explain what it was doing in Manchester, Tennessee, about 150 miles from the closest zoo. It was majestic, powerful arms, an enormous head that came to a point, black eyes underneath a prominent brow ridge. It was a gorilla. Correction, it was an angry gorilla. It beat its chest, displayed its three-inch fangs, and let out an earth-shattering roar. Kimball barked.

I moved in slowly. "It's okay," I said. "It's okay." I grabbed Kimball's collar and pulled him back. The gorilla paced and let out the occasional grunt.

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I looked at the gorilla. We made brief eye contact. It was as scared as we were. It growled and lunged forward. I pulled Kimball back some more. The gorilla turned and slowly walked back to the corner of the building where it picked up a doll and a blanket and disappeared behind a dumpster.

Wes joined Kimball and me. "That weren't no Greasywhopper," he said.

"It was..." I hesitated. "It was a gorilla."

"A go-rilla?" he said, emphasis on the first syllable. He chuckled. "I wondered where that thing went."

I looked at him like he was crazy.

"C'mon, I'll show you," he said.

We headed back toward the grill. He stopped and yelled inside to Lou. "Back in a minute, Lou. Keep a watch over the baby and mind the go-rilla out back." He laughed. "A go-rilla. Lordy, the end of the world sure do make for some interesting times."

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Wes took Kimball and me to a convenience store about a mile and a half from the mattress store and about a half mile from the interstate. Parked on the side near the diesel pumps was a large customized bus. The bus had pictures of a gorilla and the words "AJAX, The World's Only Talking Silverback" painted on the side.

"I figured they stopped for gas when the Greasywhoppers got 'em," Wes said stepping up inside the bus. Kimball and I followed. The inside of the bus was torn apart. "You can see they put up a pretty good fight." The bus was obviously a home to Ajax and his owners. It had a kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom with a double-sized bed, and a large cage in the back. The keys to the cage were still in the door. He picked

up a book off the floor and handed it to me. "The go-rilla can't really talk. He just knows some of that sign language stuff. The kind deaf people use."

The book was about Ajax. It was a detailed account of his upbringing and training. I flipped through it. It had pictures of Ajax from a baby all the way to an adult, working with some dark haired woman named Dr. Alice Fine. She loved Ajax. You could tell that from the impossible smile she had in every picture. According to one of the captions under the pictures, Ajax knew over 1500 words in American Sign Language.

"All this set me to wonderin'," Wes said. "They's a lot of zoos and such all across this country. What do you reckon happened to all those animals?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe the Take..." I stopped myself. I did not want to say that name again. "I mean, maybe the Greasywhoppers took them."

He shook his head. "They got no use for animals. I seen dozens of stray cats and dogs since this all started. I'm bettin' there's lions and tigers and monkeys of every kind runnin' around this country free as field mice."

"Maybe they're still locked up in the zoos." The thought of those animals starving to death behind their enclosures sickened me, but it was probably the unpleasant truth.

"Some of them," he said. "But I bet you dollars to donuts some of them got out some how some way, and they's out there looking for something to hunt."

I thought about what he said, and concluded that he was probably right. That meant that the Greasywhoppers weren't the only danger we had to cope with. With no guns or fast moving vehicles, my journey to Charleston was looking more and more perilous with each passing moment.

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## THE TAKERS

Back at the mattress store, I went through the book about Ajax. He was an amazing gorilla. Dr. Fine believed that he had a real understanding of the world and could even hold conversations about great works of art, music, and war. He watched movies and had a monthly article in a national magazine reviewing the latest releases. Dr. Fine wrote the articles, of course, but they were all Ajax's opinions. He was something of an artist, too. His paintings had actually sold for thousands of dollars.

Lou had taken over Nate duty and was busy walking him around the store. Kimball was snoozing away on one of the mattresses. Wes was nowhere to be found. I continued to flip through the book. I discovered that Ajax's favorite food was peaches. I excused myself, exited the mattress store, careful not to disturb Kimball, and headed for the grocery store.

Inside the store, I found a couple dozen peaches in the produce department. I grabbed as many as I could and went out the back door. I made my way to the area I had last seen Ajax and dumped the peaches on the ground. I found a hiding spot behind a stack of empty boxes and waited to see what would happen.

Minutes passed and nothing. Just as I was about to give up, I saw a long arm covered in black fur reach out from behind the dumpster and grab a couple of peaches. I could hear Ajax gobbling up the juicy fruit.

I inched my way out of hiding. I could make out half of Ajax's face behind the dumpster. He saw me and hoot-growled in attempt to shoo me away, but I didn't move. He continued to eat the peaches. I watched him for about ten minutes and then got up and walked back to the mattress store, feeling Ajax's eyes on me the whole way.

Back in the mattress store, I lay down on one of the beds.

Lou had gotten Nate to sleep. She was standing guard over him like he was a lost treasure. "What do you think happened, Lou? I mean with the Greasywhoppers. Why are they here?"

She looked at me for a long time before answering. "I think we made God mad," she said.

I thought about her answer. "How do you figure?"

"This is what happens in the Bible, isn't it? Jesus comes down and takes everybody way, all the good people anyway."

"I'm a good person," I said, a little offended by her assessment.

"Maybe Jesus doesn't think so."

I turned away from her. "I liked it better when I thought you didn't talk." I didn't want her to be right, but I considered the possibility. I thought about Stevie Dayton. I wasn't such a good person to him. If he had any kind of vote in who Jesus took back with him, then I surely wouldn't have made the list. But then again, neither would've Gordy, Larry, or Tim.

I looked at the wagon and considered getting the comic book out and reading it, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. If I notice them, I thought, they will notice me. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

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I woke up with Lou sitting on the bed next to me, staring holes through me. I wiped my eyes and sat up. "Can I help you?" I said.

"What do you think happened?" she asked.

I looked at the wagon. "I don't know."

"I think we're supposed to do something," she said. "I think there's a reason they didn't take us."

"It's not for a lack of trying," I said. "They've come after me a couple of times." I stood up and stretched.

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“Yeah, but they never got you. Most everybody else didn’t have a chance to get away, but you and me and Wes and Nate, we all found a way to escape.”

“So.”

“So, I think there’s a reason for that,” she said. “I think we have a mission.”

“A mission?” I laughed. “You watch too many movies. We just got lucky, that’s all. Truth is, it’s just a matter of time. They’ll get us all sooner or later.”

She gasped at the thought and bowed her head. I suddenly felt bad for dismissing her theory and providing her with such a prediction of doom. I looked at the wagon. What if she were right? What if we were supposed to do something? Maybe Stevie Dayton wrote about more than just the creatures. Maybe he wrote about... our mission.

“Look,” I said. “Don’t pay any attention to me. Right now our mission is to survive. We’ll figure out the rest as we go along.”

I grabbed the book on Ajax and left the store. Lou put Nate in his sling and followed. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“To make a new friend,” I said.

We walked to the grocery store, grabbed as many peaches as we could carry, and headed out the back to pay Ajax another visit. Now that I knew he was open to accepting food, I was hoping he would be open to accepting our friendship.

I instructed Lou to take my previous position behind the stack of boxes while I put the peaches a little farther away from the dumpster than I had placed them the first time. I sat about ten feet away in the open. After several seconds, Ajax poked his head out from behind the dumpster. I opened the book to the section on American Sign Language and searched for the sign for friend. Ajax stretched his body out and grabbed a peach.

The book was a little difficult to decipher, but I did my best and interlocked my right index finger over my left index finger and then switched their positions. Ajax ignored me at first, but when he reached out for his second peach he saw what I was doing and huffed. I didn't know if he was telling me I was doing it wrong or to get lost. He took the peach and peered out from behind the dumpster as he ate it. I lightly touched my fingers to my cheek and pulled my hand away, the sign for peach. I did it over and over again until Ajax responded by throwing his half eaten peach at me. I felt I had won a small victory.

I was looking for another word to sign when Nate let out his usual afternoon wail. Ajax stopped in mid stretch for another peach and howled in anger. I turned to Lou signaling for her to get Nate to shut up, knowing full well there was nothing she could do. I turned back to Ajax and to my surprise he was now sitting just three feet away from me. I was shocked and felt myself having difficulty breathing. Ajax looked in the direction of the stack of boxes and then back at me. Nate continued to cry. Ajax looked back and forth from me to the baby, and then to my astonishment he put his arms together like he was forming a cradle and rocked them from left to right, the sign for baby.

He put his right hand to his mouth and then brought it forward to his left hand. I searched through the book to find the gesture. I learned it meant good. "Baby good," he was telling me.

I looked up the word yes and signed it to him.

He responded by signing, "Baby good," and then he added another sign, his hands locked in a defensive motion in front of him. I scrambled to look up the word. After flipping through several pages, I found it, protect. "Baby good protect."

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I searched through the book to find the signs for my question. I made the sign for “protect” and then pulled my right index finger away from my left index finger for the word “from” and then struck my right index finger across my left palm for the word “what.” “Protect from what?”

He grunted, frustrated. He backed away. I asked again. “Protect from what?”

He made a gesture with his right hand as if he were grabbing for something and then moved it across his body. He did this several times adding the signs for “protect,” “baby,” and “from.” After repeating the message several times, he turned to the peaches, sat with his back to me and ate. I looked up the sign. My heart skipped a beat when I found it. Ajax had just signed, “Protect baby from take.”

I stood up and silently urged Lou to follow me. We made our way back to the mattress store with little Nate crying the whole way.

“That was cool,” Lou said.

“Yeah,” I said, not wanting to let on that the whole thing had freaked me out. “Cool.”

“What did he say?”

“Just something about the baby. Never could really get all of it.” I lied not to protect her, but to protect me from having to repeat the message.

She lay Nate on the bed and prepared to change and feed him. She periodically interrupted her preparations by mimicking Ajax’s message. “Protect baby from take,” she signed several times without realizing what she was signing.

“Would you cut that out?” I finally asked.

“Why?” she said just a little annoyed.

“It’s getting on my nerves, that’s all.”

“So don’t look at me,” she said.

"I thought you were afraid to talk?"

She pursed her lips together and shot me a death glare. She returned her attention to Nate.

We spent the next couple of hours in silence. I looked out the back door occasionally to see if Ajax would re-emerge, but he never did. Around mid afternoon, Wes returned, and he wasn't alone.

"Got something to show ya'," he said.

Lou (with Nate in his sling) and I followed Wes out the front of the store. Tied to a support column to the left were two horses.

"Meet Phil and Ryder," Wes said. They were beautiful, enormous animals, sturdy and tan with blonde manes and tails. The only difference between the two was that Phil had a white diamond patch between his eyes. "They's Belgian's. Good work horses."

Lou walked up and started to stroke Ryder's nose. I was a little more hesitant. "What are they for?" I asked.

"Your trip," Wes said. "Got 'em off Frank Greeley's farm 'bout six miles north of here."

"I can't ride a horse," I said.

"Ain't nothing to it, sides these horses ain't really for ridin'. They's for pulling." He walked over and patted Phil's back. Phil blew air through his nose and mouth and stomped one of his back hooves. "Easy now. Easy now," Wes said.

"Pulling what?"

Wes laughed. "A wagon, what else?"

"A wagon?"

"Greeley had a couple but they're in need of repair something awful. I figure we could high tail it on over to Archie's Seed and Feed tomorrow and see if there's one in better condition."

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I maintained my distance from the horses. “I don’t know the first thing about driving a wagon.”

Wes gave me a curious scowl. “The horses do all the work. You just nudge ‘em in the right direction and give ‘em a little slap with the reins. Off they go.”

I didn’t want to come out and say I was afraid, but I think he was beginning to get the idea. Horses, especially these, were big animals that always seemed to me to have minds of their own. I wasn’t all together confident that I would have any kind of control of them once I was behind the reins.

“Look,” Wes said. “It beats walkin’, and it’ll give poor ol’ Phil and Ryder something to do. They’s work horses who are just itchin’ to pull a wagon.”

I wasn’t thrilled with the idea, but I felt if I protested any further, Wes would start to get the idea that I was a sissy. I shrugged my shoulders and tried to look indifferent about his proposal. “Yeah, sure. I’ll give it a try.” I said it without an ounce of meaning.

“I’m workin’ on something else, too,” Wes said.

“What?” I asked.

“Can’t say just yet. Ain’t sure it’s going to work. I don’t want to get your hopes up.” He slapped Phil on the rump and headed for the grocery store. “Whatcha’ want for dinner?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“I’m in the mood for something different,” he said as he reached the entrance of the Kroger’s. “I’ll surprise ya’.” With that he disappeared inside.

A few minutes later he emerged with an armload of candy bars. “The candy man has arrived. Hope you like chocolate and caramel ‘cause it feels like a Snickers night tonight.” He stopped a few feet away from the horses and dropped the entire load of candy on the sidewalk. Dozens of Snickers bars in their

brown wrappers decorated the concrete walk. He reached in both pockets and pulled out two red Macintosh apples. "Here." He handed one to me and one to Lou. "Give these to Phil and Ryder. You best make sure they like you 'cause they're going to be your feet for the next 500 miles or so."

Lou and I took the apples from him and proceeded to feed the horses. Lou was more excited by it than I was, but I was surprised how gently Phil took the apple from my hand. I half expected him to gnaw my hand off in his attempt to grab the apple with his enormous teeth, but he very deftly snatched the fruit from my hand and gobbled it down.

Wes sat on the sidewalk and tore open a Snickers bar and started eating it. Lou and I joined him. We ate the chewy chocolate bars and watched the sun dip down behind the horizon.

"If it weren't for that fact the world was going to hell in a hand basket," Wes said. "This would be downright fun. Kind of nice not having to worry about money and such." He looked at us. "I guess you two wouldn't know anything about that. Paying bills is rough. I worked close to 60 hours a week trying to keep up with my mortgage, my credit card bills, my utilities, you name it. I pert near had to work my fingers to the bone tryin' to pay for it." He grabbed another candy bar and opened it.

"Don't you miss your family?" I asked. I was nibbling on my Snickers bar.

"My sister's the only one I had left. Everyone else passed. Louise was a special gal, but I didn't see much of her once she got married and started a family. Her husband didn't care much for me."

Kimball sat beside me and started whining. He was ready for his dinner. I got up and went back in the mattress store

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where I opened another pouch of dog food and fed him. As I was headed back out to join Wes and Lou, I happened to glance out the back door and saw Ajax sitting along the back of the lot. He was holding his blanket and doll and rocking back and forth. I moved to the back door and crouched down in the doorway.

He looked at me and pointed to himself and then hunched his shoulders with his hands balled in fists as he shook them back and forth. I didn't need the book to interpret what he was saying. "Me cold." I stood and quickly moved to my bed and picked up the book. Back at the door, I looked up the sign for "inside" and invited Ajax into the mattress store.

He grunted and moved his hands in front of himself as if he were protecting himself. According to the book it meant "afraid."

I made the sign for friend again.

He gave me the same grunt, waved his hand in front of his hand, and then motioned both hands down in front of him. "Stranger."

I repeated the friend sign.

He repeated the stranger sign.

I shook my head and pushed my hand out in front of me with my fingers together, "your," and then spread the fingers on my left hand and acted as if I were picking things from my fingers with the index finger and thumb of my right hand, "choice." "Your choice."

He waved his hand at me and turned away. I didn't need the book to tell me that meant leave me alone. I laughed and walked away.

Later as Lou, Wes, Nate, Kimball, and I lay in our respective beds (Lou's still being on the floor behind the adjustable bed), Ajax quietly entered and maneuvered through the maze of

mattresses. Kimball was the first to notice him. He sat up and watched the great ape with a keen interest. I smiled as Ajax hopped on a mattress next to mine. He sighed and collapsed with his back to me, still shaking from the cold.

Wes lifted his head up and chuckled. "I'll be damned," he said. "A go-rilla."

With that I could hear Lou start to giggle. I followed, and unless my mind was playing tricks on me, I even saw little Nate smile at the prospect of a 400-pound silverback lying in the bed next to us. Kimball jumped off my mattress and jumped up on Ajax's mattress, and as if the two had been best buddies forever, he lay next to the gorilla to help keep him warm.

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Lou was the first one awake the next morning. She woke me to let me know she was taking Nate from me to change and feed him. I was happy to let her do it. She was growing really attached to the kid, which worked out great for me. I hadn't changed a diaper since the first day I arrived. I looked over to my left and saw that Ajax and Kimball were still asleep. In fact, Ajax was snoring so loudly I'm surprised I was able to sleep at all.

I stood and stretched. My head ached from the over-consumption of candy bars the night before. It was a tasty indulgence that I deeply regretted at that moment.

I made my way to the bathroom in the back of the store and washed my face in the sink. When I walked back into the showroom, Wes was just waking up. He stretched, groaned, and yawned.

"I swear," he said. "I ain't never slept so good." He sat on the edge of the bed. "We best get movin' on to Archie's and

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see if we can find a wagon. I think I remember him having an old farmer's wagon." He stood and moved to the bathroom. "Just give me a minute to do my mornin' business." He stepped inside and closed the door.

I walked over to Lou. "I wish he would forget about those horses."

"They're beautiful."

"Yeah, well they're big and smelly, too." I looked out the window at them. "I don't know anything about taking care of a horse."

She smiled. "Sounds like you're afraid of them more than anything else."

"What do you know?" I snapped.

"I know we'll make it to Charleston a lot faster on a wagon pulled by horses than we will on foot." She had Nate cradled in her arm feeding him his formula.

I looked at her. "What do you mean 'we'?"

"We," she said. "Me, you, Nate, Kimball, and I'm guessing Ajax. I don't think Wes will come."

I looked at Kimball and Ajax sound asleep in their bed. "I got enough to do looking after Nate. I don't need you or... that gorilla making it any harder on me."

"I thought you told Ajax you were his friend." She gave me a look of disdain.

"I did, but..."

"But you didn't mean it?"

"No," I said. "I was just trying to get him to come out."

"Why?"

"Because..." I couldn't come up with an answer. "Just because. You're not coming and that's that."

I started to walk away when I heard her say, "Protect baby from take."

I turned to her. "What did you say?"

"Protect baby from take. That's what Ajax said to you yesterday."

Ajax stirred on his bed.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I looked it up in the book. I could tell you were lying yesterday, so I wanted to see for myself."

"You should learn to keep out of other people's property."

"That book's not your property," she said. "You took it from Dr. Fine."

"Dr. Fine doesn't exist any more, so I couldn't have taken it from her."

"Whatever," she said. "The point is Ajax knows something. He knows what our purpose is."

"What purpose?"

"The reason they didn't take us. It's Nate."

I looked at the baby in her arms. "Nate?"

"He's special."

"A special pain in the ass, maybe..."

"No, listen, he's our purpose. We have to protect him."

"There you go with that we stuff again..."

We heard the toilet flush and ended our conversation as Wes exited the bathroom. "I wouldn't go in there for a while," he said, smiling from ear to ear.

Ajax sat up and looked at Wes.

"Hello, Mr. Go-rilla," Wes said. "How 'bout we head on down to the Kroger's and get us a bunch of bananas."

Ajax grunted in agreement and climbed off the bed.

"Don't that beat everything," Wes said. "He really does understand what I'm saying." He laughed as he followed the lumbering ape out of the mattress store. Kimball took off after them. Wes turned to Lou and me. "Two weeks ago, I would've

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thought you were crazy if you told me that I was going to have breakfast with a go-rilla and a dog one day. But I'll be damned if that ain't just what I'm doing."

When he was out of earshot, I turned back to Lou. "You can't come."

"I can and I will," she said. "And Ajax is coming, too."

I sighed. "I don't see why you're so set on it."

She looked at me, tears forming in her eyes. "Because," she said. "It's my mission."

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What Wes didn't tell me about going to Archie's Seed and Feed is that in order to bring the wagon back with us, we would have to ride the horses, a prospect that did not sit well with me. I argued until I was blue in the face that I could walk the horse, but Wes didn't see how that made sense. He was right. It didn't make sense. It was apparent that my mode of transportation to Charleston was going to be a horse-drawn wagon. I might as well get used to the animals.

After several aborted attempts to mount Ryder, Wes finally was successful at setting me on top of the huge, snorting beast. My legs spread across the animal's back so wide that there were times I felt as if I were being pulled apart. Wes easily mounted Phil and we set out.

After a mile or so, my anxiety started to wane. Ryder was a gentle old horse that moved slowly and smoothly across the paved terrain. There were times I even thought I could detect just a hint of gratitude from the old horse. He seemed to enjoy having me on his back.

As we journeyed on, I couldn't help but look at my surroundings with a measured level of sadness. Manchester was dead. The buildings remained intact and the roads were

in good condition, but the heart of the little town had been ripped out. The cool October wind blew through its winding streets and alleys without notice. There was no one there to comment on the cold day or the coming holidays. It was a shell with nothing inside.

When we arrived at Archie's Seed and Feed the first thing I noticed was the odor. There was the sharp pungent smell of rot. The building was surrounded by it. We stepped inside and stood among the rows of sacks full of seed and feed. The smell grew stronger. Wes led me to the counter and stepped behind it. He looked on the floor and recoiled "Stay back," he said, trepidation in his voice. He covered his mouth with his hand and opened a drawer. He frantically rifled through it and pulled out a key. As quick as he could, he stepped from behind the counter and headed for the door.

I couldn't resist. I stepped around the counter and saw what made him draw back, the bloated, decaying body of an old man. The skin was gray turning brown. The eyes were milky and blank, and the belly looked as though it would pop. I fought the urge to retch and ran out of the building.

Once outside I placed my hands on my knees and doubled over. "What was that?" I said, fighting hyperventilation.

"Archie," he answered. He was breathing in deeply trying to flush out the odor of death. "I told you to stay back."

"I thought..." I was struggling to breathe. "They killed him."

"They didn't kill him," he said. "Old man probably dropped dead of a heart attack. They got no use for a dead man."

I stood up straight. We moved to the back of the building. Wes used the key he retrieved from the drawer to open up a large shed near a huge silo. He pulled back the double doors

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and, just as he had surmised, there was a medium-sized farm wagon. He smiled. "This will do. Old-timers used to use it to haul hay. Let's hook Phil and Ryder to it and get the hell out of here."

"What about..." I looked at the seed and feed store. "Shouldn't we bury him?"

"What the hell for?" Wes snapped.

"It doesn't seem right..."

"You want to go back in there and drag his old rotting body out back and bury him, that's fine by me, but you can count me out." Wes moved past me to fetch Phil and Ryder from the front of the store.

"I thought he was a friend of yours."

"He was a cranky old man that would sooner spit on me than say a kind word to me."

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing." He disappeared behind the front of the building.

I went into the shed and found a shovel hanging from the wall. As I was exiting the shed, Wes was approaching with the horses. He stopped and looked at me.

"You're going to do it, aren't ya'?"

I didn't say anything. I found a spot of soft dirt next to the silo and started digging. It wasn't long before Wes joined me with another shovel. "You're some kind of stubborn, kid," he said.

I smiled and we dug the hole together.

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By two o'clock in the afternoon, we were back at the shopping center. Phil and Ryder pulled the wagon like they'd been doing it their whole lives. We pulled up in front of the mattress store like we were cowboys in an old Western movie.

We jumped off the wagon and walked inside the store. Ajax and Kimball were sitting near the front. They were playing tug of war with Ajax's blanket. They had become fast friends.

Lou was sitting in the back with Nate in his sling around her shoulder. Her head was down and I could see that she was reading something. I didn't think much of it.

I had worked up a hunger burying Archie, so I retrieved a package of Oreos from my supply wagon and started chomping on as many as I could fit in my mouth. It took a while to notice that something wasn't quite right. I looked at the garden wagon. Something was out of place. I went through the wagon and gasped when I realized what that something was. Stevie's comic book was missing.

I stood in a panic. "Lou," I shouted. "Give that back!"

She looked up from Stevie's comic book. "They're called the Takers," she said, her eyes red from crying.

"Who's called the Takers?" Wes said entering the store. "And since when can you talk?"

I ran over to Lou and took the comic book from her. "Don't say their name."

"Where did you get that comic book?" she asked.

I ignored her question and ran back to the wagon and grabbed J.J. They were coming.

"What's got you all jumpy?" Wes asked. "And answer my question, little miss, since when can you talk?"

Kimball was the first to sense them. He let go of Ajax's blanket and ran to the front door. The fur on his back stood up straight. Ajax was next. He stood next to Kimball and let out a short series of hoots. With the hair on his shoulders and back puffed out, he looked twice as big.

Wes looked at the pair at the door and then me. "Damn."

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He pulled out his hunting knife. "I was beginning to think they was gone." His hand was trembling and sweat began to form on his brow. "Looks like I'm going to have to gut me another one of them suckers." He nervously chuckled.

"We should hide," I said.

Wes looked around the small mattress store. "Our choices are kind of limited here. Our best bet is to move down to the Kroger's."

"Shut up!" Lou whispered frantically. "They can hear us talk."

Wes and I looked at each other. She was right. I motioned for her to join me, and we all slowly made our way to the front door. Ajax and Kimball were firmly ensconced in their positions. It was hard to get their attention. "Kimball, go," I whispered. He darted out the door.

Ajax looked at me with a wide-eyed look. "Protect baby from take," he signed.

"I will," I whispered. I pointed to the Kroger's. "Hide." Still clutching his blanket, he turned back into the mattress store, ran to his bed, grabbed his doll and kissed it. He quickly moved past us and followed Kimball to the Kroger's.

"Don't that beat everything," Wes said.

Lou punched him in the stomach and shushed him.

Wes exited the mattress store first, followed by Lou with Nate in his sling, and then me. We were huddled together. J.J. was at the ready and Wes had a firm grip on his hunting knife. We stepped slowly, expecting the Takers to appear at any moment.

We were almost in a state of disbelief when we made it to the front door of the Kroger's without incident. Inside the grocery store, we scanned the area for our best vantage point.

"Frozen foods," Wes whispered leading the way. I grabbed

Lou's hand. She was shaking. I pulled her along, and we all ducked down behind a row of waist high open-air refrigerator units with hundreds of boxes of spoiled frozen foods stuffed inside them. Kimball paced with his tongue hanging from this mouth, and Ajax sat clinging tightly to his blanket and doll.

Minutes passed and nothing happened. We were almost ready to let ourselves believe we were out of danger when we heard the front door open and slam shut. Before we could tell ourselves it was the wind, we heard a low clicking chatter, like locusts swarming a field.

Kimball immediately crouched down. He crept forward ready to attack. Ajax moved in front of us. His hair was standing on end again. They were two warriors ready for battle.

Lou squeezed my hand so tightly I thought she might break my fingers. She was biting her lip to prevent herself from screaming, and rocking little Nate back and forth trying to keep him calm. I was too scared to breathe.

We followed their motion through the building by the chattering. They moved to the opposite end at first. It was obvious they knew we were in the store. It was just a matter of time before they found us. Slowly they made their way toward us. It was torture listening to them go up and down every aisle as they made their way to the frozen foods section. The chattering grew louder and louder.

Wes couldn't take it anymore. "I can't take that awful noise," he said, his voice low and shaky.

Lou suddenly screamed. They had found us. At the end of the aisle, there stood a Taker or a Greasywhopper, whichever name you prefer. I estimated it to be at least eight feet tall because it was taller than the shelves that housed the food. And just as Wes had said, it was covered in a thick coat of greasy black hair. Its eyes were a blazing red, and it had a short

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snout with a wide nose and mouth. Its ears were big and pointy and stood on top of its head like a wolf's. The chattering came from it clicking its rows of nail-sized teeth together. It had long fingernails on the ends of its long fingers that dangled from long arms.

Ajax beat his chest and bluff charged the monster. It retreated a step or two. Kimball joined Ajax and began to bark. The Taker backed away even more. They advanced some more on the creature and it gave a little more ground each time. As I was about to let out a sigh of relief, I turned to my left and saw another Taker standing just six feet away from us. I stood with both hands holding on tight to J.J. Wes followed my lead. The Taker spread his arms out and let out a screeching roar. Lou was paralyzed. I tapped her with my foot, "Stand up."

She didn't move.

"Lou," I said. "Stand up."

She looked at me, her mouth agape, tears freely falling down her cheek.

"We have a mission, remember," I said.

With that she attempted a smile and slowly stood up.

I looked at the other end of the aisle. Ajax and Kimball had the other Taker surrounded. The creature was more than double their combined sizes, but it retreated like it was under attack by a huge advancing army.

The Taker that stood just feet from us was another story. It crept toward us, opening and closing its mouth, gnashing its teeth. It was almost as if it were playing with us. Huddled together, we backed away. It skulked after us. Wes lunged forward with his knife, hitting nothing but air, and retreated.

"Get away from us, you Greasywhopper sucker!"

The Taker flailed its arms and chattered madly.

Behind us I heard the other Taker scream in horror. I turned

to see Kimball tearing a chunk of flesh from the monster's thigh. Ajax pounded the beast's back with his powerful fists. The Taker swung its arms wildly, but never laid a hand on either Ajax or Kimball. It was then that I realized the Taker couldn't see them.

Ajax grabbed the Taker's right leg and yanked it out from under him. The creature crashed to the ground, screaming for its life. Kimball dashed in and out on the fallen monster extracting a piece of flesh each time. It was as if Ajax and Kimball understood the Taker could not see them. They began to tear into it with reckless abandon.

Our Taker had no problem seeing us. It snapped its powerful jaws at Wes and managed to catch his shirt in its mouth. Wes thrust his knife forward and stuck the beast in the shoulder. It did not flinch. I swung J.J. and caught the Taker on the hip, leaving a gaping wound. Still the creature advanced on us.

Nate let out a gurgled cry. The Taker was momentarily distracted. It sniffed the air. Nate cried again. The creature leapt forward with a fury, tossing Wes aside and pushing me into the open-air freezer. Grease dripped from its protruding jowls as it bent down and sniffed Lou. It was looking for the baby. Its large hand ripped Lou up by her neck and held her out in front of it. It examined her with its red eyes.

A roar echoed throughout the store. Ajax and Kimball, having disposed of the other monster, were now focusing their attention on our Taker. The creature retreated. It was struck with a sudden rush of fear. Holding tightly to Lou, it backed away. Ajax stood and pounded his chest, pock-pock-pock. He was claiming his territory. The beast tried to run with Lou in tow, but it was tackled by Ajax. The Taker released Lou to fight off its attacker. Lou scrambled away. Within seconds

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Kimball had joined Ajax in the assault. A cacophony of growls, screams, and hoots filled the air.

I crawled out of the freezer and helped Lou to her feet. Wes lay dazed under a pile of 2 liter plastic bottles of soda that had collapsed on him when the Taker tossed him into the shelf. It wasn't long until Ajax and Kimball ceased their bloody assault on the creature. They stepped away as it lay there motionless, obviously dead.

I looked Lou and Nate over. Lou was a little shaken, but she would survive. Nate was howling away, but that was normal for him. I turned my attention to Wes. He was regaining his senses and trying to sit up. I helped him to his knees.

"Goodness knows," he said. "That was ugly."

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Not hardly, but I reckon I'll live." He breathed in deeply through his nose and blew air out through his mouth. "Whoa, sure don't want to do that again."

I looked at our troops. Ajax was pacing and breathing heavily. Kimball was sitting calmly, licking his paws. Lou had a pained look on her face. We were all battle-fatigued, but we were not beaten. I gathered up the others, and we headed out of the Kroger's.

Once we were back in the mattress store, I found Stevie's comic book, rolled it up, and stuffed it back in my supply wagon. "You shouldn't have gone through my stuff," I said to Lou.

"That book's about us," she said. She had Nate out of the sling and was cradling him in her arms. He was fussy and on the verge of having an all out crying session.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"It's about us," she insisted. "I saw my name. I saw Ajax. I saw the..."

“Don’t say their name,” I said.

“Just what in the hell is going on here?” Wes asked, irritated.

“Nothing. Lou just shouldn’t have gone through my things.”

“Make him show you the book,” Lou said.

“No,” I said emphatically.

“Let me see it,” Wes insisted.

“I can’t,” I answered.

“C’mon, boy.”

“No,” I shouted. “Don’t you see? They’re invisible until you see them.”

“That’s just plain crazy talk,” Wes said. He walked over to my supply wagon and started looking through it.

“No!” I grabbed his arm.

“Boy, you better let go of my arm.”

Kimball came to my defense. He didn’t growl at Wes, but he let him know with a look that he didn’t like Wes’s tone. Wes heeded the warning.

“Listen, we can’t look at the book. It brings them out. I wasn’t sure of that until just now, but if we read that book, they’ll come back, and my guess is they’ll be more of them this time.”

Wes sat down on a nearby mattress. “Let’s burn it then.”

“We can’t,” Lou said. “It’s about us. It might show us how to beat these things and bring back...” She stopped herself. She didn’t dare say it out loud.

“Bring back, what?” I asked.

“Our parents,” she said. “Maybe there’s a way.”

“You’re dreaming,” Wes said. “I say we burn it.” He reached for the wagon, but before he could lay a hand on it, Ajax pulled it away and grunted. “What the...” Wes leaned over farther,

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and Ajax pulled the wagon farther away. Wes leaned over even farther, but this time Ajax slapped his hand hard. Wes pulled back. "Ow!"

"Doesn't look like Ajax thinks we should burn it," I said.

Ajax snapped his forefinger and middle finger on his thumb. I scrambled to find his book. It lay underneath the bed. I hurriedly opened to the chapter on American Sign Language and found the sign, "No." He then held his palms up and wiggled his fingers. "No burn." He laid his hands out and mimicked the opening of a book. "No burn book." He made a V shape with his forefinger and middle finger and waved them over the palm of his other hand. I flipped through the pages, and could not believe my eyes when I found it.

"What'd he say?" Wes asked.

I hesitated. "He wants us to read the book."



## FOUR

Lookie, here," Wes said. "You do what you want, but I wouldn't listen to no go-rilla if I was you." He hoisted a case of beans up on the wagon. "You best burn that comic book."

With great difficulty, I lifted a box filled with trail mix bags onto the back of the farm wagon. "I don't know, something tells me I better listen to Ajax for now."

He turned and looked at Lou sitting inside the mattress store. She was making sure Nate was fed and changed before we took off for the interstate. The run-in with the Greasywhoppers the day before had convinced me I didn't want to make the trip by myself. "She say anything else about what she saw in that book?"

I shook my head. "She hasn't said much of anything since... You know."

"Yeah," he said. "I know." He looked over the well-stocked wagon. "Okay, you got food, first aid kits, blankets, sleeping bags, warm clothes, water. They'll be plenty of places to re-supply along the way."

"You think we'll run into anyone else out there?"

"Bound to," he said. "They're not all going to be friendly either, so take extra care."

"Sure you won't come with us?"

He rubbed his grizzled chin. "Working on something."

"You said that before," I said.

“Still working on it. I may be able to catch up with you.” He patted Ryder. “Don’t push the horses too hard. They’ll let you know when they’re ready to stop. Stick to the interstates, 24 to Chattanooga, 75 to Atlanta, 20 to Columbia, 26 to Charleston. It’s the long way, but it’s the safest route.”

“I know,” I said. “You’ve only told me about a hundred times.”

“It’s important.” Kimball chased Ajax down the sidewalk. They were playing like they didn’t have a care in the world. “You’re going to have a go-rilla, a dog, a baby, Lou, and two horses on this trip. Might as well call you Noah.”

“I guess we better get going.” I stepped toward the store. “Saddle up, Lou. We’re going to hit it.”

Lou picked up Nate and put him in his sling. She gathered up as many baby supplies as she could carry (even though we had plenty on the wagon) and exited the store. Kimball leapt onto the wagon with no problem. Ajax hesitated and then pulled his huge frame onto the back of the wagon.

I shook Wes’s hand. “Wish you were coming.”

“We’ll see each other again,” he said. “You can count on that.”

I wanted to cry, but I didn’t feel like it was the manly thing to do, so I didn’t.

Wes bent down on one knee in front of Lou. “Thanks for...” He started to cry. I guess he thought it was the manly thing to do. “For letting me call you Lou. It sure was nice to have my little sister around again.” He hugged her, careful not to smother Nate.

Lou began to bawl. All she could manage to say was, “I’m going to miss you.”

Wes picked her up and lifted her onto the wagon seat. I gave the supplies one last look and then walked around the

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wagon and climbed up on the other side of the seat. We both gave Wes one last goodbye, and then, with a flick of the reins, we were off on our journey.

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Lou and I didn't speak much that first day. We were scared to. Not because we were afraid the Greasywhoppers would hear us, but because we were afraid we would talk each other into turning back and staying with Wes for the rest of our lives. It's funny, if everything was normal, if my parents were still alive, and all I had to worry about was school and the Titans next game and anything else a thirteen-year-old boy spends his days thinking about, I would have never given Wes another thought. He would have been just some hick mechanic who needed a bath. I would never have taken the time to get to know him. I guess normal times aren't all they're cracked up to be.

We stopped at the Days Inn on top of Monteagle. The horses had pulled us up a long and winding mountain road, and they were badly in need of a rest. Luckily the motel still used real keys, not key cards. We located two keys to adjoining rooms on the first floor and set up camp for the night.

I unhitched Phil and Ryder and wiped them down with some towels from the motel. They were soaked in sweat. The temperature was somewhere in the 40s on top of the mountain. I was sure they were going to catch colds and die. Lou and I both had two double beds, so I ripped the covers from each of the extra beds and placed them over the horses. It wasn't much, but I hoped it would do.

Lou prepared a meal for everybody, formula for Nate, fruit cocktail for Ajax, Alpo's finest for Kimball, and water and canned beans for her and me. We had a small propane

camping grill, but we decided we would use it sparingly, so we ate the beans cold.

After dinner I got up and walked around the motel a few times. My butt was killing me from sitting on the badly cushioned wagon bench all day. I was hoping I would be able to walk out the kinks.

As I walked around the complex, I recalled my family's last vacation. Pop took us to Charlotte so we could watch the Titans play the Carolina Panthers. We stayed in a motel a lot like the Days Inn. It may have even been a Days Inn. I can't remember. What I do remember was having the time of my life. The Titans won in overtime, so that made it even better, but the funnest part was being with my Mom and Pop, watching a football game, eating hotdogs and popcorn. It wasn't much and it only lasted three days, but it was the best time I think I ever had in my life.

Back at the rooms, I checked in on Nate and Lou. They were fast asleep, as were Ajax and Kimball. I lay down on my bed, closed my eyes, and tried to will myself to dream about the Titans' overtime victory and the best vacation I ever had.

The next day Lou and I had some trail mix and cokes. The caffeine, sugar, and protein woke us up. Nate was his usual cranky self. Ajax and Kimball had awakened earlier and were outside exploring the grounds of the empty motel. Lou and I sat on her bed dreading the day of travel ahead of us.

"My butt's killing me," I said.

"Mine, too," Lou said, fighting with Nate to get him to take his bottle. "How much farther?"

"About 450 miles."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't suppose you got an uncle in Chattanooga." She chuckled.

"Hey, you wanted to come," I said.

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"I had to." She made a point not to look at me.

"Okay," I said. "Let's hear it. You've been looking at me like I've got a third eyeball and some horns ever since you looked through that comic book. What gives?"

She hesitated. "You were mean to him?"

"Who?" I asked even though I knew the answer.

"Stevie Dayton. The boy who wrote the comic book."

I cleared my throat and shook my head. "He put that in there?"

"He called you Ozzie the Titan." She pointed to the Titans sweatshirt I was wearing. "You made him do things."

"I wasn't the only one."

"Yeah, but you were the only one that he cared about."

I looked at her like she had just shot an arrow through my heart. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He liked you. He looked up to you."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because," she said, "he made you the hero of his comic book."

"Yeah, right," I said, feeling more and more ashamed the more she told me.

"It's true. You're this mean boy most of the time, but when there's an emergency you always save the day."

It was all a little overwhelming. I never felt more like a rat than I did sitting there listening to her tell me what Stevie Dayton had written about me. "You get any ideas how to beat these Greasywhoppers in that book?"

"I only got through the first couple of pages, but I got a pretty good idea what they want," she said.

I gave her a befuddled look. "What's that?"

She looked down at the wriggling baby in her arms. "Nate."

I furrowed my brow and almost laughed. "What in the name of Vince Lombardi would they want with that little crap factory?"

"Vince who?" she asked.

"It's something my Pop used to say. He's an old-timey football coach for the Green Bay Packers."

"The Green Bay what?"

"Never mind," I said. "Why do you think they want Nate?"

"I don't know why," she said. "But I do know when that Take... "She stopped herself from saying Taker. "When that Greasywhopper in Kroger's yesterday saw Nate, he didn't waste his time with you and Wes anymore. He went right for the baby."

"That doesn't mean anything," I said. "Maybe..." I regretted starting the sentence.

"Maybe, what?" She asked, insistently.

"Nothing," I said.

"Finish what you were going to say," she said.

"Maybe they like the taste of babies better." As soon as it came out of my mouth I regretted it. It was hateful and insensitive, but I feared it was as close to being the truth as anything else. Her jaw dropped and she looked at me with utter disdain.

"You think they eat people?"

I couldn't believe that thought had never crossed her mind. "What do you think they did with everybody?"

She struggled to come up with an answer that was as plausible as mine. We both saw the hunger and hate in the creature's eyes when it tried to get us in the grocery store. Its gnashing teeth, its vicious attack, how could anyone not think it wanted to eat us?

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"I don't know," she finally said. "But I do know where we can find out." She looked at me waiting for my protest.

"The comic book?" I stood up. "Not going to happen." I gathered up my empty Coke can and empty bag of trail mix.

"We have to read it," she said.

"As soon as we look at that book those things will be on top of us."

Carrying Nate, she followed me to the trashcan at the front of the room. "I got through four pages before they showed up yesterday. I could have read more if you hadn't interrupted me. It takes them a while to find us."

"So," I said.

"So, we read three or four pages at a time."

I walked into my room with her on my heels. "That's crazy. They'll find us."

"We can be ready for them," she said. "Ajax and Kimball will be there. You saw what they did to those things."

"We can't count on that happening again."

"They can't see animals. You saw how they were scared to death of Ajax and Kimball."

I turned to her. "It's too risky."

"But..."

"No. Now, if you bring it up again, I'm burning the comic book."

She huffed in anger. "Fine, but let me ask you something. Why did you bring that comic book with you?"

I couldn't answer the question. The truth is I didn't know why I'd brought the comic book. Something drew me to Stevie's house. Something told me I needed that comic book, but if I told her that, she would take that as a sign we should read it. And she may have been right, but I was not ready to

deal with the consequences. "Get your stuff together," I said. "I'll hitch up the horses."

\*\*\*

Coming down Monteagle was just as hard on Phil and Ryder as going up. At the bottom of the mountain, we stopped and let them rest. I jumped off the wagon and stretched my legs. I noticed Ajax signing something. He had his hands in fists together in front of him and then he burst them apart. I retrieved his book from the back of the wagon and searched for the sign.

"Explode?" I said.

He repeated the sign over and over again.

I signed, "What explode?"

He pointed to a billboard down the interstate. It was for a Crazy Jay's Fireworks in South Pittsburg, Tennessee. It depicted several fireworks exploding in midair. "Explode," he signed again.

I looked up the word fireworks; both index fingers shooting off like sparks. "Fireworks," I said as I signed it. I heard myself say the word and it suddenly occurred to me that he was right. Fireworks explode.

"Fireworks," I said absentmindedly.

"What?" Lou asked.

"Ajax just gave me an idea," I said. I signed, "Smart gorilla," to Ajax. He grinned and pounded his chest.

I got back on the wagon, and we headed for Crazy Jay's.

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South Pittsburg, Tennessee, was nestled next to the interstate with Crazy Jay's less than a mile off the exit. It was an enormous metal fabricated warehouse full of every kind

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of firework you can imagine. It all looked spectacular, and in theory a well-placed firecracker could provide us with some line of defense against the Greasywhoppers, but the question was, did they work? After all, Wes had said that they did something to the guns so they wouldn't fire. Had they done the same thing to the fireworks? There was only one way to find out. I found a box labeled "Warning: Explosives," full of fat M-98 firecrackers. I retrieved a lighter from behind the checkout counter and stepped outside. With Lou, Ajax, and Kimball looking on, I lit the firecracker and tossed it toward the road. Within seconds it let out an explosion that sent Ajax and Kimball into a state of panic, but it was just the result I wanted.

"Yes!" I screamed.

"What's the big deal?" Lou asked.

"Don't you see? We have a way to fight back."

She thought about it. Slowly a smile began to form on her face.

We spent the next hour carefully repacking the wagon and loading as many fireworks as we could. We stuck with mostly firecrackers like Hydro Crackers, Black Cats, 16,000 count Wolf Pack strips, Thunder Bombs, Silver Crackling Crackers, and virtually anything else we could light and throw. When we finished packing and discovered we had room for more, we went back for the bottle rockets. If it said "The Loudest Available by Law" on the package, we loaded it on the wagon.

Had it been different times, I would have allowed myself to enjoy the little shopping spree. My Pop and I used to have a blast shooting off fireworks on the 4th of July and New Year's. But these fireworks weren't for fun. They were going to be used to inflict harm.

As I lifted the last box of fireworks into the wagon, I saw

some movement under the highway overpass to our right. I quickly grabbed the horses' reins and hid the wagon on the other side of Crazy Jay's metal building. I instructed Lou to stay near the wagon and keep Ajax and Kimball occupied while I checked it out.

I hid myself from view behind signs and deserted parked cars as I moved in closer to the overpass. At about thirty feet, I could make out a half dozen people on bikes, four boys and two girls. I estimated the youngest to be a boy about eight or so and the oldest a girl that was 17 or 18. They were all smoking, even the youngest one. I could see by their ragged appearance they had traveled long and hard. Remembering Wes saying that I should take extra care when it came to dealing with strangers, I stealthily made my way back to Lou and the others without being spotted by the bicycle gang. They may have been perfectly fine, but I wasn't in the mood to find out. Instead, we waited until they got on their bikes and rode away. Unfortunately, they were headed in the same direction we were. We decided that we would spend the night in South Pittsburg and let them have a day's ride on us.

There were motels up and down the street, but we elected to spend the night at Crazy Jay's for no other reason than we were already there. Our two days of travel had really taken their toll on us. We wanted nothing more than to just stop, sit, and not move for the next several hours, and that's exactly what we did. We sat in the middle of Crazy Jay's and didn't make a sound. Exhaustion had set in on all of us. Ajax was the first to conk out. He curled up in a ball and started snoozing away. Kimball lay down next to him, let out a worn-out grunt, and fell fast asleep.

I was so tired I don't remember falling asleep, but I do remember waking up to the sounds of Phil and Ryder

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whinnying, snorting, and throwing a general fit. We all rose up. Our minds immediately kicked into defense mode, I grabbed J.J. and slowly moved toward the front door, Ajax and Kimball flanking me on the left and right. The horses whinnied some more, and I could hear voices. Lou picked up Nate and headed for the back of the warehouse.

Looking out the glass door, I could see what had the horses so upset. The bicycle gang was back, and they were trying to steal the horses and wagon. Relieved they weren't Greasywhoppers, I breathed easier. It did not occur to me that I still had a crisis on my hands. It only occurred to me that I would not have to face another one of those slobbering ghouls for the time being.

I looked at Ajax and then Kimball. "We can handle this," I said. With that I opened the door and stepped outside. Ajax and Kimball remained hidden behind me. "Can I help you?" I asked the thieves.

The older girl turned to me first. She was tall, skinny, and covered in road dirt. "That's all right," she said with a thick country accent. "We're just going to help ourselves."

A boy, about 15 and shorter than the girl, positioned himself in front of her. He was wearing a Hixon High School hat and a heavy flannel jacket. He held a thick, four-foot length of chain and twirled it around at his side. "You don't have a problem with that, do you?" he asked.

Another boy, maybe 13 years old, stood beside him. He was a chubby kid with a broken pair of glasses and a pair of Converse high tops that had seen their share of mud puddles. He laughed. "Nah, he ain't got no problem with that."

The youngest boy, a small kid wearing only a t-shirt and a baggy pair of blue jeans had hold of Phil and Ryder's reins. He looked petrified. A girl about his age stood next to him.

She wore a tattered dress that was at least two sizes too big for her. She held a handful of sugar cubes in her hand trying to get the horses to calm down. At the end of the parking lot near the bicycles, another boy stood in the darkness guarding their belongings.

“As a matter of fact, I do have a problem with that,” I said. I stepped out into the open. I motioned for Ajax and Kimball to stay put behind me.

The fifteen-year-old stepped forward. “We got us a hero, Reya.”

The older girl answered. “Show him what we do to heroes, Miles.”

The fifteen-year-old howled and stepped forward. He raised his hand high above his head and started swinging the chain. “Whatcha’ gonna do, boy?” he shouted with a look of unbridled insanity.

“Me?” I said calmly. “Nothing.”

The chubby thirteen-year-old chimed in. “Then how you going to stop us?”

I smiled. “I’m not.”

Reya snorted. “That’s what I thought.” Phil snorted and whinnied. “Tyrone, I told you to get them horses calmed down,” she said.

“I’m trying,” the small kid said.

“Let go of those horses, Tyrone,” I said. “They’re more likely to give you a swift kick on the noggin than calm down. They’re tired and fussy.”

“Shut up,” Miles said.

“Devlin, go help Valerie and Tyrone keep them horses under control,” Reya told the chubby kid.

“What about him?” Devlin asked, gesturing to me.

“He ain’t going to do nothing,” Miles said.

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“It’s not me you have to worry about,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” Reya said. “Then who do we have to worry about?”

I stepped back and motioned for Kimball and Ajax to come outside. They burst out the door and stood in front of me, Kimball with his teeth bared and tail bent down and Ajax beating his chest.

Valerie screamed and the horse reared up. Tyrone went tumbling to the ground. I ran over quickly and pulled him to safety. Reya stood like a statue while Miles and Devlin were already half way to the bikes.

I heard Devlin yell out, “Monster,” as his fat legs carried him to the end of the parking lot.

“Still want to help yourself to our horses?” I asked Reya.

She turned to me, the color drained from her face. “We didn’t mean nothing by it. We was just tired of riding our bikes.”

“Well,” I said, “I hope you’re not too tired to ride on out of here.”

She started to back away. “Valerie, Tyrone, come on, let’s get.”

Tyrone looked up at me. “I didn’t want to do it,” he said. “They made me.”

“I just wanted to give the horses some sugar,” Valerie said.

I looked at them and felt guilty that I had scared them half to death. “That’s alright.”

They followed Reya. She shifted her gaze back and forth from me to Ajax and Kimball. She was angry because she had been beaten.

The bicycle gang mounted their bikes and disappeared

into the night. I turned to Ajax and Kimball and smiled. "Man, did I pick the right friends," I said.

\*\*\*

Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep that night. Kimball and I took up residence in the wagon, while Ajax watched over Lou and Nate in Crazy Jay's all night. Besides being cold, I drove myself crazy by reacting to every little noise that I heard in the darkness. I was convinced Reya and her mob were going to return and finish what they had started.

But by daybreak, they had not reappeared. I wasted no time getting the horses hitched up and coaxing Lou, with Nate, and Ajax on the wagon. I wanted to hit the road and get as far way from South Pittsburg as I could.

I didn't see any signs of the bicycle gang until we crossed Nickajack Lake. Just over the bridge, I spotted Devlin trying to hide his pudgy frame behind a car parked at a truck stop just off the interstate. The others were nowhere in sight. I didn't like seeing him. It meant one of two things. We were either headed in the same direction by chance, or they were deliberately following us. Either way it increased our odds of having another run-in. I turned and looked at Ajax. As long as I had him with me, I felt relatively safe from Reya and her group. I wouldn't worry about them for now. I gave Phil and Ryder a tap with the reins, and they went from a walking pace to a slow trot.

"What's the hurry?" Lou asked.

"No hurry," I said. "Just seeing how fast this thing will go." I smiled.

She smiled back and opened the sling on her lap. Nate's red face peered out. He was in an unusually good mood. Lou goo-gooed and gaw-gawed him. She gently tapped his nose

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with the end of her finger. "I sure hope we're doing everything right," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"With Nate. I was around when my baby brother was born. I kind of watched my mom, but that was three years ago. I don't know if I'm doing everything right."

"You're doing great," I said.

She shrugged her shoulders and continued to play with Nate. "You ever notice Nate's ears?" she asked.

"His what?"

"His ears. They look kind of funny."

I leaned over and looked at the little guy. "They look okay," I said. "They're kind of small and funny shaped, but he's a baby. He'll grow out of it."

"They just look weird," she said.

"Yeah, well we've all got our burdens to bear."

"What?"

I looked at her and laughed. "It's something my Mom used to say when I complained about something. 'Yeah, well we've all got our burdens to bear, Osmond. Get over it,' she used to say."

"Osmond?" She laughed.

"Family name. Now you know the burden I have to bear."

"It's not so bad," she said still laughing.

"Yeah, right," I said. "How 'bout you? Any words of wisdom from your parents you want to share?"

"Words of wisdom?"

"I figure we might as well teach each other as much as we know. Doesn't look like anyone else is going to."

She furrowed her brow and tried to think of something she could pass along from her parents. "My parents were always too busy fighting to really teach us anything."

“They didn’t get along?”

“They hated each other. That’s pretty much why they got divorced. Although my Mom meeting my Stepdad didn’t really help things much.”

“How long ago?”

She thought about it. “About four years ago, I guess.”

“Tough?”

“Scary,” she said. “My parents fought a lot, but they were always around. It was weird not having my Dad around any more.”

“I guess that was your burden to bear,” I said.

She thought about it. “Until now.”

“Yeah, until now.”

Her eyes suddenly brightened. “My grandmother Kate used to tell us something that might count as words of wisdom. She was kind of a loon, but she usually meant well.”

“What was it?” I asked.

“She used to say that God put us on this planet to see the magic in everybody.”

I looked at her. “I like that.”

She smiled. “Me, too.”

Gray clouds started to form above us. A crack of thunder echoed in the distance. “Looks like a storm is headed our way,” I said. I saw a sign for a rest area ahead. “We should probably wait it out.” I looked behind us and saw no signs of the bicycle gang. Relieved I tapped Phil and Ryder again with the reins, and shouted, “Get up, boys.” They responded and barreled toward the rest stop.

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The rain came in torrents for hours. We (Lou, Nate, Kimball, Ajax and I) took shelter under one metal-canopied

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picnic area, while Phil, Ryder and the wagon rested under another. We ate lunch and relaxed as best we could. The sound of the heavy raindrops pounding the metal cover was deafening at times, but the noise somehow soothed little Nate into a peaceful slumber. Lou tucked him away in his sling and approached me.

“We should do it now,” she said.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Read the book?”

“What?”

“We’ve got the fireworks. We’re out in the open. We can see them coming from every direction.”

“No,” I said, my tone sharp and serious.

“Why not?” Her tone was just as resolute.

“Because we don’t know how many will come this time. I’m not saying you’re right, but let’s say they are after Nate, they’re liable to send a whole army to get him. We can’t do much against an army even if we do have Ajax and Kimball.”

“They won’t send an army,” she said.

“How do you know?”

She couldn’t answer.

Ajax heard our conversation. He knuckle walked through the rain to the other picnic area and climbed on the wagon. He rifled through some stuff until he found what he was looking for. He returned with the book written by Dr. Fine.

“What?” I signed.

He handed me the now wet and muddy book.

“You want to talk?”

He nodded. He formed his arms in a cradle and rocked back and forth.

“Baby,” I said.

He put his fingers together, thumbs up, palms in, and then pulled his hands into his body.

It meant, "Have."

He then held his hands like he was a soldier marching and carrying a rifle across his body. "Army."

"Baby have army," I said out loud. "I don't understand."

"Baby have army," he signed again.

I looked around the picnic area. "Us? We're not an army."

Ajax shook his head furiously. "Baby have take Army," he signed.

I looked at Lou and told her what he said. "That just doesn't make any sense."

She thought about it. "Ask him how he knows," she said.

I asked him and he replied, "Gorilla always know."

"How?"

He pulled down from his chin like he was pulling on a long beard and then he made his hand into the shape of the American Sign Language letter 'F' and moved it in steps ahead of his body. "Old future." He repeated the signs for "Gorilla always know."

I turned to Lou. "He's not making any sense."

"Maybe we're the ones not making any sense," she said. "I think he's telling us it's safe to read the comic book."

Ajax grinned and nodded. He signed, "No take army."

"I'm supposed to take an ape's word for it?" I said, frustrated. "Old future? Gorilla always know? I think you're nuts, Ajax."

He grinned wildly and shook his hands above his head as if to show me what crazy really was. When he calmed down, he signed, "Baby sentence tell."

"Well, now he's just lost it," I said. "'Baby sentence tell' doesn't make any sense at all."

"What do we have here?" a voice said. "Horse-boy is talkin' to the monkey." Reya and her gang had snuck up on us

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while we were talking. They lined up outside the picnic area. Devlin, Miles, and the kid who stood in the dark the night before held fast to the leashes of four pit bulls. The dogs had not barked but there was a raw bloodlust in their eyes that let everyone know they were killers.

Tyrone and Valerie stood back. They were soaked to the bone and shivering. It was obvious they did not want to be there.

Miles stepped forward with his pit bull. The chain link he had brandished as a weapon at Crazy Jay's was wrapped around his left hand and arm. "We got us some killer pits to take care of your stinkin' ape," he said proudly.

"Yeah," Devlin shouted. His pit bull pulled on its leash and nearly knocked him to the ground.

The other kid held on calmly to his two pit bulls. "These are fightin' dogs," he said. "They'll tear your gorilla and German shepherd apart." I could tell from his tone he was older, and he looked a lot like Reya. My guess was they were twins.

I looked at the four dogs. They were stout fierce animals, and they probably could kill Kimball with no problem. But I had my doubts they could put much more than a scratch on Ajax.

"All we want is the horses," Reya said.

"Get your own," I said.

"I'm going to snap your neck, horse-boy," Miles said.

"Seriously," I said, "there are probably hundreds of horses around here. Their owners certainly don't have any use for them anymore."

I could see Devlin scratch his head. "He's right. Why don't we just get our own?"

"Shut up," Reya screamed. "We're bandits. We take what we want. And we want your horses... and the gorilla, too."

Ajax stood on the table. He roared and pounded his chest.

“What are we going to do with a gorilla?” Devlin asked.

“Yeah, I don’t know about that,” Miles said.

“Shut up!” Reya was so mad she could hardly see straight.

“Tell you what,” I said. “You figure out what it is you want and come back when you get it all straightened out.”

Lou giggled, and Nate gurgled from his sling.

Reya stepped forward. “You got a baby in there?”

“What if we do?” I said.

She smiled. “We’ll be takin’ that, too.”

Now they were starting to piss me off. I signed to Ajax, “Protect baby.” He leapt forward with his fangs displayed. Kimball followed his friend into battle.

Devlin released his dog, which promptly ran as far away as it could. The other pit bulls cowered as the great ape approached on two legs, pounding his chest. They were fighting dogs, but they were also smart enough to know when they were outmatched. The remaining three dogs ripped free of their leashes and sprinted out of the area.

Reya and her gang stood dumbfounded. The rain drenched them as they struggled to come up with a dignified exit strategy. Ajax and Kimball stopped advancing, but they remained poised and ready to attack at a moment’s notice.

“You’re not very good bandits, are you?” I said.

“Call off your monkey,” Miles said, arms raised, afraid to move.

“He’s not a monkey. He’s an ape same as you and me.” I was starting to enjoy myself.

“Whatever,” Devlin said on the verge of tears. “Just don’t let him hurt us.”

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I thought about his request. “You’ve tried to steal my stuff twice now. Seems to me that it might make my life a whole lot easier to let him just rip you bandits to shreds. It would keep me from having to look over my shoulder all the time.”

“Mister,” Tyrone said. “Please don’t let him rip us to shreds. Me and Valerie didn’t want to come...”

Reya turned to him and screamed, “Shut up, you traitor!”

I stood and walked to the edge of the canopied picnic area. “Tell you what, I’ll let you go on your merry way on one condition.”

The kid whose name I didn’t know cleared his throat. “What’s that?”

“Tyrone and Valerie come with us.” I looked at the two little kids. “You wouldn’t mind that, would you?” They looked at each other and then me. They shook their heads.

Reya snarled. “No way. They’re part of our gang.”

“Ajax,” I said. “When I count to three you start ripping these bandits apart.” He looked at me and it was clear he had no idea what I was talking about, but Reya and her gang didn’t know that. “One.”

“C’mon,” Miles said, pleading now.

“Two.”

“Let him have the kids,” the older boy said to Reya.

Reya hesitated and then relented. “Okay, okay, you can have them.” She motioned to them to join us under the canopy.

I called Ajax and Kimball off and they quickly joined us under the shelter.

The remaining bandits turned to mount their bicycles when Reya stopped. She looked at me with pure hatred and said, “We’ll be back.” With that the four bicycle bandits got on their bikes and disappeared in the rain.

“You hungry?” I asked Tyrone and Valerie. They nodded enthusiastically. I ran to the wagon and got them some food, which they gobbled up like they hadn’t eaten in days.

“What do you reckon on doing with us?” Valerie asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“You ain’t going to feed us to your gorilla, are ya’?” Tyrone asked.

“He’s not my gorilla,” I said. “He eats what he wants.”

Lou shook her head. “Gorillas don’t eat people.”

Valerie and Tyrone sighed in a moment of unified relief. Their faces were dirty, and their clothes were drenched. They looked like refugees. Kimball sat next to them and started licking the mud from their faces.

“Your dog’s crazy, mister,” Tyrone said between giggles.

“Don’t call me mister,” I said. “I’m only 13.” I squatted down at the edge of the canopied picnic area and watched the rain pound the rest area grounds. “How’d you two end up with Reya and the others?”

“They found us in the hospital,” Valerie said.

“Hospital?”

“In Chattanooga,” Valerie said. “I had my tonsils out. See.” She opened her mouth wide to show me her tonsil-less throat. “Anyway, that’s where they found us.”

“What were you doing there, Tyrone?” I asked.

“Visiting my granddad. He had a brain tutor.”

“You mean ‘tumor’?” I said.

“I guess,” he said.

I stood and thought about my next question very carefully. I didn’t want to traumatize the little kids by making them relive what they may have seen the Takers do, but in the end my need to know trumped my concerns for their mental well being. “Do you know what happened to everybody else at the hospital?”

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They thought about it. The pained expressions on their faces verified they were drudging up some unwanted memories.

“The monsters got ‘em,” Tyrone said.

“Swallowed ‘em up,” Valerie said.

“How did you two get away?” Lou asked.

Valerie hesitated. She seemed to be studying Lou’s question carefully, as if she was afraid that her answer might sound crazy. “An angel helped us.”

Tyrone rolled his eyes, “He weren’t no angel. He was the janitor.”

“He was too an angel. I seen him fly.” Valerie seemed hurt by Tyrone’s protest.

Tyrone huffed. “How many angels you know named Stevie?”

The name struck me like a fist to the gut. “What did you say his name was?”

“Stevie,” he said.

I avoided looking at Lou, but I could feel her looking at me. I knew what she was thinking. But she was wrong. She had to be. Stevie was a fairly common name. Just because this janitor was named Stevie doesn’t mean he was Stevie Dayton. Besides it was impossible. Stevie Dayton was dead. I thought about that word “impossible” and how little meaning it had any more.

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The rain continued into the evening. By the time it stopped it was too late to carry on with our travels, so we settled into the rest area for the night. The plan was that Lou would stand watch the first half of the night and I would take over the latter half. Although I could have volunteered to stand watch the

whole night because there was very little chance I was going to get any sleep. And I wish it were because I was concerned about the bicycle bandits returning.

The truth of the matter is that as soon as the sun fell, I could feel the presence of the Takers slithering in the darkness. They were in the picnic area. They were in the restrooms. They were on the highway. They were everywhere, waiting to be noticed, to hear their name. I could feel their desperation. The wind carried the chattering of their teeth. Looking back over my life, I know now they had always been there. They were that unexplained noise whenever I was left home alone, that misplaced shadow on the wall of my bedroom that I would notice just as I was about to drift asleep. They were the disembodied cool breeze that caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand up straight. They had always been around, and they were harmless until somebody said their name, or until you read Stevie's comic book.

We heard the bathroom doors slam around midnight. The Takers' desperation had turned into frustration. They could smell us, but they couldn't find us until we found them.

The night air was cold. Valerie and Tyrone were buried under mounds of blankets. I couldn't see their faces, but I was sure they were awake, praying for God to make the monsters go away. Lou's posture told me all I needed to know about her state of mind. She held J.J. firmly with one hand and Nate's sling with the other. She was ready to fight to the death. Kimball and Ajax sat attentive but calm. They were soldiers waiting for their orders.

"The Music City Miracle," I said. "January 8, 2001. The Titans played the Buffalo Bills in the AFC wild-card playoff game." This drew a strange gaze from Lou. Tyrone and Valerie peeked out from under their blankets. "The Bills had just kicked

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a 41-yard field goal to go ahead of the Titans, 16 to 15. There were only 16 seconds left on the clock. Everyone in the Titans hometown stadium thought the game was over. I know. I was there with my Pop. I thought for sure that was the end for the Titans." All eyes were on me. "But what none of us knew was that the Titans had been practicing a play all year called Home Run Throwback. It was made just for situations like they were facing, down by less than a touchdown with just seconds left on the clock. The Bills were expected to squib kick on the kick-off to keep it out of the hands of the Titans return men." I got more and more excited as I relived the memory. "The Titans were waiting for them. The key to the play is to get the ball to Frank Wycheck, the Titans tight end. He would then take the ball and backwards pass it to Derrick Mason, their best return man. Mason would then follow a wall of blockers down the field and either get them into field goal range or take it all the way in for a touchdown. The only problem was Derrick Mason had left the game with a concussion. So they called on Kevin Dyson to take his place. Dyson had never run the play in practice. Well, what do you think happened?" I asked.

Tyrone was sitting up on his elbows now. "What?"

"The play worked to perfection," I said. "Steve Christie with the Bills kicked off to Lorenzo Neal with the Titans. Neal took the ball and handed it off to Wycheck on the 25-yard line. Wycheck lateraled the ball across the field to Dyson who ran 75 yards for the game-winning touchdown. Have you ever heard 67,000 fans screaming their heads off?" I was standing now. The elation of the memory swirled all through my body. "It was the most incredible thing I have ever seen."

"Not if you ask my granddad," Lou said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's a Bills fan. He says the lateral was an illegal forward

pass.” She smiled. “I don’t know what that is, but he hates the Titans because of it.”

“Your granddad’s nuts,” I said. “It was legal all the way.” Neither one of us noticed that we had used the present tense in referring to her grandfather. We were so caught up in the story that we talked as if everything was normal, as if we were old friends back home talking about one of the greatest moments in NFL history.

Something else happened as I told the story. The Takers had gone away because we refused to notice them. I had successfully turned their frustration into futility. They had moved back into the shadows and seeped into the surrounding nothingness.

## FIVE

Riding into Chattanooga the next morning, we passed a billboard for a car dealership that had the word “Takers” spray-painted over it. We tried not to focus on it, and to a certain extent we were successful. But seeing the word written in such a public place made me curious. Was that how they did it? They write the name in enough public places so people see it, eventually read it out loud, maybe catch the eye of a TV station or a newspaper. They take pictures and run it as a news item. Suddenly the word “Takers” is in every home in every community. Hell, if you write it on the side of Air Force One or the White House it becomes national news. Pretty soon everyone in the whole country – the whole world for that matter – is seeing it, hearing it, and saying it. Who would have thought that something as innocuous as vandalism would cause the end of the world?

Under the shadow of Lookout Mountain, we passed a small one-foot by one-foot blue sign with a white letter “H” on it – Hospital. The details of Tyrone and Valerie’s story came rushing back. An angel named Stevie saved them. Logic told me that it wasn’t the same Stevie, but my mother once told me there is no such thing as a coincidence. A billboard for the hospital was a half mile ahead of us. Giant smiling doctors, nurses, and staff looked down on I-24 and welcomed the infirm to pay them a visit while they were in Chattanooga. A closer look at one of the staff members in the advertisement made

me do a double take. A man, in a gray uniform and holding a mop, looked very similar to Stevie Dayton. I pulled back on the horses' reins and stopped. I stared at the billboard. Valerie and Tyrone peered from the back of the wagon.

"Is that your angel?" I said pointing to the billboard.

"Yep," Valerie said.

"That's him," Tyrone added. "Cept he ain't no angel. He's a janitor. See, he's holdin' a mop."

"So," Valerie said a little perturbed. "Angels can mop."

"What's wrong?" Lou asked.

I flicked Phil and Ryder with the reins. "Nothing a trip to the hospital won't fix."

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The hospital was not far off the exit, so it wasn't that difficult to find. The parking lot was full of cars. If I hadn't known better I would have thought that it was bustling with people inside, scurrying from floor to floor, visiting loved ones, or administering care to the sick.

Once inside though, it became apparent that the eight-story building was abandoned by the crowds long ago. Lou, Nate, and Ajax stayed with the wagon while Tyrone, Valerie, Kimball, and I entered the darkened hallways of the hospital. I held J.J. in one hand and a flashlight in the other. I also stuffed a dozen or so firecrackers in my pockets. I didn't know what I was going to find, but I wanted to be prepared if it was unfriendly.

Tyrone and Valerie guided me through the maze of hallways to the stairs at the back of the building. I opened the door. It was a pitch dark stairwell. I shined the light around revealing the jagged pattern of a seemingly endless number of zigzagging stairs.

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“He took us down there,” Tyrone said.

I shined the light to the set of stairs leading down. “Of course he did,” I said sarcastically.

We stepped inside the stairwell and slowly made our way down three flights of stairs to the landing. The sign above the heavy steel door said, “Basement: Records, Morgue, Boiler Room, Authorized Personnel Only.” I swallowed hard. “Morgue,” I whispered.

I pulled on the door with all my strength to get it open. Once we were on the other side, the heavy door closed with a thud behind us. The putrid smell of rot, the same as I encountered at Archie’s Seed and Feed, only ten times stronger, slapped us in the face as we stood in the wide cold hallway. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that the smell was coming from the morgue.

Valerie pointed at the morgue door. “That’s where the angel hid us.”

“It’s full of...” Tyrone started, but I stopped him.

“I know what’s in there,” I said. “There’s no need to talk about it.”

As I stood there staring at the door, I could hear Wes’s voice in the back of my head saying, “They ain’t got no use for dead people.”

Suddenly I heard a tap, followed by another and another. Then a cool breeze raced through the passageway. I turned the flashlight in the direction of the breeze and nearly collapsed to the floor in fright as I saw the door to the boiler room closing. Tyrone and Valerie were clinging tightly to me. Kimball was sniffing the ground near the door.

“Let’s go,” Tyrone said. “Let’s get out of here.”

I should have listened to him, but instead I moved to the boiler room door, took a deep breath, and opened it. “Hello,” I

said hoping for a friendly salutation back. I heard nothing but a quick succession of footsteps traveling deep into the bowels of the boiler room. Kimball barked. The bark echoed through the empty chamber, bouncing off the dead machinery that once powered the huge hospital.

“Stevie!” I yelled.

The footsteps stopped.

“Stevie, I want to talk to you.”

“Who dat?” asked a voice from the darkness.

“We’re friends.”

“Stevie fends gone,” the voice said. “Monstas take away.”

“We’re new friends.” There was a long silence. “I have Valerie and Tyrone with me. They said you helped them hide from the monsters.”

“Valley?” Stevie said. “Ty-lone?”

“Say something,” I said to Valerie and Tyrone. They were still holding me tightly.

“Hey, Stevie,” Tyrone said. “What’s up?”

“You got away,” Stevie said with obvious glee.

“Me, too,” Valerie said.

“Valley,” Stevie said. “I told you the monstas wouldn’t find you in the mo’ga.”

I pinpointed the direction of his voice and shined the light towards him. I saw Kimball saunter up to a pair of feet sticking out from behind a metal construct of some kind. His tail began to wag.

“Hello, doggy,” I heard Stevie say. His head appeared out of hiding as he bent down to pet Kimball. He turned his face toward the light. “I like doggies.”

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After some gentle coaxing we convinced Stevie to come

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with us upstairs. He agreed but he refused to leave the hospital. Instead he took us to the fifth floor to the hospital's chapel. A stained glass window provided a source of light that ranged in colors from yellow to purple as we sat on the front pew and talked.

I learned his name was Stevie Spangler. He had a flat facial profile, a depressed nasal bridge, and a small nose. His eyes had an upward slant. He obviously looked similar to Stevie Dayton because they both had Down syndrome.

"Are you here by yourself, Stevie?" I asked.

"No, I'm with you, silly," he said. This drew a laugh from Tyrone and Valerie.

"No, I mean, were you here by yourself before we came?"

"Yes," he said. "Eveebodys gone."

"Have you left the hospital since they went away?"

"No, monstas out they." He pointed toward the outside world.

"How do you know?"

"I hea' dem."

"You hear them? The monsters?"

He nodded his head. "They lookin' fo sto-weetellas"

"Sto-weetellas?"

"Sto-weetellas," he repeated.

I didn't understand. Valerie tugged on my shirt and whispered, "Storytellers."

"Storytellers?" I said, perplexed.

Stevie nodded.

"What storytellers?"

Stevie shrugged his shoulders. "All of dem."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"I he' dem."

"You hear them? They talk?"

“No,” he said. “They say it to my bain.” He pointed to his head.

“Brain? They’re telepathic?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

I rubbed my chin. “What do they say to your brain?”

He thought about the question. “They say they look fo seven.”

“Seven what?”

“Sto-weetellas.”

“Are you a Storyteller? Is that why you can hear them?”

He looked at me as if I had just asked the most asinine question ever. “No, no, no.” He giggled a little. “I’m the janito.”

“Why do they want these Storytellers?”

“To finish the sto-wee.” He gave me the same perplexed look. I could see the wheels turning in his head. He was trying to assess exactly how stupid I was.

A thunderous crash came from outside the chapel. I jumped to my feet. Valerie and Tyrone stood behind me. Stevie ducked under the pew and curled up in the fetal position.

“They don’t want me to say anymo’,” he said. “They don’t want me to say anymo’.” He repeated it over and over again until it became a fast rhythmic chant.

I had both hands on J.J. Tyrone, Valerie, and I were backing away, scanning every inch of the chapel, looking for the Takers to materialize out of thin air. Kimball paced excitedly in the back of the room.

“No!” Stevie screamed. “Don’t make me do it!”

“Stevie, calm down,” I said. “Don’t let them get in your head.”

“They want me to say they name,” he said.

“Don’t do it, Stevie. Don’t do it.”

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He stood. His face was red. I could see his temples pulsing. His hands were covering his ears. Tears streamed down his cheek. "Beway," he gurgled. His tongue was turning purple. He was fighting it, but he was losing. "Beway..."

I took Valerie's hand. "Tyrone grab on to Valerie." He did as requested. I pulled them around the side of the pews to the back of the chapel. We raced for the door.

"Beway the Takas!" Stevie shouted.

With that his body relaxed, and his shoulders slumped. He turned to us, sopping wet from his battle. "Won," he said.

"Won?" I said. "You won?"

He shook his head and screamed, "Won!"

"Run." Tyrone pulled on my hand. "He said, run."

The words barely had time to leave Tyrone's mouth when the door to the chapel came flying open, hitting Kimball and knocking him across the room. A Taker entered, its teeth chattering. This one was bigger than the ones we had encountered in the Kroger's. It stooped over to avoid hitting the ceiling. It let out a roar that shook the building. The Taker stomped toward Stevie.

"Won! Save the sto-weetellas!" Stevie picked up a hymnal from the pew and threw it at the Taker. The monster caught the fat book in its mouth and thrashed its head back and forth.

I slid against the back wall with Tyrone and Valerie in tow. The Taker was fixated on Stevie. The door had been knocked from its bottom hinge. It hung precariously from the top hinge. I pushed it easily and peered up and down the hallway. It was clear. I pulled Tyrone and Valerie in front of me and sent them into the hallway. "Kimball," I said. I had not noticed until that moment that he had not moved since he was hit by the door and sent flying across the room.

I handed J.J. to Tyrone “Go down to the wagon and tell Lou to get out of here.”

“But what about you?” he asked.

“I’ll catch up. Just go. Get Valerie down to the wagon and get out of here.”

He brandished the heavy sword with some difficulty and ran towards the exit with Valerie.

I stepped away from the battered doorway and made my way toward Kimball. The Taker was nearly on top of Stevie. Stevie was screaming and throwing every hymnal and Bible he could get his hands on as he backed away from the creature. I bent to the ground and scooped Kimball up in my arms. He had regained some of his weight since I first saw him a few days ago, so the task of carrying him took every bit of strength I had. I stood and heard the horrible gurgled scream of Stevie. The Taker had him half way in his mouth. Stevie’s legs kicked and flailed about as the monster began to swallow him whole.

My mind raced. I had to do something to help him. I put Kimball down and quickly pulled a lighter and M-98 firecracker out of my pocket. I fumbled with the lighter. I flicked the lighter over and over again unable to get it lit. Finally, as my thumb throbbed from my unsuccessful attempts, the flame appeared. With a shaky right hand, I lit the firecracker and prepared to throw it at the Taker, but much to my dismay, Stevie was gone and the creature had turned his focus on me. He stepped toward me, and I could see his overstuffed stomach involuntarily expand and contract. Stevie was still alive. He was fighting the Taker from within.

I threw the firecracker. It exploded near the creature’s shoulder. It stopped momentarily. An open wound smoked on the Taker’s shoulder. The monster shrugged it off and continued its pursuit of me. I lit a second firecracker and tossed it in the

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Taker's mouth. The M-98 exploded. Two teeth shot out of the monster's mouth, but it still pressed forward. I tossed a third and fourth firecracker, each time striking a direct hit on the creature and slowing its advance. But I could not stop it. I had a fifth M-98 lit when its huge hands wrapped around my neck. It lifted me off the ground with its mouth open and its remaining teeth folded in. It was going to swallow me. Its slimy tongue licked my face. I took the lit firecracker and stuffed it down its throat, and then grabbed the Taker's snout and tried with all my might to push myself away from its mouth. I heard a muffled pop. The monster dropped me. It grasped its throat with both hands.

The Taker stumbled back and fell over a row of pews. I took the opportunity to pick up Kimball and run to the door. Before I exited, I looked back at the fallen creature. It was still alive, but in pain. It rolled over on its hands and knees, coughing and wheezing. I wanted to go back and see if I could help Stevie, but I convinced myself that he was dead now, churning in the monster's stomach. I leapt through the broken door and headed towards the exit with Kimball who was now beginning to stir.

I threw my shoulder into the stairwell door and was surprised to see Ajax and Lou standing on the other side. "What are you doing here?" I asked short of breath.

"We came to help."

The Taker stumbled out of the chapel. It was still grasping its throat with one hand. It spotted me by the stairwell exit and headed towards me.

"Well you can start by getting out of the way!"

Lou saw the creature and quickly complied. We reached the third floor before we heard the fifth floor stairwell door crash open. The Taker was slowing. We heard it let out a

strained roar. It sounded as if it were dying. I had mortally wounded it.

When we reached the first floor, the Taker was finished. The unmistakable sounds of it tumbling down a flight of steps echoed through the stairwell.

Kimball groaned and lifted his head. He began to squirm making it impossible for me to continue to hold onto him. I set him down and he stood on wobbly legs. Ajax gently patted his old pal on the back and hooted.

We opened the door to the hallway and stepped out into the corridor. I collapsed to the floor. The slime from the Taker's hand was still on my neck. I frantically tried to wipe it off.

"You all right?" Lou asked.

"No," I said. "Didn't Tyrone tell you to leave?"

"Yep," she said.

"So, why didn't you?"

"I don't know how to drive that stupid wagon," she said. "Besides I couldn't just leave you."

"Yeah, well next time do what I say." I stood. The emergency room sign caught my eye.

"You're not the boss of me," Lou said.

I ignored her and headed for the emergency room.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

I didn't answer. I continued down the hallway.

"We should get back to the wagon," she said. "I left the baby with Tyrone and Valerie."

"Go ahead. I'll be out in a second." I opened the emergency room door and disappeared inside. All that I could think about was seeing the Taker swallow Stevie whole. The poor guy was eaten alive. I wondered to myself if there was a chance, however small, that he was still alive in that creature's belly. I stepped behind a curtained partition and saw a silver tray of

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instruments, just what I was looking for. I grabbed the scalpel and turned to see Lou staring at me dumbfounded.

“What are you going to do with that?” she asked.

“I thought you were going out to the wagon.”

“I sent Ajax and Kimball. What are you going to do?”

I held the scalpel up. “I don’t know if you want to see this.”

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Thankfully the Taker had fallen on its back. Its extended belly was easily accessible.

“This one is bigger than the other two,” Lou said.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said kneeling down beside it. I placed the scalpel on the monster’s stomach and hesitated. “You might want to look the other way,” I warned. Lou didn’t respond. She stared tight-lipped at the monster. She was determined to watch me cut it open. I silently counted to three and then lightly moved the blade across the Taker’s stomach. Blood oozed along the expanding slit. A rush of hot steamy air rose out of the opening that carried with it the foul odor of spoiled milk. When I had made about a two-foot cut, I put the scalpel down. I rubbed my hands together, said a quick prayer and then pulled back the thick leathery skin. A layer of fat obstructed my view so I cut it away. Once I sliced past the fat, I stared at the insides of the creature in amazement. There was nothing there, no Stevie, no stomach, no bones, nothing. It was literally a black hole.

“What do you make of that?” Lou said sounding a little relieved not to find the partially digested body of Stevie Spangler inside.

“I don’t know.” I stuck my hand inside. I slowly pushed it past the fat and into the black hole. I was in it up to my wrist and then my elbow and then my shoulder.

“Gross,” Lou finally said.

I pulled my arm out, and except for a little bit of slime from the layers of fat, it was clean. “There’s nothing there I said.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” she asked.

“Where’d Stevie go?”

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We were in Dalton, Georgia when it started to rain again. The closest shelter we could find was a carpet outlet warehouse. The loading dock was open and I was able to drive the wagon up the ramp and inside the enormous building. Gigantic rolls of carpet stacked ten feet high were placed throughout the entire building. Dozens of carpet manufacturers’ signs hung from the ceiling. It was a carpet lover’s paradise.

We all found a spot and attempted to relax. The morning at the hospital left us all a little worse for the wear. We were battle fatigued. Kimball was doing better, but he was still a little woozy. Ajax tried to coax him into a rough-and-tumble play session, but Kimball snapped at him and lay down on a stack of throw rugs.

I sat propped up against a roll of green carpet and flipped through Dr. Fine’s book. My conversation with Ajax the day before kept replaying in my head. He had said something about “Gorilla’s always know,” and “Old future.” And there was something nonsensical he said about “Sentence tell.” I flipped through the pages of the book and stopped when I saw a series of photos of Ajax’s artwork. Most of it was just handprints and paint splatters, but some of it could pass for real art, I suppose. A lot of it looked pretty dreary. He painted a few that looked like flames. But there was one in particular that drew my attention, hidden in globs of black and gray paint, I could almost detect

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glowing red eyes peering out. I was stunned when I read the caption, "Ajax calls this one 'Old Future,' though no one on the staff can ascertain what he means." I flipped the page. There was a picture of Dr. Fine sitting on the floor with Ajax. He looks to be making the sign for sentence. The caption read, "Ajax worries about the storytellers again." Storytellers! I felt as if I would explode with anticipation. Ajax wasn't signing, "Sentence tell." He was signing "Storyteller." More specifically he was saying, "Baby Storyteller."

On the next page of the book, there was a brief explanation of Ajax's obsession with the storytellers. Dr. Fine wrote:

"To those disbelievers who think gorillas aren't capable of cognitive thought, that they lack imagination or the ability to invent fantasy for the sake of entertainment, I direct you to Ajax's Storytellers. On most nights, Ajax will regale visitors with fantastic stories of the end of the world. He tells vivid tales of grotesque creatures from what he calls 'Imagined Lands,' that seek out eight storytellers that will give them 'Permanent Blood.' He speaks of warrior heroes that sacrifice their lives to protect the storytellers. It is a classic tale of good versus evil that only lacks an ending."

I read the passage several times. Is it possible that a gorilla knew that the end of the world was coming? That he knew about the Takers and their origins? "Possible," I thought. I had just seen a man swallowed by a creature that did not exist in the known world, and I was asking if something was possible. It was obvious that anything was possible. It was apparent that what he meant by "All gorillas know," and "Old future," was that what was happening to the world right now with the

Takers and the Storytellers is old gorilla folklore. That it is a precognitive story of the world shared by all gorillas. "Old future." They've always known this would happen.

I called out to Ajax. He knuckle-walked his way over to me and sat down. "Tell me about the old future," I said.

He signed, "Old future now."

"Who are the storytellers?"

"Eight," he signed.

I told him Stevie Spangler had said there were seven.

"Seven now," he signed.

Seven now? I thought about his answer. The comic book. Stevie Dayton was one of the Storytellers, but now he was dead. Eight had become seven. I asked Ajax if this is what happened.

He nodded and signed, "seven now," again.

"Where are the other Storytellers?"

He signed, "All world," and "baby Storyteller."

"Baby Storyteller?" I looked at Lou who was feeding Nate. I turned back to Ajax. "Our baby is a Storyteller?"

He grinned and nodded. "Protect baby," he signed.

I remembered Stevie Spangler yelling "Save the Stoweetellas," as he was backing away from the Taker. It was all too big a responsibility for me to bear. I was just a kid. We were all just kids. How could we be expected to protect Nate from the Takers? We were outmatched in every way.

He pointed to me and made the signs for "war" and "man".

"War man?" I asked.

He repeated the sign, and pointed to Lou and then Kimball. "War man."

I flipped through the book to see if I could find a reference

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for this. I did. It was a phrase he used frequently. To Ajax “War man,” meant “warrior.”

He continued. “War man find keep. Protect baby.”

I tried to tell him I wasn’t a warrior, but he responded that I had always been a warrior. “I’m just a dumb kid,” I said. “I’ve never been in a fight in my life.”

He huffed and repeated, “War man find keep.” He was getting frustrated with me.

“What’s a keep,” I asked.

“Keep,” he signed emphatically. “Keep protect Storytellers. Keep help remove take. Keep good.”

He was getting more and more frustrated with me and as a result his signing was getting sloppy and his phrasing was off. I tried to calm him by assuring him that I understood, but he knew I was lying. He let out a pained groan and lurched away. All the while I’m sure he was thinking to himself that I was possibly the dumbest human he had ever encountered.

I leaned back against the roll of carpet and closed my eyes. I was angry. Not at Ajax, but at the situation. I didn’t want to be a warrior. I wanted to be a kid. I wanted to go to Titans games. I wanted to spend my time coming up with creative excuses for not raking the yard.

Nate started to get restless and cried out. Lou quickly tended to him. He’s not my responsibility I told myself. I don’t care what Mrs. Chalmers said. If the Takers wanted him, they could have him. I wasn’t going to risk my life for something that does nothing more than poop, sleep, and vomit. I had had it.

I opened my eyes to find Lou standing over me with Nate. “What?” I said unintentionally sharp.

“I have to...” she hesitated.

“You have to what?”

"I have to... You know?" She was shifting from one leg to the other.

"No, I don't know," I said, not really in the mood to play a guessing game.

"Go to the bathroom," she whispered.

"Oh," I said trying not to smile. "So."

"So, can you watch Nate?"

I looked at the wriggling little baby in her arms. "Get Tyrone and Valerie to do it."

She turned and watched the two little kids chasing each other around the warehouse. They looked as if they were playing tag. "They're not old enough to watch a baby."

"I'm busy," I said.

"Doing what?"

"None of your business."

She bent down and put Nate on my lap. "You're watching him," she said. "And that's that." She stood and sped away before I could protest.

"Hey," I shouted. But she never looked back. I looked down at Nate. His eyes were open wider now than when I first saw him on the floor of the attic in his house. He seemed to be more aware. I looked at his belly and the little brown crusty knob had disappeared. He had a normal pink belly button. His tiny hand reached out for me and grabbed my Titans sweatshirt. "You like the Titans?" I asked, not expecting an answer. "Of course you do, we're from the same neighborhood." I looked at his ears. "You know, your ears do look kind of funny, but I wouldn't let that get you down, kid." I looked around to see if anybody could hear me talking to the baby. I didn't want to look foolish. I was in the clear so I continued my conversation. "I don't think it's fair, Nate. I'm only 13. I can't protect you. Have you seen those things that are after

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you? They're huge and ugly and... hungry. What's a kid like me supposed to do against something like that?" Nate looked up at me and smiled. "Hey, that's the first time I've seen you smile." I reached in my back pocket and pulled out the picture of Nate with his parents. I looked at it and then showed it to the baby. "I wonder if they knew what you were." I laughed. "Listen to me, I'm starting to buy into this whole nonsense." I looked at the picture again. "They sure did love you, kid."

Lou suddenly appeared in front of me. "I'll take him back."

"Hmm? Oh, okay," I said. I lifted the baby up to her and she took him. She bounced him up and down as she walked away. I stared at the picture of the Chalmers. "We all have our cross to bear," I said to myself. "I guess it's time to bear mine."

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That night we ate well. I pulled out the propane grill, a pot, and some instant Ramen noodles. Not a gourmet meal by any stretch of the imagination, but it was our first hot meal since the corn-on-the-cob. Kimball enjoyed a double helping of dog food and Ajax feasted on a bucket of fruits and vegetables.

The conversation never veered toward the horror we witnessed at the hospital. We talked about our lives before the end of the world. Tyrone had eight brothers and sisters. He was the youngest. Valerie was an only child being raised by a single mother. Lou was home schooled. We all had different backgrounds and now we were all headed for the same future.

We relaxed by playing a game of hide and seek. I wasn't too keen on the idea at first, but I agreed hoping to give Tyrone and Valerie a sense of normalcy. I have to admit I had a pretty

good time. Even Ajax got in on the game, although there weren't many places for a 400-pound gorilla to hide.

By nine o'clock that night, I encouraged everyone to get some sleep because we had something important to do the next day. I didn't tell them what, because I wanted them all to get a good night's rest. They protested at first, but eventually they gave in and settled down for the night.

I laid in my sleeping bag next to the wagon. Lou and Nate were close by. The baby was being unusually quiet. As I lay there staring at the ceiling of the warehouse, I asked Lou, "I wonder why he liked me?"

"Who?"

"Stevie Dayton. I mean I was a real jerk to him."

"Maybe he saw the magic in you," she said.

I turned to her. "You better get some sleep. We've got a big day tomorrow."

"You might as well tell me what you've got planned. I'm going to know soon enough anyway."

I smiled and closed my eyes. "You'll see." I didn't know how to tell her tomorrow was the day we would read the comic book.

## SIX

I woke up the next morning trying to convince myself I was a warrior, but it never really sunk in. Warriors were big muscled grown men who could defeat entire armies with nothing more than their fists. I was a puny kid who had trouble making a fist let alone defeating an army with one.

I woke everybody up and treated them all to a hearty breakfast of honey and chunky peanut butter sandwiches. Ajax ate three and got peanut butter all over his face.

After they were well fed, I sat them in a circle and began my speech. "I know this is kind of sudden, but we have to do something that's not going to be too pleasant today. If you don't want to do it, I'll understand."

"We're going to do it, aren't we?" Lou said with excitement in her voice.

"Do what?" Tyrone asked.

"It's time," I said. "We're going to war today."

"War?" Valerie said apprehensively.

"We're going to read the comic book." Lou stood and started for the wagon.

"Hold on," I said. "We've got to get prepared first."

"What comic book?" Tyrone asked.

"The one that brings the Greasywhoppers," Lou said.

Tyrone and Valerie looked at each other. They were certain we had lost our minds.

"Why would we want to do that?" Valerie asked.

“We don’t want to,” I said. “We have to.” I looked at Ajax. “We’re warriors.” He stood and pounded his chest. Valerie and Tyrone were unsure. I could imagine they were now sorry they had left the bicycle bandits to join us. “You don’t have to be part of this,” I said.

“What choice to do we have?” Tyrone asked.

“I’ll hitch the horses to the wagon,” I said. “You can take off.”

“We’ll stay,” Valerie said.

“We will?” Tyrone didn’t look too thrilled.

“We’re warriors,” she said putting her arm around him.

He looked at me and said, “Better than being a bandit, I guess.”

Our first order of business was to load up on weapons of some kind. We had plenty of fireworks and J.J., but beyond that we weren’t prepared for a battle. I exited the front of the warehouse and scanned the street to see if there was a store that might have what we needed. To the left, beyond the interstate overpass, was a series of shopping centers. I called for Tyrone to bring Ryder around, and I mounted the gentle old mare.

“Get all the candles together,” I told Tyrone. “And start unloading the fireworks. I’ll be back.” He smiled and saluted me like he was a soldier taking orders. I gave Ryder’s ribs a tap with my heels and he trotted off towards the shopping centers.

There were plenty of fast food places and clothing stores among the shopping centers, but nothing that could help us in our impending battle. I was just about to give up when I spotted what looked like a giant pair of deer antlers poking up over the hill beyond the last shopping center. I guided Ryder in that direction. When we reached the peak of the hill, I saw the giant antlers were part of a sign that stood above Rankin’s

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Outdoor Outfitters. Their slogan bragged that they were the outdoorsman's best friend. I hoped they were the warrior's best friend, too.

The store was locked so I threw a heavy rock through the glass front door. The inside was in pristine condition. It was wall-to-wall camouflage. They had every outdoor item known to man. I made a mental note to bring the wagon by the store before we left Dalton to restock on some survival essentials. I briefly thought of the possibility that we may not be leaving Dalton depending on how our face-off with the Takers went.

The place was replete with guns and ammo, but they didn't do me any good. Past the row of guns, I saw something that caught my eye. It was a crossbow. It was a thing of beauty. I moved around the counter and took it from the wall. Like virtually everything else in the store, it was decorated in camouflage. It had what looked to be a highly complicated pulley system and strong, durable cable. It was even fashioned with a scope that placed a red dot on your target. I held it to my shoulder. It weighed about nine pounds. It felt surprisingly natural in my hands. The price tag said \$1,000. I smiled like a kid waking up on Christmas morning. I had to have it. In fact, I had to have four.

I found a large canvas bag and filled it with four crossbows, as many arrows as I could find, a half dozen quivers that could hold up to ten arrows, a variety of hunting knives, a dozen lighters called pocket blow torches, and some hunting vests with pockets everywhere.

Mounting Ryder with such a heavy load wasn't easy. I set the bag on the roof of a nearby car and jumped on Ryder's back. From there it was just a matter of leaning over and snatching the bag of goodies from the car roof.

I was back at the warehouse in less than fifteen minutes,

anxious to show off my new toys. Tyrone was as enthusiastic as I was, but Lou and Valerie were a little reticent. Realistically they knew that it would come to this, that we would have to arm ourselves in order to successfully fend off the Takers. But seeing the crossbows with their almost sadistic looking arrows was another thing all together. It brought the point home to them that this was for real. We would have to kill in order to avoid being killed. They didn't like the idea even though all we'd be killing were uncaring monsters that saw us as food.

Reluctantly they joined Tyrone and me in a crossbow shooting practice session behind the outlet warehouse. We took turns cranking the cocking mechanism and firing out arrows at a basketball backboard the outlet employees must have made full use of during lunch. Tyrone, Lou, and I got fairly efficient, but Valerie never got the hang of it.

We continued preparations for the battle inside the warehouse. I gave the others the pocket blowtorches. They lit with an easy push of a lever, and the flame was big. It was perfect for lighting a firecracker and throwing it at an assailant quickly. As a backup, I lit all the candles Tyrone had placed throughout the warehouse. If we got in a spot and our pocket blowtorches wouldn't work, we wouldn't be far from a lit candle.

I hitched up the horses, loaded the wagon with all our supplies, and moved it outdoors. "Valerie," I said, "You stay with the horses and Nate." I pulled a bottle rocket from my pocket and showed it to her. "You see this? It shoots off red and blue sparkles." She nodded. "I'll shoot this off for only one reason."

"What?" she asked.

"To tell you to get out of here. If you see red and blue sparkles, you slap Phil and Ryder with the reins as hard as you

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can and go. Don't look back just keep going until you get to Atlanta. You understand?"

"But I want to help," she protested.

"You are." I took Nate who was lying in his sling around my neck and placed him across Valerie's shoulder. "You're making sure the monsters don't get Nate. We can't let them get him."

She reluctantly agreed.

I reached in the back of the wagon and pulled out the rolled up comic book. I gave one last reassuring look to Valerie and went into the warehouse.

Lou and Tyrone were nervously standing by. We were all armed with our crossbows and wearing two quivers filled with ten arrows each. Our first shot was cocked and ready to go. In addition, we all had on hunting vests with each pocket filled with firecrackers. We had knives strapped to our waists. We were armed to the teeth.

I handed Lou the comic book. "You read," I said, "How many pages do you think you can get through before they show up?"

"Five, maybe six," she said.

"Make it four and then hide it in that roll of carpet." I pointed to a large roll of carpet to my right. "There's answers in that comic book. Things those Greasywhoppers don't want us to know. If they get their hands on it, we may never know what we need to know."

"What do we need to know?" She looked at me hoping I had some clue.

"I don't know," I said.

"What do you want me to do?" Tyrone asked.

"You and I are going to keep a close eye out. We have no idea which direction these things are going to come from.

Aim for the chest. Give yourself a big target.” He looked at me nervously. “You up for this?”

“I guess so.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said. I turned to Ajax. “You ready, warrior.” He grunted. I didn’t have to ask Kimball. He was already pacing pack and forth ready for action.

“Lou,” I said. “You’re the only one who’s going to know what you read.”

“So?”

“So, you have to survive. If we lose you, this whole thing will have been for nothing.”

She smiled anxiously, and sat down in a folding chair we placed in the middle of the warehouse. Tyrone and I put our backs to her and stood three feet away. We both readied our crossbows and kept a guarded eye out for any signs of the creatures. Kimball and Ajax took positions close by.

“Ready?” I said.

“Ready,” Tyrone answered.

“Okay, Lou, do your stuff,” I said.

I heard her take a deep breath and then I heard her open the comic book. It was eerily quiet as she read. We were too scared to even breathe. Lou flipped a page and then another. She was reading fast.

“Lou, what are you doing?”

“This is stuff that already happened,” she said. “South Pittsburg, the rest area, Chattanooga, he wrote about it all.”

“Get to the part we don’t know about.”

“I’m trying.”

A noise came from the far corner of the warehouse. Tyrone and I both turned towards it, our crossbows ready to fire. “Time’s up, Lou.”

“I just need a few more minutes.”

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A roll of carpet tumbled to the floor from the same direction the noise had come from. "Time's up, now!" I tried to shout like a commander, but it came out as a plea.

Tyrone slowly started moving toward the noise. "Stay put, Tyrone," I said. He hesitated, but then continued to move forward. "Tyrone!"

"I need to get closer to get a better shot," he said.

"Trust me, it will come to us."

He stopped. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He was now standing at the end of the largest roll of carpet in the entire building.

I turned to Lou, "I said that's enough." She didn't respond. "Lou..."

Suddenly she stood and shouted, "Tyrone get away from there!"

Stunned by Lou's tone, Tyrone was about to comply when he was jerked to the ground. I could see a Taker's hand wrap around his ankle and pull him behind the roll of carpet. Kimball was the first to run to Tyrone's aid. I followed. Ajax grabbed Lou and pulled her to the other end of the warehouse.

By the time I reached the other side of the roll of carpet, Tyrone was gone. Kimball was growling and barking down a large hole in the concrete floor. I could hear Tyrone screaming, "Help!" from below the floor.

From the other end of the warehouse where we first heard the noise, two more Takers appeared, their teeth chattering, their claws extended. They were fifteen footers easy. Ajax raced past us and barreled towards the two monsters. Kimball charged after him.

"Oz!" I heard a screech rise up from the hole.

Lou ran towards me. She fired her crossbow at one of the Takers pursued by Kimball and Ajax, and hit it between the

eyes. It wobbled to its knees, and placed both hands around the arrow jetting out from its forehead. Kimball leapt on it and sunk his teeth into its neck. "Go!" she said. "We can take care of these two."

I did not immediately jump into the hole. I thought about it first, which was a big mistake. Fear grabbed hold of me. I wrestled with myself, fighting to work up the courage to jump in the hole and save Tyrone. I looked to see Lou turning the crank on her crossbow to cock it and insert another arrow in the barrel. Ajax was tormenting the Taker. He had hold of its leg and was trying to pull it off its feet, but the monster swung wildly and caught Ajax on the head, sending him tumbling to the ground. Ajax quickly recovered.

"Oz!" Tyrone cried. His voice was distant and muffled. I couldn't wait any longer. I jumped into the hole.

It was pitch black. I couldn't see three feet in front of me. I searched through my pockets and pulled out a small penlight I had picked up at the outdoor shop. I turned the head of the light and it came on. I was astonished to see the Takers had dug a large tunnel that ended at the hole in the warehouse. I shined my light down the tunnel. The walls were dripping with the ooze from the Greasywhoppers. I walked forward, increasing my pace with each step. "Tyrone!" I called out.

"Oz!"

He was alive and just ahead. My beam of light caught some movement. I slowed my pace. It was the back of the Taker. In its left hand it held tightly to Tyrone, while it dug its way through the earth with the right. It was removing huge chunks as it frantically clawed at the rock and dirt in front of it.

I shot my crossbow and hit it in the shoulder. The creature stopped digging. It seemed to be unfazed by the arrow sticking out of its back. It turned slowly, its teeth chattering. I dropped

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the light and furiously turned the crank on the crossbow to cock it. The bottom half of the Taker was the only thing illuminated now. I could see Tyrone struggling to free himself from the monster's grasp. The crossbow cocked, I reached back and pulled an arrow out of one of my quivers and loaded it in the barrel, but I couldn't fire without the light. I saw the monster take a step toward me. As I bent down to pick up the flashlight, it went dark. I ran my hand across the muddy tunnel floor, but I couldn't find it in the darkness. I stood and searched my pockets again, this time looking for my pocket blowtorch. I couldn't remember which pocket I put it in. I searched them all and didn't locate it. I could hear Tyrone whimpering. The Taker was dragging him along the ground as it walked toward me. I searched my pockets again. This time I found it on the first try. I pushed the lever and lost all feeling in my body when the light from the pocket torch flame revealed the creature's slimy snout just inches from my face. I screamed and my finger involuntarily twitched, pulling the trigger on the crossbow and striking it in the chest. The monster flinched, but that was it. It almost seemed to smile at me. Looking down I could see Tyrone's knife sticking out of the Taker's leg. Tyrone was wriggling like a worm on the end of the hook trying to break free from the creature's grip.

"Do something," Tyrone ordered.

I dropped the crossbow, reached in my pocket, pulled out an M-98 and lit it with the pocket torch. The Taker slapped the firecracker out of my hand and sent it flying behind me. It exploded, kicking up rocks and mud.

The Taker opened its oversized mouth and its teeth bent down. Looking inside the mucus-covered cavern, I couldn't help but think I had been in this situation before. It was going to swallow me. I reached down and pulled the knife from my

waist and thrust it up into the Taker's chin. It reeled back and let go of Tyrone.

"Go, go, go," I said to Tyrone as I helped him to his feet. We ran toward the opening. The Taker screamed in agony.

When we got to the opening, we realized it was too high for us to reach. I lifted Tyrone up as high as I could, but that wasn't very high. A long hairy arm dropped down from the opening. It was Ajax. I lifted Tyrone up and he reached for Ajax. The gorilla grasped Tyrone by the wrist and pulled him up to safety. Ajax dropped his arm down the hole again to pull me up. I jumped and missed his hand. I jumped again. As I felt the leathery grip of Ajax latch on to my hand, I also felt the monstrous grip of the Taker grab me by the waist. Ajax roared trying to lift me against the strength of the Taker, but he couldn't do it.

The monster yanked me down to the ground. I scrambled back on the muddy surface. The Taker was on all fours. It snapped its mighty jaw as it lurched towards me. It suddenly lunged backwards and howled. Ajax was on its back, pounding it with his enormous gorilla fists. Kimball stuck his head down the hole. He barked, desperately wanting to jump down and help his friend, but it was too far down.

The Taker slammed backwards into the wall. Ajax bellowed in pain, but he fought on. I darted in and pulled the knife out of the monster's leg. The Taker swung its clawed hand at me, but missed when Ajax jerked it to the ground. It flailed on its back. It was now or never. I jumped up on its chest and with both hands around the knife's handle, I plunged it into the Taker's neck. It jerked and flopped, sending me flying against the tunnel wall. In a matter of minutes, it made one last spasm and then stopped moving.

Ajax was wounded. Blood was coming from his chest.

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The Taker had sliced him with its claws. I crawled to his side. He moaned and cupped his huge hand around my head. His breathing was uneven. "Hey," I said. "C'mon, now, they can't hurt you. You're a warrior."

He roared in pain.

I ran to the opening. "We got to get Ajax out of here. He's hurt."

"Now, how do you propose we get a 400-pound go-rilla out of that hole?" A familiar voice answered back.

"Wes?" I said.

Wes peered down the whole. "The one and only. Sorry I missed all the fun." He smiled. "Hold on to your britches. We'll get a ladder down to you."

"How did you..."

"I told you I was working on something. As soon as we get you and that ugly go-rilla out of there, I'll show you."

Ajax roared in protest at being called ugly. I sat next to him and waited for our old friend, Wes, to pull us out of the hole.

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Topside, we tended to Ajax's wounds. He had two deep gashes that ran about four inches across his chest. They were deep cuts, but Valerie and Lou did a good job of patching him up.

I was anxious to talk to Wes, but I needed a moment to gather myself. I found a secluded spot in the manager's office in front of the warehouse and dropped to my knees. I was angry, happy, terrified, and emboldened all at once. My entire body was trembling. We had voluntarily engaged the Takers in battle, and we had won, but I didn't know if I had the courage to do it again. I allowed myself only a few moments of reflection before I returned to the others.

Wes took me outside and showed me what he had been working on. It was a 1972 VW bus. The short, green and yellow van glistened in the October sun.

“But the gas?” I said.

Wes smiled. “Converted it to run on propane.

“Propane?”

“Didn’t think this old redneck could do much more than fart and cook on the grill, did ya’?” He walked over to the German-made vehicle and ran his hand across the driver’s side door.

“You’re a genius,” I said.

“Nah, I ain’t no genius. Just an old grease monkey who reads Popular Mechanics.”

I walked over and looked inside the van. He had it half loaded with supplies, mostly food. Wes leaned against the VW and soaked in my admiration.

“I see you picked up a couple of strays,” he said, motioning with his head toward Valerie and Tyrone standing inside the warehouse.

“Yeah.” I leaned on the van next to him. “Picked them up outside of Chattanooga.” I looked at Tyrone and could scarcely believe what he and I had just gone through in the tunnel. “How’d you find us anyway?”

“Seen the horses and wagon from the interstate.” He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “You kids is playing with fire,” he said. “Conjuring them things up will only lead to trouble.”

I thought about how to respond. I couldn’t tell him that, like Lou, I believed we were on a mission. It sounded too corny, and he would just think it was nonsense.

“We were prepared.”

He was about to give me a lecture on the fallacy of that

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statement when we heard some whining and yelping from inside the van. His eyes opened wide. "Hell, I almost forgot." He ran around the other side of the van and opened the door. "Got me some future Greasywhopper killers."

I walked up as he was pulling out a box full of puppies from the van. There were eight. They were all, different variations of the colors black, tan, and white. They looked to be about six weeks old.

"Found 'em out back of my garage the other day. Don't know what happened to the mother. I waited for her to come around, but she never did, so I figured I had to bring 'em with me. Didn't feel right just leavin' them there."

I picked one up. Its little tail was wagging uncontrollably. It started licking my face. "It'll be a while before these things can take on a Greasywhopper."

"Old Kimball will give them all the training they need." We started to walk back to the warehouse. He carried the box with the remaining seven puppies, and I carried the other tightly to my chest. "You don't mind if this old redneck tags along with ya', do ya'?"

"Mind? I'd be mad if you didn't."

Predictably, Tyrone and Valerie were elated to see the box of puppies. They greeted us as we entered the warehouse and started plucking puppies from the box before Wes could set it down. I carried my puppy over to Ajax, who was resting comfortably on a stack of throw rugs, and placed the puppy next to him. His eyes lit up. I patted him on the shoulder as he gently picked up the puppy and began tickling its belly. Kimball watched the exchange with just a hint of jealousy.

I motioned for Lou to follow me to the manager's office, and invited Wes to look over our new weapons cache, asking him to come up with a list of things we would need from the

outdoor shop. In truth it was just busy work so Lou and I could speak in private.

When Lou and I entered the manager's office, I turned to her and said, "What did the book say?"

"I didn't get that far ahead."

"You knew what was going to happen to Tyrone?"

She nodded. "It was in the book. I knew you were supposed to go in the tunnel after him."

"What happens next?"

"All I know is our next stop is the Atlanta Zoo."

"The Atlanta Zoo?"

"That's where I stopped reading."

I sat on the manager's desk and rubbed my eyes. "How many more pages do you have left?"

"Twenty, maybe."

"Twenty?" I sighed deeply. "We'll never be able to pull this off."

"We have to." She looked at me, determined.

I nodded. "Agreed."

She smiled and started to walk away.

"But," I said.

She stopped and turned to me.

I hesitated and then said what had to be said. "We're not all going to make it. I just wanted you to know that."

She processed the information and nodded. "Understood." She exited the manager's office.

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That night, after returning from the outdoor store with replenished supplies, we sat down to a meal prepared by Valerie. It was a decent assortment of raw vegetables and some powdered milk. In my life before the Takers, I would have

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barfed at the mere thought of such a meal, but our present situation changed my expectations and severely altered my tastes. I ate it as gratefully as I would have eaten a super-sized meal from McDonald's just weeks before.

"Something's been bothering me," Wes said after chomping a handful of carrots.

"What?" I said.

"No cars." He phrased it simply and offered no further explanation.

I turned and looked out the warehouse door to the interstate. I wasn't sure what he was talking about. "No cars?"

"Yeah. I ain't seen one car since I took off from Manchester yesterday."

Lou and I looked at each other. Of course he hasn't seen any cars. There's nobody left to drive them. "You do know what's going on out here, don't you?" I said.

"Of course I do," he said. "I ain't expectin' to see nobody drivin' around, but how come there ain't no cars on the sides of the highway or in the middle of the road for that matter?"

"What do you mean?" Lou asked.

"I mean them Greasywhoppers snatched people from their cars. You look off on any side road and you'll see all kinds of abandoned cars. Some wrecked in piles. But not on the interstates. Not on 24 and not on 75. Hell, not this exit either."

I thought about it. He was right. We hadn't come across one car that was abandoned or wrecked on our entire journey. Not even the little side trips we took. I hadn't thought about it until now, but he was right. The Takers came suddenly and quickly. Surely people were driving when the Takers yanked them up.

"It's almost like somebody's give us a clear path." He said. "There's really only one question."

“What?” I asked.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

I looked at Lou and the others. They had all stopped mid-chew thinking about Wes’s question. I felt obligated to say something inspirational, but nothing particularly awe-inspiring came to mind. “It’s good,” I said with no explanation to back up my claim.

The others didn’t buy my assertion, but they didn’t offer any arguments either. They were all tired of talking about our current situation and what had to be done. They just wanted to relax and prepare for another day of travel.

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We all awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of what we thought was thunder. Initially we didn’t pay much attention, but as I lay there and listened to the rumbling of the thunder dissipate, I noticed that it actually wasn’t dissipating. It was growing louder and more intense. It sounded as if it was building to a crescendo, that at any second, we would hear another roaring boom.

I turned on my side to look out the loading dock door and was surprised to see Ajax sitting in the open doorway, his silver back to us as he watched the night sky. I stood and joined him.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

Without acknowledging me he signed “Warrior,” and then he made the sign of a ‘V’ with one hand and ran it across the palm of this other until it went over the edge of his fingertips. Before I could get up and get Dr. Fine’s book, Lou was standing next to me with the book in her hand.

“It means fail,” she said. “He’s been sitting here for the last fifteen minutes signing ‘Warriors fail’ over and over again.”

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“Warriors fail?” I put my hand on his shoulder. “Did we fail, Ajax?”

He made the sign language symbol for the letter ‘A’ and first pointed in one direction and then another. Lou flipped through the book.

“Other,” she said.

“Other warriors fail?” I said. The phrase shook me. Not only because the implications of it were horrifying, but also because it was the first time Ajax gave any indication that there were other warriors out there. “There are more like us?”

He grunted and nodded.

“And they failed, meaning the Takers got one of the Storytellers?”

He signed, “Six now.”

“How do you know?”

He pointed to the sky. I looked and saw a fat purple crack etching itself across the blackened horizon. “What is that?” It was sickening. There was no other way to describe it. It looked as if our world was being ripped apart.

“Day long here,” Ajax signed.

“What’s a day long?” Lou asked.

Ajax put both hands to his head, placed his thumbs to his forehead, held up two fingers on each hand and wiggled them up and down. I turned to Lou. She frantically flipped through the pages of the book. Her face turned ghost white when she found the description.

“What?” I asked.

She could not say it out loud so she held up the book. I shared her fear when I saw the meaning. I took the book from her and sat back down next to Ajax.

“Are you sure?” I asked him.

He nodded.

Wes had snuck up behind us. He had been standing there long enough to hear most of the conversation. “What’s it mean?” he asked.

A little startled by his voice, I turned to him. I cleared my throat and said, “Demon.”

## SEVEN

I think it's time you come clean with me," Wes said. He was bent next to his propane-converted '72 VW bus checking the air pressure in the front passenger side tire. The sun was stretching above the horizon. The purple crack was ever present. "You kids seem to be messin' around with something you shouldn't be messin' around with."

I squatted next to him. "I don't know exactly what to tell you. I'm not really all that clear on everything."

"Why don't you tell me what you know then?" He sat down on the ground and leaned against the van.

I placed my hands on the paved surface and stretched my legs out. We looked deceptively relaxed, but we were far from it. The purple crack above us rattled both our nerves. "Well, come to find out we're warriors."

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'warriors'?"

"We have to protect Nate." I tried to make the conversation as matter a fact as possible.

"From what?"

"The Greasywhoppers."

He wiped his dirty hands on the front of his shirt, although I suspected they picked up more dirt from his shirt than they left behind. "What in Hades do them ugly buggers want with Nate?"

"He's a Storyteller." I said it, but didn't know how to explain it.

“Storyteller? The little guy can’t even hold his head up. How you figure he’s a storyteller?” Wes snickered at the idea.

“Because Ajax said...”

“Hold on, now,” he interrupted. “You mean to tell me you’re listening to the go-rilla?”

“He knows things,” I said.

“He barely knows how to peel a banana.”

“He says we’re warriors. He says we have to protect Nate, to get him to something called the Keep.”

“It’s not the Keep,” Lou said. She appeared from the back of the VW bus. “It’s the Keepers.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

She produced Dr. Fine’s book from behind her back and pointed to a picture of one of Ajax’s paintings. It was a simple, yet crude bright yellow circle. The caption read, “Ajax’s Keepers.”

“Don’t you see?” she said. “If we get Nate to the Keepers, the Greasywhoppers will never be able to get to him.”

“I still don’t know what them things want with a little baby,” Wes said.

“He’s only a baby now. He’ll grow up to be a Storyteller.” She pointed to the purple crack in the sky. “See, the Greasywhoppers already got one of the Storytellers last night. What did Ajax say? Day long demons? That’s what happens. They get the Storytellers and the others can cross over.”

“What others?” I asked.

“The others,” she said as if it were an unnecessary question on my part. “The other monsters that live in the minds of the Storytellers.”

Something that Ajax had said a couple days earlier came to me. “Baby have army. That’s what he meant.”

Wes was still skeptical of the entire conversation. “You kids have gone plum crazy.”

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“Ajax said, ‘Baby have army.’ The Storytellers have the armies. The Greasywhoppers are building an army. They need the Storytellers to increase their numbers.”

Wes let out a raspberry. “Look around ya’, Oz. The Greasywhoppers don’t need an army. They done destroyed and conquered. There’s nobody left to fight.”

Lou stood straight and proud. “There’s us and the others that are out there.”

Wes shook his head. “No offense, but it sure won’t take a whole army to beat the likes of us.”

“You’re wrong,” I said standing. “We’re warriors.”

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We started out for Atlanta an hour later. Wes took Tyrone, Valerie, Ajax (who was still convalescing), and the puppies in his bus. They moved faster than us so they took point. They were miles ahead of us within just a few minutes. We kept in touch through a pair of high-powered two-way radios we’d picked up at Rankin’s Outdoor Outfitters.

It was risky to split up like that, but Wes could not contain himself when he got behind the wheel of his VW bus. He had to drive as fast he could, which by his standards wasn’t as fast as he was used to driving, but he still could out pace our horses and wagon by a good bit.

Lou and I didn’t talk much. I think we had said all we could stand to say. We just sat and lost ourselves in the rhythmic clop-clop-clop of the horses’ hooves on the pavement as we methodically made our way south.

The purple crack in the sky remained stamped on the horizon. It taunted us, letting us know that the Takers were not our only foes now. There were new creatures we had to deal with, and we knew nothing about them. Ajax had called them

the Day Longs, although we couldn't be sure if that is what he really meant or if they were just the closest words in his vocabulary. We looked through Dr. Fine's book, but there were no references to these new monsters, or demons as Ajax called them. We had no idea what they looked like, or if they followed the same rules as the Takers. The comic book may have had some answers, but we could not chance another reading until we were all rested and healthy.

We got a call from Wes on the two-way that he was stopping at the Calhoun exit to wait for us to catch up. I could hear Valerie and Tyrone laughing through the static-filled airwaves of the radio. It made me smile. They were good kids who deserved a little bit of happiness. Unfortunately, that's about all the happiness you could find on this side of our planet's history, a little bit.

As soon as I put the radio down, I got the funny feeling we were being watched. I couldn't pinpoint from where, but I definitely could feel the eyes on me. I didn't tell Lou because I didn't want to ruin her moment of relative peace. I gave Phil and Ryder a light tap with the reins and urged them to pick up the pace.

As we went under an overpass, I got my first look of what or who had been watching us. I saw a shadowy figure on a horse. I got just a glimpse, but I could see that whoever it was, was not a master horseman. I watched the chubby figure in the saddle sway from side to side trying to get the horse to move behind an abandoned semi truck off the exit. The horse kicked up its back legs and whinnied. Lou was now aware of our visitor.

"Somebody's following us," she said.

"I know." I looked to my left and saw another amateur horseman skulking his horse behind a row of trees in the median. "I've seen two so far."

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With Nate around her shoulder she carefully stepped to the back of the wagon and retrieved a crossbow. "There's a third one behind us," she said.

I turned to see a long slender figure riding a white and black spotted Tiger horse. I couldn't make out her face, but I could tell by her stance in the saddle, it was Reya. Another horse and rider joined her from the median, the kid who had no name. That meant Devlin and Miles were the ones to our sides. I pulled the wagon to a stop. Kimball barked. We both jumped off.

"What are you doing?" Lou asked.

"Stopping," I said.

"But why?"

"Because we need them."

"What for?"

"Even a warrior needs some friends to help him win his battles."

She shook her head. "These guys are losers. I don't trust them."

"We've got no choice." Kimball and I stood in the middle of the interstate behind the wagon. Reya and the other kid trotted up to me.

"Where's your monkey, horse-boy?" she said, trying to get the horse to stop. Instead of pulling back on the reins, she leaned back in the saddle and nearly fell over the mare's rear.

I tried not to laugh. "Gorilla. He's up ahead of us in Calhoun."

The other kid rode up and grabbed Reya's reins and stopped her horse. "I told you, you gotta pull back on the reins."

"I am," she snapped. She spotted Lou holding the crossbow to her side. "Your girlfriend going to shoot us?"

I turned to Lou and motioned for her to put the crossbow

down. She refused. "She's not my girlfriend." Kimball started to growl. I placed my hand on his head and tried to sooth him. "Doesn't look like you're too popular around here," I said to Reya.

"What of it?" she said. She peered into the back of our wagon. "What you got in there that we might want?"

"A lot," I said, "but you can't have any of it."

"You best look at Devlin and Miles. They got something to say about that."

I looked at her two minions. They were pointing what looked like two nine-millimeter guns at us. I chuckled. "I guess you didn't get the memo. Guns don't work any more."

"The kinds that fire bullets don't," she said smugly. "But these kind shoot darts. They're air pistols."

I pointed to Lou. "In case you aren't of aware of it, arrows do a lot more damage than darts."

She looked confused. She searched and searched for a reasonable retort to my logic, but she couldn't come up with any.

The other kid climbed off his horse, "Reya will you stop trying to bully the kid."

"Shut up, Roy. I'm in charge." She shot him an evil look.

"Hell of a lot of good it's done us. We're about to starve to death." Roy walked toward me. "Look, just ignore my sister," he said. "All we really want to know is if you'll share some of your food with us."

"Sure," I said, "but why don't you just go to a grocery store and take what you need."

He looked embarrassed. "Ask her." He shot a thumb toward Reya.

"Because we're bandits," she said proudly. "We don't shop in grocery stores. We take from unsuspecting travelers."

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He turned to her. "Look around, Reya. There aren't that many travelers to take from."

"What are you doing, Roy?" She hopped off her horse. "You shouldn't be undermining my authority." Devlin and Miles still had their air guns trained on us, but they were more than mildly amused by the fight between the brother and sister.

"You're a real idiot, you know that?" Roy said. "You're too busy playing bandits to know that me, Devlin, and Miles are about to fall over from hunger."

"Guys," I said, but they didn't hear me. They continued their argument.

"I suppose you think it's easy being the leader," Reya said.

"You're not the leader," Roy shouted.

I went to the wagon and pulled out a box of granola bars. I walked over and handed bars to Devlin, Miles, and Roy. All the while, Reya and Roy were arguing over her role in their troupe. I tried to hand a granola bar to Reya, but she slapped it away.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm sharing our food with you," I said.

"You are not sharing your food with us." She looked at the others in her gang. "Put those granola bars down." Devlin was just about to raise the bar to his mouth when she gave the order. He wanted to disobey, but he thought better of it. Miles followed Devlin and dropped the granola bar.

Roy looked at her defiantly. He ripped open the granola bar.

"Stop that," she said.

Roy smiled and took a bite.

"That's it. You're out of the gang."

“Fine,” Roy said with his mouth full of granola. “I’d much rather ride with...” He turned to me. “What was your name?”

“Oz.”

He turned back to Reya. “I’d much rather ride with Oz, anyway. At least they eat.”

She let out a low frustrated scream and headed back to her mount when Devlin’s horse suddenly reared. The jolt almost threw him from the saddle. He reached to grab hold of the horse’s neck and inadvertently pulled the trigger on his air gun. Reya yelped and put both hands on her backside. Devlin had shot her in the right butt cheek.

Lou and I struggled not to laugh. Roy did not show the same restraint. He bent over in spasms of laughter as he watched his sister hop around the interstate trying to pull the dart from her butt.

I looked at Lou. “You better help her.” Lou jumped from the wagon and handed me Nate in his sling before she walked over to Reya.

Reya was dancing in little circles now. “Get it out! Get it out!”

Lou reached her and calmly stopped Reya. The injured bandit was a full foot taller than the little warrior. “Breathe deep,” Lou said holding Reya’s arms and looking up at her. Reya did as requested. Lou reached around and pulled the dart from her rear end. It had penetrated fairly deep. “C’mon,” Lou said, “we’ve got a first aid kit in the wagon.”

Reya looked at Lou suspiciously. She thought about declining her offer, but realized that, given the location of her wound, riding a horse was probably next to impossible. She grudgingly limped to the wagon following Lou.

Devlin and Miles immediately jumped from their horses and picked up their granola bars. They frantically tore off the wrappers and started chomping away.

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“We’ve got somebody waiting for us in Calhoun,” I said to Roy. “You want to come along?”

He smiled and said, “Absolutely.”

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When we reached the Calhoun exit, Valerie and Tyrone were justifiably unhappy at the presence of Miles, Devlin, Roy, and Reya. Reya had ridden in our wagon on her belly the whole way, her horse tied to the back. She moaned and complained the entire way. She mostly wanted us to be aware that just because we were helping her didn’t mean that she was beholden to us in any way. I assured her that we expected nothing in return.

Wes had gorged himself on three cans of chicken, and he was napping on the side of the road when we arrived. The puppies were climbing all over him licking chicken grease from his shirt.

Ajax gave our old adversaries a curious glance from the VW bus and then returned to resting comfortably. He looked terribly depressed. Valerie said she could not get him to eat. I invited Roy and the others to help themselves to any food we had. Lou was more than a little upset that I was being so nice to these self-described bandits, but I had a reason. We needed more allies. I had a feeling things were about to get a lot stickier for us.

I climbed in the back of the bus with Ajax. He had his back to me. His blanket and doll were uncharacteristically out of his reach. I grabbed them and crawled to him. I attempted to hand him the blanket and doll, but he shoed them away. “You all right, big guy?” I asked.

He huffed.

“What can we do for you to make you feel better?” It

was a question my Mom had always asked me when I was feeling under the weather. Somehow it seemed to help me. I was hoping it would do the same for Ajax.

He rolled over on his back and signed, "Bring baby to Keepers."

"We will," I said. "You should get some rest. We need you at full strength." I turned to leave, but he grabbed my arm.

"Warrior friend," he signed. He cupped his huge hand and pulled me to his side. I tried to pull away, but he didn't want to let me go. After a few seconds of struggling, I gave up and lay next to him.

Minutes passed and Wes stuck his head inside the bus. "What's with these stragglers you picked up?"

I slid from a now groggy Ajax's grasp and quietly exited the VW bus. "They were hungry."

"They're bad seeds, Oz." He guided me to the back of the van. "The girl is full of piss and vinegar and the little fat one has already gone through a row of Oreos."

"We've got enough to go around."

"That ain't the point. We don't know nothing about these people..."

"Yes, we do," I said. "They've tried to rob me three times. They're bandits."

"Rob you?" He was incredulous. "What in the name of Knotty Pines are you doing letting a bunch of bandits eat our food?"

"They're not very good bandits." I laughed, but he didn't get the joke. "Look, we need all the reinforcements we can get..."

"Reinforcements?" He threw his hands up in the air. "You're letting this warrior stuff go to your head. We're one old fat redneck mechanic and a bunch of kids. We ain't warriors."

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Now, I think this trip to Charleston is just a fool's errand, but you had your heart set on it, so I figured I'd come along, but this warrior talk and fightin' them Greasywhoppers is just plain dumb. There ain't no way around it. You're going to get yourself and all the others killed."

"Wes," I said as emphatically as I could without sounding angry. "This is something we have to do. I didn't want to believe it at first, but..."

"But what?" he asked.

"If we can get Nate to the Keepers, I think we can find a way to get everything back." I had tried to keep myself from believing it, but as the days went by, I was starting to convince myself that our mission wasn't just to save the Storytellers, but to restore our old world, to bring back our parents, and Wes's sister and everything else as it was before the Takers came. I had nothing more than a gut feeling, but it was a feeling I couldn't shake.

"You're nuts, boy," Wes said as he chortled at my expense. "You're just out and out nuts." He put his hands on his hips and dropped his chin to his chest. "But seeing how you're about the closest thing to a friend I got in what's left of this upside down world, I'm willing to lend you my support."

I smiled.

"That don't mean I believe a lick of this nonsense, but I got to admit, I've seen some pretty crazy things in the last couple of weeks." He massaged the back of his neck. "I guess your theory ain't any crazier."

I extended my hand and he shook it enthusiastically. We both smiled and turned to see the group of newcomers rifling through our supplies in the wagon. "You sure about these bandits of yours?" he asked.

"I'm not sure of anything," I said walking towards the wagon.

Kimball was sitting on the road watching the bandits with a distrusting glare. His ears were upright and he sniffed the air. The eight puppies had gathered around him and were playing in his shadow.

I stepped up on the wagon and perched myself on the side. "You all getting everything you need?"

Devlin and Miles didn't bother to answer. Their mouths were full with an assortment of food. Reya stood gingerly, trying to pretend she wasn't enjoying the feast she had finally agreed to take part in.

Roy smiled with peanut butter on the corners of his mouth. "This sure is appreciated," he said.

"No problem." I waved his gratitude off. "Look, what are you all planning to do?"

"What do you mean?" Reya said, bitter and insolent.

"I mean do you plan on going with this bandit thing forever or do you see yourselves doing something else?" I treaded very carefully because I knew how intensely committed Reya was to her moniker of bandit.

Devlin raised his head from his frosted apple pie pocket, "What else is there?" Particles of food shot from his mouth as he spoke.

"There is nothing else," Reya snapped.

"I was thinking you might join us," I said.

"To do what?" Miles said after a long sustained belch.

"We're going to Atlanta," I said. I was beginning to get sick watching Miles and Devlin eat. They ended up wearing most of the food.

"Why Atlanta?" Roy asked.

"We don't care where you're going," Reya interrupted. "We're headed someplace else."

Miles stopped eating at hearing this news. He turned to

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his leader and wiped the slop from his face with his shirtsleeve. "Where we going?"

"Wherever I say," Reya said, her voice shrill yet commanding.

Roy ignored his sister's announcement. "What's in Atlanta?"

I didn't know exactly how to answer. I mapped my argument out in my head before I spoke. "We're on a mission," I said trying to sound as confident as I could. "We're going to fight the Greasywhoppers."

"What's a Greasywhopper?" Devlin asked.

"The monsters," I said.

Everyone stopped eating. They all looked at each other and then me. Roy spoke. "The things? The people-eaters?"

I nodded.

Miles slowly chewed his food. "Why would you want to do that?"

"We don't want to," I assured him. "But it's the only way we can get Nate to the Keepers."

Reya tried to remain indifferent to my story, but she couldn't contain her increasing interest any longer. "Who's Nate?"

I pointed to Lou who was changing Nate's diaper. "That's Nate."

Reya laughed. "The baby?" She felt a twinge of pain coming from her dart wound. She flinched and gently rubbed her butt cheek. "We'll just go our own way. You kids go off and get your baby to your Keepers and leave us out of it."

"I'll go with you," Roy said.

Reya was enraged. "No you won't."

"Those things ate Mom and Dad, Reya. You saw them. I'm going to make them pay." The hatred was bubbling up inside of him as he spoke.

“Yeah, I saw them,” she said. “There’s no way we can beat them. They’ll eat us, too.”

“We’ve already beat them three times,” I said.

She looked at me. “You lie.”

“It’s the truth,” Lou said, standing with Nate in her arms.

“I don’t believe it,” Reya said. Her dart wound still burning. “They’re too strong and too fast. I’ve seen them with my own eyes.”

I remained as level-headed as I could. “But they only know how to do one thing, eat. We’ve killed four of them.”

“And how many have you lost by fighting?” Reya asked, stern and unwavering in her opposition to joining us in our mission.

I thought about Stevie Spangler and his horrible muffled screams as the Taker swallowed him. “One.”

“That’s one too many,” she said. “We’ll do just fine by not fighting.”

“That’s not true,” I said. This time I raised my voice and stood. “They brought the fight to us. They started this. Just because you don’t want to fight them doesn’t mean they’re not going to get you. It’s not a matter of ‘if.’ It’s a matter of ‘when.’ We have a better chance of beating them if we take the fight to them, on our terms, than if we just sit and hope that they won’t ever find us. Cowards hide, and they devour cowards.”

“He’s right,” Roy said. “We have to stand up to them.”

Reya’s lower lip began to tremble. She crossed her arms in front of her and tried not to cry, but the tears slowly formed in the corners of her eyes. “They’ll kill us.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But maybe we’ll kill them.”

She bowed her head. “I’m scared. I don’t want to die.”

Miles and Devlin were shocked by Reya’s sudden

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admission. They had never seen her this way before. They saw her as tough and hard-nosed, but there she was, tears falling freely now, hands shaking. She was just a teenager who was running from the horrors she had seen.

Roy approached her and put his arm around her shoulder. “We have to do this for Mom and Dad.”

She looked up at him. She wanted to protest. She wanted to get her roughrider persona back, but it was gone. She was shaken to her core. She nodded and laid her head on her brother’s shoulder.

I refrained from pumping my fist in the air. I didn’t think it was appropriate. I looked at Devlin and Miles. They looked at each other. Eventually they shrugged their shoulders and returned to gulping down their food.

I walked over and shook Roy’s hand. “Glad to have you aboard.”

He only half-heartedly smiled. “Can’t say I’m glad to be aboard, but if there’s one thing I’ve been wanting to do, it’s making those ugly monsters pay for what they did to my parents.”

I squeezed his hand to let him know I meant what I was about to say, “We will,” I said. “We will.”

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We were a caravan now, a 1972 VW bus, two Belgian horses pulling a wagon full of passengers and supplies, and four spotted Tiger horses with young unskilled riders (me included) of different degrees on their backs. Wes held back on his NASCAR driver instincts and drove at a pace we could match. Lou drove the wagon, while I took over Reya’s mount, who Devlin for some reason called Chubby even though he was no bigger than the other Tiger horses. Chubby was a bit sprier

than Phil and Ryder. He had the urge to run, and I had the fear that he would take off at any moment. I was a more confident rider than I was when Wes first introduced me to the horses in Manchester, but I had not experienced a horse at a spirited gallop yet, much less a full out run. I wasn't all together sure I could handle it. I gripped the reins tightly and tried to fight the run out of him, but he was raring to go.

"Might as well let him get it out of his system," Roy said. He had been shaking his head for the past fifteen minutes watching me fighting the inevitable.

I tried to think of an excuse why the horse should not run, but I could not think of anything. Finally, I just blurted out the truth. "I can't ride that well. I don't know if I can handle a run."

He guided his horse next to mine. "There's only one way to find out." He slapped Chubby on his hindquarters and whistled loudly.

The horse reared slightly and then bolted down the interstate. I spread my arms out and held loosely to the reins. The rest of my body flopped uncontrollably. We quickly passed the VW bus.

"Squeeze your legs to his body," Roy shouted. "Move with him, not against him!"

I was too panicked to listen to his instructions at first, but as the horse grew faster and faster I implemented his advice. Before long, it felt as if I were riding the horse instead of just sitting on him, my fate at the mercy of his whims. I brought my hands in and tightened my grip on Chubby's reins. It was an incredible feeling of power. I could feel the horse's muscles restrict and contract as it moved its hooves across the paved terrain. I steered the mare toward the median to get him off the pavement. Once he touched grass, he dug his hooves in

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and picked up the pace. We were flying and I involuntarily hooted.

I looked behind me. Roy had his horse, Mr. Mobley, running at full speed. Roy was dipped down in the saddle, almost hugging the animal's neck. They were gaining on us. I kicked Chubby in the ribs and prayed I wasn't pushing my luck. The horse snorted and puffed. I could feel him trying to pick up the pace, but he couldn't go any faster. I looked back again. Roy and Mr. Mobley were even closer now. They would overtake us at any minute. I looked beyond him, and was amazed how far behind the others were now. We had covered an incredible distance in a short period of time.

Roy pulled up beside me. "Looks like you can handle it," he said, his voice raised to be heard over the pounding hooves of our horses.

"Yeah," I said, "but I'm not sure I can get him to stop."

"Just ease back on the reins. Not too hard." He showed me. His horse slowed to a gallop and then stopped.

I followed his example. Chubby slowed to a fast walk. He was out of breath from the exercise. I was out of breath from the excitement.

Roy and Mr. Mobley rode up beside us. "That was fun."

"That was incredible," I said, my voice exuding excitement. I heard a click and a hiss come from the two-way on my belt. I looked back and the caravan was about a mile behind us. The click and hiss came again. I unclipped the radio and pushed the talk button. "This is Oz, go ahead." There was no response. I tried again. "This is Oz."

A voice I didn't recognize answered back. "Hello, Oz." The tone was low and brooding. The words crackled from the radio, cold and piercing.

"Who is this?" I asked the question even though I really

didn't want to know the answer. Roy appeared drained and pale. I imagine I looked the same way.

A throaty laugh crept out of the two-way's tiny speaker. "We're coming."

Mr. Mobley and Chubby came to a complete stop. I wanted to drop the radio and have my sturdy Tiger horse crush it with one of its hooves, but I knew I couldn't do it. "Who's coming?" We peered up in the sky, and watched in amazement as the clouds spelled out the word, "Délons."

The laugh shot out of the two-way again, and then in a sing-songy voice the answer came over the radio, "The Délons are coming, the Délons are coming."

I looked at Roy. He was white as a sheet. "What are Délons?"

"Day longs," I said. I turned Chubby around. "C'mon, we have to get back." I nudged the steed in the ribs and bounded toward our caravan.

"What are Day longs, then?" Roy and Mr. Mobley were running neck and neck with us.

"Don't know," I said, "but they're not the welcome wagon, that's for sure."

We rode back to the caravan at an even greater speed than we left. Lou did not recognize the alarm in our expressions when we pulled to a stop next to the wagon. She rolled her eyes at what she perceived as boys-will-be-boys antics on horseback. "You two having a good time?"

I climbed down from Chubby. "Stop!" I yelled.

Wes looked out of the van's window. "What for?"

"Just stop," I said, sounding more demanding than I had intended.

The bus and the others came to a stop. Everybody eyed Roy and me curiously. "We've got visitors. Who's got the two-way?"

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Wes disappeared back into the VW bus and then returned to the window holding the two-way radio. "It's right here."

"Did you just hear... something?" I asked.

"On the radio?" He looked perplexed. "No. Did you try to call?"

I shook my head. "Okay we need to be alert. Wes, Roy, Lou, and Reya, grab the crossbows and quivers. Everybody else grab the hunting vests and load the pockets with firecrackers. Make sure to get a pocket blowtorch." I jumped up in the wagon and searched through my stuff until I found what I was looking for, J.J.

Wes stepped out of the bus. "What's going on?"

"Day longs," I said. "Make sure Ajax stays put. He's in no condition to fight." I climbed back on top of Chubby.

"Where are they?" Lou asked.

"Don't know," I said. I watched as the others scrambled to get ready for a fight.

"They called us on the radio," Roy said.

"What's a day long?" Reya asked.

"Délon," Roy said, pronouncing it like the sound of a single horse gallop. He looked at me. "At least I think that's what he said."

"Whatever," Reya snapped. "What is it?"

Lou pointed to the purple crack in the sky. "It made that."

Devlin pulled out his air pistol.

"Don't think that will do much good," I said.

"Damned if it won't," Miles said, holding his air pistol. "We shoot the suckers in the eyes, you can bet it will do some good."

"Are you that good of a shot?" I asked, not really hiding the doubt in my tone.

“Heck, yeah.” Devlin smiled.

“You better be,” I said.

Everybody armed themselves. They all stood around waiting for my next set of orders. It was only then I realized that I had taken charge of our defense. It was not a conscious choice on my part. I was simply reacting to what I thought was an impending attack. I struggled to find the right words to say to them. I wasn’t the oldest. I wasn’t the strongest. I wasn’t the most experienced combatant. But there I was with a group of fighters waiting for instructions from me. Finally I spoke. “We should keep moving. I saw a sign for an Alltoona Lake not too far ahead. We’ll need somebody to ride point to scout it out.”

Roy cleared his throat. “I’ll do it.”

I considered his offer. I felt like I should do it, but I didn’t want to put that much separation between Nate and me. After all, I was ultimately responsible for him. “Fine.” I threw him my two-way. “Take this.”

“Why does he have to go?” Reya was fuming. She didn’t like her brother being sent on such a dangerous mission.

“Because I volunteered, Reya.” Roy was coarse with his sister.

Reya stomped over to me. She looked up at me sitting on Chubby’s back. “Send somebody with him.”

“I can’t,” I said. “We have to protect our cargo.” I motioned toward Lou and Nate.

“I’ll go with him,” Reya said.

“No you won’t.” Roy turned Mr. Mobley south. “If we’re going to survive this thing, we stick together and do as Oz says.” He kicked Mr. Mobley and darted down the interstate.

Reya pursed her lips together and sighed deeply. “Who made you boss?” she asked.

It was a question I couldn’t answer so I ignored her. “Everybody load up, and keep your eyes peeled.”

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Reya thought about asking the question again. She wanted to defy me so badly I could see it in her face, but she didn't. I don't know why exactly, but I'm guessing her concern for her brother began to take over her every thought. She turned and climbed back on the wagon.

Our caravan moved slowly. The sound of a small VW engine and bounding horse hooves echoed across the empty interstate. We all kept a wary eye on every inch of road, countryside, and sky. We didn't speak. We were all afraid that any distraction would be a costly one. I rode in front of Wes's tiny bus. Devlin and Miles brought up the rear. We looked like we were from an old western movie I had seen with Pop, a group of marshals giving a Wells Fargo stagecoach an escort to Dodge city.

Some 45 minutes later, we got our first call from Roy. He had found a campground off I-75. He would wait for us at exit 290.

"I didn't see any signs of trouble," he said. "You can breathe easy."

"Not likely," I said. I turned Chubby around to inform everybody that Roy was safe, and he had found a place for us to bed down for the night. Best of all, he reported that we had a safe passage. I was hoping that it would put the others more at ease than it did me.

As I made my way to the wagon, I gave Wes the news, and he informed his passengers, Tyrone and Valerie. Chubby moved past the van and we approached the wagon. I was about to give the others the news when I saw something on the horizon behind us that gave me pause. Then again I couldn't be sure if I saw anything. Though the temperature was in the fifties and the pavement below me wasn't conducting any heat, I was hoping I was seeing a heat-induced mirage. Far off in the

distance, I saw what looked like an army marching our way. It stretched across both sides of the interstate, and the soldiers were the size of specks, thousands of them, all dressed in black. I blinked my eyes to try and push them out of my vision but they were still there.

Miles saw my awed expression. "What's up, boss?" He turned to look over his shoulder to try and see what had me so spooked. He had no reaction.

My gaze went from the approaching horde to Miles and back to the advancing throng. They were gone. Miles clearly had not seen them. "Nothing," I said not sounding very convincing. I turned Chubby around next to the wagon and we trotted along side the others. My head was turned to the rear. I looked for the marching people to reappear.

"Did Roy call?" Reya asked. I didn't immediately answer. My eyes were fixed on the real estate behind us. "Captain Kid," Reya said, her voice impatient and terse.

I snapped out of my fixation. "What?"

"Roy – did he call?"

"Yeah, yeah, he called. Everything is fine. He found a campground for us." I tapped Chubby on his ribs with my heels. "Let's pick up the pace." I ran up to tell Wes the same thing. I was filled with a sudden sense of urgency.

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As promised, Roy was waiting for us at exit 290. He escorted us to McKaskey Creek Campground. The mixture of the evergreens and turning fall colors made it a picturesque spot for traveling campers or, in our case, traveling warriors. A slight wind blew in from the east and turned the lake into a churning pale green pool. Had I not been worried about the mission we were on, the impending next meeting with the

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Takers, the eerie call from the Délons, and the either imagined or real marching army to our rear, I would have found the atmosphere very relaxing. As it was, I was a bubbling caldron of trepidation and fear. I could not escape my inner feeling of doom. I scanned our ragtag group, and cursed myself for getting them involved in this. I should have walked out of the Kroger's grocery store the first night I met Wes and Lou, and I should have kept on going until I reached the interstate. Then none of them would be here. I sat on a picnic table away from the others, kicking myself for even leaving my parents' closet.

Wes and Roy approached me with some fishing poles. "Where'd you get those?" I asked.

Roy smiled. "There's a bait and tackle shop up the road. I got one for everybody." He handed me a rod and reel. "Got a tackle box full of spinners and lures."

"I'm the king of fishing," Wes said, his voice almost giddy. "Alltoona's known for its stripers and rock fish. Bet you I hook the biggest."

I looked at the rod and reel and tried to make myself seem excited. I couldn't pull it off, and Wes noticed.

"C'mon, Oz," he said. "Kick back a little. Relax. There's enough trouble ahead to keep us occupied for the next hundred years or so. Might as well enjoy the simple things when you can."

I smiled out of courtesy more than sincerity. "What's the winner get?"

"What?" he asked.

"Your bet. What's the winner get?"

"Oh, well the joy of watching all the losers clean and cook up the day's catch."

I smiled, this time sincerely. I had been so down in the dumps it had not occurred to me that fishing would not only

provide us with some much needed distraction from our current situation, but it would also provide us with a hot, freshly cooked meal. Somehow adding that little practical matter to the task made it even more enjoyable. When you do something out of necessity, it always feels more rewarding. I jumped off the table, and we all headed for the rocky shore.

I cocked back the open face reel and tossed my spinner into the murky lake water. It was as if I were instantly bathed in an invisible shield of relaxation. The sound of the clicking gears, the gentle splash of the water, the breeze blowing through the colored leaves, it was so calming that I forgot all about Takers, and crossbows, and firecrackers, and battle plans. It poured out of my mind like water pours through a break in a damn. I looked up and down the shore and was happy to see everybody in our group was fishing. Ajax and Kimball even sat with Tyrone and Valerie, patiently waiting for them to untangle their lines and make their first cast.

Wes was true to his proclamation. He was the king of fishing. He not only caught the biggest, he caught the most. There was a mixture of striper, largemouth bass, and perch. The biggest was a striper that Wes bragged weighed at least 15 pounds. The losers of the bet pitched in and cleaned the bounty under Wes's very close and often irritating supervision.

We cooked the fish over an open fire and ate what was by far my most hearty and delicious meal since I woke up from my fever-induced slumber. I was not a big fan of fish, but at the moment, I would have told you my favorite food of all time was anything with gills and a dorsal fin.

Ajax and Kimball were the only ones who did not eat the fish. I was afraid Kimball would choke on the bones so I fed him his normal diet of Alpo. Ajax wasn't a meat eater by nature, so he stuck to a small portion of apples and berries. His

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appetite wasn't quite back to normal, but I could tell from his eyes that he was getting back to his old self.

We ate all the while knowing that just a few short hours ago, we were preparing to do battle with the Délons. Had Roy not been witness to the voice on the radio, I'm sure the others would have believed I was just being overly paranoid. Where did they go? I didn't tell anybody about my sighting back on the interstate. I couldn't be sure it was real since Miles had not seen anything at all. There was a possibility that the stress of the situation had played tricks on my mind. Perhaps I did see a mirage. The conditions weren't perfect for it, but it was possible.

We hadn't given up on the idea the Délons would make an appearance, but as time passed we were becoming less and less apprehensive about it. We gathered around the campfire and talked about better days. Roy spoke about his parents. Reya still remained aloof and didn't participate much in our conversation, but she smiled as her brother talked about their mom and dad. Their father was a truck driver, and their mother was a special education teacher. They were hard working people who were strict but loving parents. Miles lived with his mom and saw his dad on weekends. Truth be known, he didn't really like going to his dad's house. Miles didn't get along with his dad's ever-changing lineup of girlfriends. He spent most of his time playing Play Station 2. He was a Madden freak just like me. Devlin lived with his grandparents. His dad ditched him when he was three and his mom died in a car crash a year later. He never really felt loved by his grandparents. They cared for him the best they knew how, but they were cordial and off-putting when they interacted with him. He sometimes thought that, given the opportunity, his grandparents would have gladly turned him over to the state and washed their hands of him.

As the fire crackled and popped into the evening, Reya finally asked the question she had wanted to ask for some time. "Why don't we just give them the baby?"

There was a thick, unsettling silence that hung in the air after she spoke. I could tell some of the others had been wondering the same thing. The baby after all was a Storyteller, and it was a Storyteller that was responsible for bringing the Takers into our world.

"We have to get him to the Keepers," I said, trying to sound assured that was the best thing to do.

"Besides," Lou said looking up at the purple crack in the sky, "you see what happens when they get their hands on a Storyteller."

"So let's kill it." Reya said so directly and coldly that it chilled me.

"What did you say?" I was daring her to say it again.

"Reya!" Roy wanted to pounce on her for saying such a stupid thing.

"I'm serious. He ain't nothing but a baby now. He ain't no Storyteller yet. We should kill him before he causes more pain and suffering in this world." There was a certain unassailable logic to her statement. If we kill Nate, then he can never grow up to be a Storyteller. The Takers can't use him to bring forth their army.

Ajax was showing more signs of his old self now. The more Reya talked, the more agitated he became. He hollered as she continued to make her case.

"All I'm saying is, we should think about it. The Greasywhoppers might go away if the baby is dead." She avoided looking anyone in the eyes.

"There's nothing to think about," I said, the anger dominating my tone. "We have to get Nate to the Keepers. If

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the Greasywhoppers want him because he can help them, then that means he can hurt them, too.”

“A whole lot of trouble over a little retard,” Reya snapped.

My heart stopped when I heard her use that word. I stood, my hands balled in a fist. “What did you say?”

She stood and towered over me. “He’s a retard. He’s got Down syndrome. Believe me, I know. My mother taught those little short bus freaks.”

I looked at Nate who was in Lou’s arms. “How do you know?”

She smiled smugly. “My momma worked with retards of all ages. She looked after babies, too. Look at Nate’s ears, they’re what’s called dysplastic, all tiny and funny shaped. You see his fifth finger is dysplastic too.” None of us knew what she meant. “There’s only one joint.” We all looked at Nate and then each other. “He’s got the retard eyes, too...”

“Stop saying that word,” I said. I was more than a little angry. I could have beaten the living crap out of her, but I controlled myself. “If you ever harm a hair on that kid’s head or even so much as talk about it again, I’ll feed you to a Greasywhopper myself.”

Her mouth dropped. She was sizing me up to see if I could back up my threat. I could see that she was torn. Finally she turned to her brother. “Are you going to let him talk to me that way?”

“Hell, Reya, I was just about to shake his hand. You just don’t know when to shut up.” Roy stood and walked away.

Reya stomped a foot and groaned angrily. She hated me now more than ever because her brother had taken my side one too many times. I could see her plotting her revenge in her mind even as she sat back down and returned her steely gaze to the flames of the campfire.

I grabbed Nate from Lou and headed toward a nearby picnic table. Wes followed after me.

“You gotta do something about her,” he said.

“We need her,” I said, not knowing if I believed that any more.

“We need her like we need a thorn in our keisters,” he said as I sat down.

Roy approached. “I can handle her.”

“I don’t think you can.” Wes was insistent.

I raised my hand. “She stays,” I said unapologetically. “Roy you’re in charge of her. If she gets out of hand, you’re going to have to make a choice.”

Roy nodded. “I’ve already made my choice. I’m a warrior. I’ll keep her under control.”

“And if you can’t?” Wes asked.

“I’ll personally toss her out on her rear,” Roy said unequivocally.

Wes looked at Reya sitting next the fire. “You may have to do more than that.”

“Meaning?” Roy said.

“Meaning she’s a hothead that won’t go quietly.” He turned back to Roy. “You prepared to do whatever’s necessary?”

Roy swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

I rocked Nate in my arms. “She’ll come around,” I said. “It won’t come to that.”

When Wes and Roy left, I focused my attention on Nate. Was Reya right about him? Did he have Down syndrome? If so, that would make him like both Stevies. One was a Storyteller and the other who could hear the Takers in his head. I thought about how I treated Stevie Dayton and was racked with guilt. I was the one who put the monsters in his head. I made him feel so useless and unwanted that he created the Takers. Stevie

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Dayton wasn't responsible for the end of the world. I was. I held Nate close and vowed to myself that no one would ever treat him like I treated Stevie Dayton.

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We posted sentries in shifts until morning. Six of us paired off in groups of two. Each pair took a three-hour shift. I'm not sure how necessary the guards were because none of us really slept more than a couple of hours. And, when we did sleep it was a restless unsatisfying respite from the insanity that came with being awake. The craziness waited for us in our dreams, too.

I took second shift with Wes. We kept each other awake reliving Titans football games. He was almost as big a fan as I was. Turns out he was there for the Music City Miracle, too. We both agreed it was the greatest play in the history of professional football.

It wasn't until late in our shift that we turned to more serious matters. After some talk about how the game of football related to war and battle strategies, Wes leaned in and said, "You know you're a born leader, kid."

I felt embarrassed and unworthy. "Nah, I'm just trying to get by."

He snickered. "Yeah, right. I've seen you in action, Oz. You answered the call, my friend. Not everybody does."

"You did," I said.

"Please, if you hadn't have come along, I'd still be sitting in that mattress store in Manchester. Everybody in this campsite tonight is here because of you." He yawned, and then continued. "Well, maybe not Reya, but she's a different story all together."

I caught his yawn and shook my head to fight off fatigue.

I surveyed the sleeping bodies in our camp. "I don't know if we can do it." I looked at Wes. "Win, I mean."

"Your job isn't to win," he said scratching his belly. "Your job is to lead. The winnin' will take care of itself." He could tell by my expression that I was confused. "The greatest army in the world with the greatest equipment and the perfect battle strategy can't win without a good leader." He motioned to the campground with his head. "That scraggly bunch of misfits don't care about the fight. They care about the man leadin' them into the fight. You understand?"

I tried to look like I did, but I wasn't sure. I had never been called a man before. I was waiting for him to correct himself and change it to boy, but he never did.

"Look," he said. "If you sacrifice yourself for them, they will die for you."

I nodded. "Some of us will die, won't we?" I had told Lou as much earlier, but now hearing somebody else say it, it really sunk in.

He ran his thumbnail across his lips and gave me a compassionate gaze. "Yeah, Oz, some of us will."

I smiled. "How do you know so much anyway?"

He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back, his elbows out like chicken wings. "Because I'm an old fart."

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When our shift ended I woke up Roy and Reya to relieve us. Reya was unhappy about the arrangement, but after some prodding by her brother she reluctantly agreed. I imagine they kept each other awake by arguing until morning.

Before lying down by the waning fire, I walked to the edge of the campground to pee. Before I could get my pants unzipped, I heard jumbled almost unintelligible voices from the trees above me.

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“Look, everybody, it’s Oz.” Hundreds of voices giggled and hissed in response.

I froze. “Who-who’s there?”

“Who-who?” A raspy voice called out. “Who-who?”

“The Délons are coming. The Délons are coming.” The same sing-songy voice from the two-way belted out.

I looked around and wondered why no one else in the camp was reacting to the deafening babbling from the trees. Roy and Reya were in a heated argument, and the others were lying in the same position they were in before. I was the only one who could hear the voices in the trees.

“The Délons are coming,” the voice said again.

“So, come on already.” It was a foolish use of bravado considering that it was obvious they outnumbered us a hundred-fold.

“It’s not your time, warrior,” a voice to my left said.

“It’s not your time,” a voice to my right said.

“It’s not your time,” a voice whispered in my ear. I could feel its lifeless and stale breath on my neck. I backed away.

“You’re not really here, are you?” I said.

“Wish you were here,” a Délon giggled.

“We’ve so many warriors to fight,” another moaned.

“The Délons are coming,” the sing-songy voice said. The voice suddenly turned grave. “The Storyteller is ours.” With that, the prattling stopped. They left as suddenly as they came. I scanned the tree line. Nothing. My ears ached from listening to the incessant mumbling. I stumbled backwards and struggled to get solid footing. Still in a state of semi-shock, I rejoined my sleeping comrades and sat next to the fire. The urge to pee had been scared out of me. I sat and stared into the hot embers of the fire. I looked up at the purple crack in the sky. A warrior was fighting the Délons tonight, of that I

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was sure. I pulled my knees to my chin and wrapped my arms tightly around my legs. I closed my eyes and tried to wish our fellow fighters to victory.

## EIGHT

Atlanta, home of the NFL's Falcons. We arrived in the southern metropolis around mid-morning. The highway system was a twisted mass of concrete and steel spaghetti. On the side roads and looping bypasses, there were thousands of abandoned vehicles, but there were none on I-75. Wes was right. Somebody was giving us a clear path. I thought about his question. Was it a good thing or a bad thing? Something or somebody could be leading us into a trap. I shrugged the thought off. Even if they were, it didn't really matter. Our goal was to find the Keepers. If that meant fighting our way out of a trap, then so be it.

We stopped at a convenience store and picked up a city map. We were all a little surprised to see the store had been looted. About the only thing that remained were maps. It had been savagely stripped bare of everything else.

"Who do you suppose did this?" Miles asked.

"Survivors," Wes said.

"Survivors?" Devlin was picking through the wreckage looking for any morsel of candy. "Like us?"

I made my way across the broken glass and fractured display shelves to the counter and snatched a folded city map from a wire rack on what was left of the wall. I scanned the wreckage. "I wouldn't say they're exactly like us."

"Yeah," Wes said. "They don't appear to be as friendly as us." He looked at Reya and corrected himself. "Most of us, anyway."

She smirked at him as he exited the store.

“We should go,” I said. Ajax stood on all fours in the doorway. He was feeling a hundred percent, and he was anxious to face the Takers again. He knew it was the only way to the Keepers. “We have to get to the zoo.”

“Cool, the zoo,” Devlin said.

“Alright,” Miles gave his fat friend a high-five. “The zoo rocks!”

“You idiots,” Reya said. “We ain’t going there to sightsee.” She flashed me an evil eye. “We’re going there to die.”

I started toward her. “Wrong.” I stopped when we were side-by-side; shoulder to shoulder, her facing one way, me the other. Without looking at her I said, “We’re going there to fight.” I walked out of the store.

We had left the wagon and VW bus parked on the side of the interstate due to the congestion of abandoned cars on the on-ramp. Roy, Kimball, and Lou stayed behind to guard our supplies and Nate. Wes sat on Mr. Mobley and waited at the edge of the convenience store parking lot for the rest of us. I climbed aboard Chubby and stuck my hand out to help Miles aboard. Ajax started down the grassy slope to our awaiting caravan. After giving up on finding anything edible in the convenience store, Devlin exited and mounted his horse. Reya followed. We weaved our way through the maze of cars, some in pristine condition, some torn apart at the metal frame.

Miles was the first to spot the strangers approaching from the east side of the overpass. There were a couple dozen men on horseback headed our way. They were all dressed in military uniforms, but they were unkempt and none of them exuded the discipline and pride of an average soldier.

“What do you make of that?” Wes asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Our survivors?” I turned to

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Reya and Devlin. "Get down to the wagon and bus. Tell Roy to drive the VW. Keep heading south."

"What are you going to do?" Reya asked.

"We won't be far behind," I said.

She watched as the band of horsemen inched their way closer.

"Do you need me, boss?" Miles asked. I could tell that he wanted to go with Devlin and Reya.

"No, we can handle it."

Miles quickly dismounted Chubby and climbed aboard Devlin's steed. Together with Reya, they headed down the on-ramp to the caravan.

Wes and I rode slowly toward the horsemen. They moved methodically around the abandoned vehicles. The rider in the middle turned to the others and said something. Two riders suddenly broke away from the pack and headed down the off-ramp on the other side of the overpass. The rider who had spoken galloped toward us with three other riders. The others stayed behind.

As they got closer, I recognized the one in the middle. He was a large man with a thick neck and a muscular build. His name was Pepper Sands, a linebacker for the Atlanta Falcons. I knew him because I saw him get three sacks against my Titans just last month. My Pop had cursed his name every time he broke through the offensive line and crushed our quarterback. I'd studied his resume later that night on the internet.

We met in the middle of the overpass. I was star struck. The man was a professional athlete that could bench press a Buick. Now, here we were face-to-face, both designated leaders. In a sense, we were equals. The idea blew my mind.

"You fellas passing through or looking for a place to hang your hat?" Pepper asked.

I couldn't bring myself to answer. I was mesmerized by his celebrity.

"Passing through," Wes said.

Pepper pointed to our caravan. "How'd you get the van to work?"

"Runs on propane." Wes wasn't as impressed by the great Pepper Sands as I was.

Pepper turned to his men and laughed. "Damn, boys, it runs on propane." His men laughed with him. He turned back to us. "There's a passing through tax." He sat up straight in his saddle and involuntarily flexed his forearm.

"A passing though tax?" Wes was incensed.

"That's right," Pepper said.

"Says who?" Wes asked. His voice was a little too sharp for Pepper's liking.

"Says me." Pepper moved his horse closer. He was headed for Wes when he stopped at the sound of my voice.

"What's the price?" I asked.

Pepper smiled. "Now the kid's got brains." He looked at his cronies. "The children are the future, boys." They laughed. "How many in your party?" he asked me.

"Does it matter?" The star worship was starting to wear off. This time I sat up in my saddle and flexed what little muscle I had in my forearms.

"Don't get smart, kid." He looked at our caravan. "The VW bus will do."

I followed his gaze and spotted the two horsemen who had broken off earlier riding toward our group. "No," I said. "You can't have the van. We've got food and weapons. You can take your choice."

Pepper circled me on his horse. "I said we'll take the van." I could see he was wearing a small tank on his back. Tubing

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and a metal nozzle were stuffed in the back of his pants. It was a small flame-thrower.

“And I said no.”

He didn't know what to make of me. I was thirteen, all of 100 pounds soaking wet, yet I was standing my ground like I was the giant and he was the puny one. “Kid, do you know who I am?”

“Pepper Sands,” I said. “You had twelve and a half sacks last year. You played college ball at Michigan. You still hold the record for tackles in a season there.”

“Good, then you know my nickname ain't Pepper Grinder for nothing.” He had an insufferable swagger that pissed me off. “I used to pulverize punks bigger than you for a living.”

“You were a great football player,” I said.

“You're damn right I was...”

I interrupted him. “But in case you haven't noticed, football season's over.”

“What the hell...”

I raised my hand to shush him. “Like I said, I won't give you the van, but maybe we can work something out.”

He studied me carefully. He had not expected my defiance, and he didn't know quite how to handle it. “What do you have in mind?”

I pointed to Wes. “That's Wes. He converted the VW bus to run on propane.”

“You giving us your mechanic?” Pepper smiled.

“What are you doing, Oz?” Wes was a little peeved that I would trade him for safe passage.

“I won't give you my mechanic, but I'll give you his knowledge.”

Pepper thought about the offer. He examined his crew. He finally gave his decision. “Deal”.

“Not quite,” I said.

Pepper wanted to leap out of his saddle and throttle me, but he showed remarkable restraint for a man who used to crush people for a living. “What do you mean, not quite?”

“I mean, what Wes knows could change your whole way of life. I need a little more than safe passage in exchange.”

“You’re pushing your luck, kid.” He considered my statement. “What did you have in mind?”

I turned to Wes and smiled. “I need an army.” Wes smiled back. For the first time, he knew where I was going.

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“You’re crazy, kid.” Pepper Sands leaned forward in a leather recliner on the fifty-yard line in the Georgia Dome. His feet rested on the Falcon’s logo. His men sat in recliners (all considerably less nice than Pepper’s) behind him. They had made the Georgia Dome their home. The emergency lighting worked due to an industrial-sized solar powered generator. It was a 75,000 seat indoor stadium that made me feel even smaller than I already was. Even with it empty, I got the tiniest sense of the kind of thrill Pepper and his teammates must have felt on Sundays.

Wes, Roy, and I sat in folding chairs across from Pepper. The others in our party remained with our supplies in the underground loading dock area of the dome.

Pepper reclined in his chair. “You’re asking too high a price.”

“That’s the offer,” I said. “Take it or leave it.”

He smiled. “You’re a hard-nosed little snot, aren’t you?” He snapped his fingers. A smallish mousy man stood up quickly and ran to Pepper’s chair. “I’ll give you Donny here.” Donny’s eyes opened wide. He had the look of a man who’d just been told he would volunteer to stand in front of a firing squad.

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Wes snorted. “You gotta be kidding. He looks like a strong wind would break him in two. No offense, Donny.”

Donny nodded and shrugged his shoulders as if he agreed with Wes’s assessment of him.

“You’re one to talk.” Pepper pointed at me. “Your little general here hasn’t hit puberty yet.” He rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles. The popping bones made an echo in the cavernous dome. “I’ll give you three men.”

“All or nothing,” I said.

“Kid, you’re not really in any position to negotiate. I’m not about to send every man I’ve got to die just because you’re on some silly mission.”

“Fine,” I said standing. I turned to Wes and Roy. “We’re leaving.”

Pepper bristled. “Hey, nobody told you that you could leave.”

Wes and Roy slowed down, but I told them to keep walking. This enraged Pepper even more. I had my back to him, but I could feel him getting out of his chair.

“I said you can’t leave!” He shouted. His voice bounced around the arena.

We kept walking.

“You can’t beat them,” he said. He had lost the command in his voice. He was scared.

I stopped and told Wes and Roy to do the same. I turned to Pepper. “Yes we can.”

He tried to laugh and make it sound menacing, but it came out weak and unsteady. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because,” I said, “we have to.” Wes, Roy, and I continued to walk towards our party.

“Okay,” Pepper said, sounding almost embarrassed that he

had been out negotiated by a kid. "We'll help, but not tonight and not without a game plan."

I stopped and turned with a smile on my face. "Deal."

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Wes spent a good portion of the day showing the most mechanically inclined members of Pepper's group how to convert a gas-guzzling vehicle to one that runs on propane. Wes erupted into fits of frustration many times during the impromptu workshop, but eventually they came around and grasped the concepts Wes was trying to teach them.

I introduced Pepper to Ajax, while Lou sat nearby with Nate and Dr. Fine's book. Roy and the others in our group gathered around to listen to the next day's plans. Pepper invited only two of his men, Hollis and Shaw. The others milled around the south end zone. Hollis was tall and lean, if not a little on the lanky side. He did not speak unless spoken to, but he had the chiseled look of intelligence that did all his speaking for him. Shaw was the opposite of Hollis in almost every way. He was a rotund little man who swayed nervously as he flanked Pepper to his left. His left eye twitched distractingly and his belly rumbled almost continuously.

"You're trying to tell me this gorilla can talk?" Pepper said.

Ajax signed, "Gorilla think man dumb."

Lou giggled after she interpreted what Ajax had said.

"How do you like that?" Pepper said to Shaw. "A gorilla just called me dumb." The round man heckled more than laughed.

Ajax signed, "Go zoo now."

"He wants to go to the zoo now," Lou said. She was consulting the book less frequently than she had before. I

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realized she must have been studying Ajax's sign language on her own.

"Tomorrow," I said.

He signed, "Why?"

"We have to make a plan." I pointed to Pepper. "We have new warriors."

Ajax signed, "More warriors at zoo."

"Yes," I said. "More warriors for the zoo."

He grunted and hooted. He was clearly irritated. He signed, "More warriors at zoo."

"I think he literally means there are more warriors at the zoo," Lou said.

This surprised me. "What warriors?"

"Gorilla warriors," Ajax signed.

Pepper crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "Is he saying what I think he's saying?"

"Of course," I said. "Gorillas always know," I signed. "They've been waiting for this, preparing for this for generations."

"You expect us to fight along side a bunch of monkeys?" Pepper shook his head.

Shaw's stomach roared before he spoke. "If I want a bunch of bananas et, I'll call me some monkeys, but I got no use for 'em in a fight." He waited for his fearless leader to laugh, but Pepper ignored him.

"Apes," Devlin said.

I smiled. "That's right, apes."

"I don't give a damn if they're super-apes, I'm not asking my men to put their trust into a bunch of dumb animals."

"The Greasywhoppers can't see them," Lou said. She was more than a little offended that Pepper had insulted Ajax. "Besides I'd bet money this dumb animal is smarter than half the men in your group."

Shaw squinted one eye and looked her way. He was trying to determine if she was referring to him.

Kimball barked.

“Kimball, too,” Lou added.

“Look,” I said, “Ajax knows these things better than any of us. All the gorillas do. It’s part of their folklore.”

“You expect me to believe gorillas have a folklore.” Pepper elbowed Hollis. “How do you like that, Hollis? These rubes think this gorilla is some kind of ape historian...”

“Historian? That’s a good one, Pep,” Shaw said trying to win favor with his boss.

Hollis cleared his throat. “I’ve seen a lot of weird things the last couple of weeks, Pepper. Once you’ve seen a monster eat your family, you’ll believe just about anything. What they’re saying doesn’t sound all that crazy to me.”

Pepper looked at his soldier. It was obvious Hollis had not questioned him before. He didn’t quite know how to react.

Ajax started signing frantically.

Lou had trouble interpreting. “Day soon... He’s going too fast.” She gently reached out and grabbed his hands. “Slow down, Ajax. I can’t understand you.” He huffed and repeated his signs, this time slower and more pronounced. “Day longs come soon. Doctor knows. Must go zoo now,” Lou said. “The Délons.”

“What does he mean, ‘doctor knows?’” I asked.

“What are the Délons?” Pepper asked.

“Monsters,” Roy said.

“Wait a minute.” Pepper twisted in his chair. “I thought you called them Greasywhoppers.”

“The Délons are... different,” I said. “We don’t know much about them.”

“Now hold on, we didn’t sign up for this. We said we’d

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help you with these Greasywhoppers at the zoo, but nobody said anything about these Dalungs, or whatever you call them.”

Ajax signed, “Doctor knows,” again.

“What doctor?” I asked.

Ajax huffed and motioned his head toward Hollis.

Hollis’s expression changed. He tilted his head and studied the ape. “I think he means me.”

“You?” I said.

He became even more reflective. “Interesting,” he said after a long pause.

Pepper looked at his second. “What’s interesting, Doc?”

“Doc?” I said.

“He was the team shrink.” Pepper smiled. “He kept all us savages out of the loony bin and on the playing field.”

“I’m a psychologist. I specialize in sports psychology.” He spoke about his credentials unremorsefully in the present tense. “In particular, I train athletes in the art of mental imagery or visualization as it’s most commonly called.”

“He’s a genius. My sack total went up thirty percent after he started working with me,” Pepper proclaimed happily, as if it were still a relevant achievement.

“The key is to get athletes to visualize each play before it happens. In doing so, you increase motivation, focus, and endurance. The brain can duplicate physical energy without the actual physical activity. In effect, the brain tricks the body into thinking the outcome has already taken place. In a properly trained athlete, the actual event becomes a reflexive formality. In some cases, the lines between reality and imagination can become very blurred.”

“What does this have to do with the Délons?” Roy asked.

“A colleague, Dr. Bashir, in Buffalo was working with

a group of patients that had underdeveloped brain functions for various reasons.” In the telling of his past, Hollis had transformed himself from Pepper’s number one, to proud psychologist before our very eyes. “Traditionally, society has taken the path of least resistance when treating such patients. The goal is to teach them to cope in society, but not to excel. Dr. Bashir had a different approach. He felt that through intensive mental imagery, these patients could do more than cope, they could thrive.”

“This is all very interesting, Doc, but...”

Hollis cut Pepper off. “Let me finish.”

Pepper gritted his teeth. He didn’t like being cut off by his underling.

Oblivious to Pepper’s frustrations, Hollis carried on. “It worked more successfully with some than it did with others, but what he found with his patients who suffered from Down syndrome was they possessed a keen talent for the mental imagery exercises.”

There were those words again, Down syndrome. They’d haunted me since the day I walked into Stevie Dayton’s house. It was absolute torture every time I heard them.

“In fact,” Hollis said, “he found that with some of these patients the lines between reality and imagination not only became blurred, they were obliterated. Particularly in one case. He had one patient who developed what Dr. Bashir called Hyper Mental Imagery, or HMI. That is to say, this patient not only visualized prior events in his mind, he created events in the physical world; a snowy day in May, a particular food on the hospital menu every day, small things that he would image onto the physical world. Understand that these findings were largely discredited by mainstream scientists, but still they offer some fascinating possibilities.”

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“Doc, the Délons?” I said.

“Oh yes, of course.” He put his hands behind his back and rose up on his toes. “This particular patient took to drawing what he wanted to image. They were quite spectacular drawings. In one noteworthy drawing he imaged a race of strange creatures that he called Délons. Anatomically they didn’t make much sense. They were part man and virtually part everything else, thousands of tentacles that looked like spider legs on top of its head and outlining its corpse-like face, a set of insect mandibles for teeth, milky white protruding eyes, horrible, horrible looking creatures.”

“Why would he want to image something like that?” Pepper asked.

Hollis considered the question. “I don’t know exactly, but it’s likely he created the Délons to punish those who made fun of him. According to Dr. Bashir, he suffered enormous humiliation at the hands of his classmates.”

Lou looked at me. I knew what she was thinking.

“Enough of this,” I said. “We need to come up with a battle plan.” I was harsh, and I didn’t care. I wanted to get off the topic of HMI and retarded kids abused by their classmates. I had lived it. I didn’t need to hear about it again.

“We still haven’t settled on this Délon business,” Pepper said.

I snapped. “We fight who we have to fight!” My voice carried throughout the entire dome. Pepper’s men all turned my way. “Be a man, Sands!” I couldn’t stop myself. I don’t know if the pressure had finally gotten to me or the guilt for Stevie’s death had been rekindled because of Hollis’s little lecture on HMIs, but I was on the edge, and I brought Pepper with me.

Shaw snickered a hideous, insufferable laugh.

Sweat formed on Pepper’s brow and his eyes turned blood

red. The veins on his neck started to convulse. He wanted to kill me, and I didn't blame him. I had challenged his manhood in his house in front of his men. If he was any kind of leader, he would have to make me pay. The only thing I had going for me was I that I was only 13 years old.

Roy pulled me aside. "What are you doing?"

"We don't have time for this, Roy. We need to be talking battle strategy..."

"Listen to me," he said. "You can't force this guy to help us. All you're going to do is piss him off."

I looked at the now enraged Pepper Sands and turned back to Roy. "Too late, I already did."

Unbeknownst to us, while we discussed a way to get Pepper back on our side, Shaw approached Lou and the baby. Kimball growled as the fat man waddled closer. Ajax stepped in front of Lou and Nate. Shaw's stomach gurgled loud enough to shift Roy's and my attention to the increasingly tense scene.

"I just want to say hello to the baby," Shaw said pleading his case to Ajax and Kimball.

They would have none of it. Ajax gave a short roar and tried to shoo Shaw away. Kimball was stooping lower and lower to the ground. He looked as if he were about to pounce at any moment.

Pepper stood. "Call off your pets, kid! In fact, pack up your stuff and get out of my house! Our deal's off!"

Shaw tried to move in closer to see the baby. Kimball snapped at his leg. "Hey, that ain't nice," he said, backing away.

"Kimball, back!" I yelled.

Wes approached. His puppies were on his heels. "What's going on?" The eight little junior Taker slayers saw Kimball and clumsily bounded towards him. Their demeanor became as vicious as Kimball's when they got closer to Shaw.

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“Would you look at that,” Wes said. “I ain’t never seen them react to somebody like that before.”

“Yeah,” I said. I caught a quick glimpse of Shaw’s face. His eyes started to tremble, and for a fleeting second they seemed to bug out from their sockets and turn a milky white, but it was for the briefest of seconds. I wondered if my mind was playing tricks on me again. I moved in and grabbed Kimball by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away. The puppies yapped and growled as menacingly as they could at Shaw, but they couldn’t quite pull it off. As I was dragging Kimball away, I saw Ajax signing something.

Lou swallowed hard. “Day long here.”

Ajax erupted and flung himself on top of Shaw.

“Get him off!” Pepper shouted. “Get him off!”

The man we thought was Shaw was pinned beneath Ajax’s massive 400-pound frame, and began to morph before our eyes. His round shape shifted into a long slender build. Thin, hairy tentacles sprouted from his face and head. His eyes bulged and turned milky white. He opened his mouth and two vertical pinchers shot out and snapped at Ajax. The military uniform was replaced by a black tattered uniform that left some of the creature’s purple skin exposed. It began to squawk like a bird. The sound suddenly started to come at us from all sides. Looking around the arena, we saw half of Pepper’s men undergo the same change as Shaw. They pounced on their former comrades. The thrashing tentacles held tight to the victims’ faces while the pinchers cut through to their brains.

Pepper didn’t know what to do. He watched in horror as his men were ambushed and destroyed.

I turned to Roy while I held Kimball back. “Weapons! Now!” Roy raced to our supplies.

To Tyrone and Valerie, "Get Lou and Nate to the wagon."  
To Devlin, "Go with them."

That left Reya, Miles, Wes, and me waiting in a defensive posture against the Délons. Hollis approached Ajax and the Délon who was once Shaw. The grotesque creature struggled against the great ape's weight, but to no avail. It looked up at Hollis and hissed.

"Interesting." The psychologist dropped to one knee and examined the Délon like it was a science experiment. "It matches the drawing perfectly."

The Délon squirmed and manically tried to work its arms free, but he was no match for Ajax's strength. "Come a little closer, Doc." The Délon spoke. "I'll show you something really interesting."

Hollis was floored. "It talks!"

Pepper backed his way to us. "Looks like the deal's back on, kid. Got any ideas?"

"Fight," I said. I let Kimball go and he bolted toward Ajax and the Délon.

Four Délons released the lifeless bodies of Pepper's men from their tentacles and focused their attention on us. The bodies flopped and twitched until they too morphed into Délons.

"That's not good," Wes said.

Roy galloped into the arena on Mr. Mobley's back carrying a sack and holding a loaded crossbow. He fired an arrow at one of the advancing Délons, striking it in the mouth. It continued toward us undaunted. Roy dropped the sack to the ground and our weapons spilled out. Wes, Miles, and Pepper grabbed the crossbows. I picked up J.J. and ran to Ajax's side. With a quick, unthinking thrust, I drove the sword through the Délon's head.

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The creature flailed about and a putrid gas emanated from the open wound. Ajax rolled off the Délon.

Hollis looked up at me. "Interesting."

"You said that already." I pulled the sword out of the Délon's head and wielded it in front of me. The four Délons advancing toward us had become eight.

Wes, Miles, and Pepper readied their crossbows. They fired in unison. The arrows flew true and struck three of the Délons, but they had no effect. Reya gathered all the arrows and waited to hand them out as needed.

"Fall back," I said. "We have to get to the zoo."

I turned to Hollis. "C'mon, Doc. Time to go."

He stood and for the first time showed some concern, when he took in the carnage on the field behind him. "Oh my."

Wes, Miles, Reya, and Pepper wasted no time in falling back. They quickly backed toward the loading dock, their weapons loaded and ready to fire. Pepper made a small detour to retrieve his mini flamethrower and then fell back in line.

"Go with them," I said to Hollis. I turned to Kimball. "Kimball, wagon." He started for the loading dock, but stopped. He barked once. The puppies yelped and chased after him.

Roy fired another arrow from horseback, but something spooked Mr. Mobley, and the arrow flew far off target. The Tiger horse reared and bounded toward the scene of the massacre.

"Roy!" I shouted.

He had no control over Mr. Mobley. The horse approached the virtual sea of Délons with Roy frantically trying to reload his crossbow.

"Roy," Reya yelled. I turned to see Pepper and Miles dragging her to the loading dock.

I stepped forward. I had to help him. I had to. The fire was in my gut to race after him, but... I hesitated because helping

him meant most certainly that I would die, and that terrified me.

The first Délon seized upon Mr. Mobley and drove him to the ground. Roy tumbled to the artificial turf, still holding tightly to his crossbow. With cat-like reflexes, he jumped to his feet and fired an arrow into another approaching Délon. The creature went down, but another one emerged and leapt for Roy. He dropped the crossbow and pulled an arrow from his quiver. The Délon grabbed his arm. Roy stabbed the creature in its dead eye with the arrow, and then reached for his knife, but before he could pull it free another Délon was on top of him.

“Roy!” I shouted again. Finally, I shook the paralyzing fear and headed for him, but Ajax stepped in front of me.

He pushed me back. “Go zoo now,” he signed.

I tried to run around him, but he pushed me to the ground. “Get out of my way! Roy’s in trouble!” I didn’t shout. I screamed.

“Go zoo now,” he signed. The hair on his shoulders and back flared. He meant business.

Roy shouted. “C’mon you ugly mothers! C’mon.” He had broken away from the two that had hold of him and was holding his knife.

“Yes,” I said standing, relieved.

He hooted and raised the knife in victory. Another Délon blindsided him from behind and shoved him to the ground. “Roy!” This time I was determined to get to him. Ajax had other plans. He roared and displayed his fangs. The eight Délons were just ten yards away. I felt a hand on my shoulder. Startled I turned to see Wes staring at me.

“There’s nothin’ we can do. Let’s go.”

I didn’t want to believe it. I could do something. I could

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save him. I was the leader. It was my job. Without being aware of it, I started to cry. I'd failed. I let Roy down when he needed me. I let my cowardice prevent me from sacrificing myself for him. I was no warrior. I was a scared little kid who had no business on the battlefield.

Ajax pushed me back again. I looked at him with all the hate I could muster, and he understood. He knew exactly how I felt.

Wes yanked me back. "Now!" He was as steadfast as Ajax.

I surrendered and followed Ajax and Wes to the loading dock, listening to Roy's pleas for help as we went.



## NINE

**I**t was a solemn trip to the zoo. I sat in the back of the wagon trying to come to grips with what I had done, or not done as the case may be. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I wanted to stew in self-pity and crawl under a rock.

Reya rode atop Chubby next to the wagon. She alternated between fits of blinding tears and looks of rage directed at me. She had witnessed the whole thing, and she knew I was a fraud. No words were spoken between us, but we shared an understanding that she would not let my cowardice go unpunished. Someday, somehow, she would pay me back, and I couldn't blame her.

For some reason, the Délons did not follow us out of the arena. I'm not sure if they could have overtaken us, but they didn't even try. It was as if they understood we had a rendezvous with the Takers, and they didn't want to interfere. It was even more of a reason to think we were being set up, but we were in too deep to turn back now. We had to follow through.

We had sent Pepper and Miles to scout out the road ahead. They came back and reported it was clear sailing. Pepper saw me sulking and maneuvered his mount next to the wagon on the opposite side of Reya.

He showed all the tact of a man who hurt other people for a living, "Get over it, kid. I lost a lot of men back there and you don't see me crying about it."

Reya fumed. "That was my brother."

Pepper stuttered. "Oh, well... Sorry..."

"This little twerp just let him die." I didn't look at her, but I knew she was referring to me. She kicked her horse and road ahead of the caravan.

Pepper waited until she was out of earshot. "Don't let her get to you, kid. She'll calm down after some time has passed."

"She's right." There was no other way I could've said it. "I let him die."

Pepper shifted in his saddle. He looked at me with a genuine look of compassion that I did not think he was capable of. "Show me a hero, and I will write you a tragedy." He winked at me. "F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that." I gave him a strange look. "What'd you think, I was some dumb jock who never went to my English Lit class?"

"I'm no hero," I said.

"An old coach once told me that brave men overcome fear while fear overcomes cowards, and no man always overcomes." He smiled. "Fear has to win out every now and then, kid. It's how the world works." He leaned forward in his saddle. "It's even beaten me a few times." He looked at his watch. "Now, take the next five minutes or so to feel sorry for yourself and then snap out of it because things aren't going to get any easier." He moved his horse to the front of the caravan.

He was right. I couldn't afford to go into the zoo feeling the way I did. It wouldn't do me, and more importantly, any of the others any good. I closed my eyes tight and buried my morose feelings deep inside. I stood and took the horses' reins from Lou. She smiled, relieved that I was back, for the time being anyway.

We pulled up in front of the zoo's entrance. Ajax was eager to enter, but I urged more vigilance. Remembering my conversation with Wes about what had become of the

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zoo animals, we had no idea what was waiting for us on the other side of the gates. An abundance of caution was called for. Everyone armed themselves, and formed a tight-knit group. We all entered the zoo with Ajax and Kimball leading the way.

Some of us were more surprised than others when we were greeted by a large African elephant on the other side of the entrance in the Flamingo Plaza. It plodded toward us with a strange curiosity, glaring at us, inspecting us. Ajax approached it and to my amazement began signing to the hulking gray beast. He was trying to talk to the elephant. What's more amazing is that the elephant understood what Ajax was saying. It nodded its massive head, raised its trunk, bellowed a trumpet-like blast, and stepped back to let us pass.

The pink flamingos bobbed their heads from their habitat and watched us with a great deal of interest as we journeyed farther in. Unlike every other town and community we had traveled through over the last couple of days, the zoo was alive. The animals had not only survived, they had thrived. There was no explaining it. They had no food, no caretakers, but they were definitely flourishing within the confines of the zoo. Some of the animals had escaped their habitats and were roaming about the grounds with little or no fear of us as we traversed from one exhibit to the other. A male lion crossed our path outside the Masai Mara habitat, but he only gave us a passing glance before moving toward a grazing zebra. Once he was in striking distance of the black and white feast, he simply lay down and yawned. He had no interest in eating the zebra. It was a little disconcerting to see such peace among species that did not usually live in harmony with each other.

Ajax led us through the zoo like he had lived there his entire life. He knew exactly where he was going. I even thought

I detected looks from the other animals that suggested they had been expecting the great ape. A black rhino nodded in recognition at our presence, a giraffe seemed to point us out to another giraffe as we approached. They both bowed their heads as we passed. It was as if they had been waiting for us.

Outside the Ford African Rain Forest, gathered around a massive bronze statue of Willie B., the late legendary silverback of Zoo Atlanta, were 23 gorillas of various sizes and ages. Ajax loomed toward them stoically. We stood back and watched as a larger, more powerfully built silverback than Ajax met him in front of the group of apes. The two circled each other. The other gorillas screamed and hooted. It looked as if the two silverbacks would tear into each other at any moment. Instead, they stopped, grunted, and embraced each other in a bear hug that few bears could survive. In an extraordinary scene of joy, the other apes converged on the two silverbacks and emitted deafening sounds of happiness. It was a reunion unlike any I had ever seen. Yet, could it have been a reunion? Ajax had been in Dr. Fine's care since he was an infant. How could it be that these gorillas knew him?

Just when I thought I could not be more confused by the gorillas' behavior, something even more astonishing happened. The silverback that first greeted Ajax began to sign to him. Ajax signed back. They were having a conversation. Some of the other gorillas signed, as well and joined in on the conversation. A group of gorillas with no known exposure to American Sign Language were using it like they had been using it their whole lives.

Lou put her hand on my shoulder. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

I nodded.

"What's going on?" Pepper asked.

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“I have no idea,” I said.

“What are they saying?” Hollis stepped up to the front.

Lou scanned the group. “I don’t know exactly. They’re all signing at once. Something about a theater.”

Over to our left was the Elder’s Tree Theater. “They must mean that one,” I said. I broke from the group with Pepper and Miles in tow. We advanced on the small open-air theater with caution. Once we reached the perimeter, we could see a group of orangutans sitting on the stage surrounding a massive white-haired animal with its back to us. It wasn’t until it turned that I realized what it was. It was a Taker.

“What the hell?” Pepper said.

Furious, I ran back to the others. “C’mon, we’re leaving.” Lou, Wes, and the others gave me a look like I had lost my mind. “Ajax sold us out.”

“What are you talking about?” Lou asked.

I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to the theater. “See.”

The Taker was chattering its teeth now. The sound sent a chill down my spine. Lou’s chin dropped. She became visibly shaken. “What...”

“Looks like our gorilla friend was in charge of dinner,” I said.

I felt a hot rush of wind on my back. I turned to find Ajax and the other silverback looking back at me. Wes and the others kept their distance.

Ajax started to sign. Lou interpreted. “Not take. Keep.”

“What?” The white Taker stood and circled the stage. It sniffed the air. It was becoming more and more excited with each passing moment.

Lou said with a thinly veiled sense of horror, “That’s a Keeper?”

The orangutans began to scream and dart back and forth as the white monster's unrest grew.

I looked at Ajax. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Keeper protect baby," Lou said as Ajax signed. "Keeper save Storyteller."

Pepper chimed in. "Something don't smell right. I wouldn't trust that thing with the baby."

The other silverback rushed Pepper and roared. Pepper cowered back.

I studied Ajax. He had saved my life. He knew more about what was going on than the rest of us. It seemed to be absolute folly not to trust him now, but hearing that familiar chatter coming from the Keeper, I could not help but have reservations. My mind flashed back to Mrs. Chalmers walking down the stairs of the attic, giving her baby one last look before she entered the hallway and gave herself to the Takers. "He's your responsibility now," she said. I thought about Stevie Spangler's thrashing legs dangling from the Taker's mouth. The monster had consumed him in front of my eyes, swallowing him whole. The Keeper on the stage matched that Taker in size and ferocity. The only difference was the coloring.

I took a deep breath. "Stay here," I said to Lou. Before she could ask where I was going, I entered the theater. I slowly walked up the outer aisle. I hung on loosely to JJ. My legs ached. My chest hurt from the pounding of my heart. The Keeper locked me in an eye-to-eye stare as I approached. Its short fleshy snout raised, its massive nostrils flaring, it sniffed the air getting a bead on my scent. The orangutans moved to the front of the stage. They bounced and wailed, trying to discourage me from coming any closer. Ajax knuckle-walked down the middle aisle with the other silverback behind him. They both hoot-growled, and the orangutans calmed in response. They moved to the rear of the stage.

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I stood at the base of the stage and looked up at the massive creature. It did not have the greasy coating the Takers had. Its hair looked soft and silky. Ajax moved beside me and signed something to the Keeper. It breathed in deeply through its nose and let out a short guttural chuckle.

“The warrior?” it said.

Its thick throaty voice startled me. The tone of it rattled from its vocal cords and vibrated through the air like the sound of a horrible crash.

“He’s too small.” The Keeper reached down and pulled me up on the stage by the scruff of my shirt.

“Hey,” I heard Wes shout. The other gorillas held everyone back at the perimeter of the theater. Wes tried to break through, but he could not get by the powerful apes.

“This is a boy,” the Keeper tossed me about as it examined me.

Ajax continued to sign, and the Keeper continued to treat me as if I were a rag doll. He held me by my feet and lifted me above his head.

“This one saved the Storyteller?”

“Put me down,” I said.

“Shut up!” The Keeper growled. “I should eat you and wait for a real warrior.”

I swung J.J. at its hand, striking it on one of its huge knuckles, but it only flinched the tiniest bit as if it were just struck by a gnat.

Nate began to yowl from his sling around Lou’s neck. The Keeper directed his interest on the pained cry. “Bring him to me,” the Keeper demanded.

A female gorilla reached for the sling, but Lou slapped her hand away. The gorilla protested with a high-pitched screech. Another gorilla grabbed Lou by the hair. Wes punched it on

the nose, causing a chain reaction that resulted in a melee between the apes and humans. Ajax stood and pounded his chest. The apes took heed and backed off. They clearly had the advantage and could have disposed of their human counterparts with ease, but at the behest of Ajax they showed restraint and retreated into the theater. Kimball had stayed out of the fray. He was unusually tranquil.

The Keeper held me upside down to his eyelevel. "I want the Storyteller."

"No," I said.

"The gorillas promised this to me..."

"It was not their promise to make," I said. "He's my responsibility."

The Keeper gnashed its teeth and tossed me to the back of the stage. I landed with a thud on top of three agitated orangutans. Had it not been for Ajax running immediately to my rescue, the three gangly-armed orange apes would surely have torn me apart.

The Keeper leapt off the stage and stormed towards Lou and the others. He was determined to get his hands on Nate.

"Stop!" I yelled, battered and bruised from the fall.

Amused, the Keeper turned to me. "Such a loud voice for such a little boy..."

"We came here to finish the book."

"What book?" With his hands curled under his wrists, the monster stomped toward me with an ominous glare.

"Stevie Dayton's book."

Fear smothered his menacing expression. He had not expected this. "You have the book?"

Ajax signed, "Read book now!" He pointed to the purple crack in the sky.

The Keeper peered upward. "That is why the Délons do

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not come.” The white creature began to pace. “They are waiting for you to read the book.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

Ajax signed again, “Read book now.”

The Keeper barked, “We cannot!”

“What’s going on?” I asked Ajax.

“The Délons need us to read the book,” the Keeper answered. “They are in allegiance with the ones like me.”

“The ones like you? You mean the Take... the Greasywhoppers?”

He smiled at this name. “The Greasywhoppers? Ahhh, yes, you cannot speak their true name. We are a brother race, not of this realm. They are here to conquer your world. We are here to restore it.”

“You can restore our world?” This heartened me.

He looked toward Lou and the others. “We cannot do it without the Storytellers.” He looked back at me. “Nor can we do it without the warriors.”

“Why did this happen?” It was hard to hide the immaturity in my voice. I wanted to sound authoritative and commanding, but instead I sounded like a little kid asking his mommy if Santa really existed.

“Because he was afraid.”

“Stevie?” I asked, hoping against hope that the Keeper meant somebody else.

He nodded. “Your kind always seeks solace inward. Most of the time you find peace there. The one called Stevie did not. He found bitterness and fear. He became so afraid that he could not hold back his inner world any longer, and the Takers escaped his mind. They are here to find others like Stevie, Storytellers to bring forth legions of dark warlords. To rule the outer world as ruthlessly as they rule the inner world of those like Stevie.”

"It was because of me," I whispered.

"Yes," the Keeper said, simply, unapologetically. "This is your burden to bear." He smiled. "And your wrong to set right." He looked at Ajax. "There is no turning back if the book is read."

Ajax signed, "Gorillas always know. Read book now."

The Keeper turned back to me. "I'm afraid Ajax may be right. You have to understand by reading the book you are opening the gate between the two worlds. The Takers will enter freely, as will the Délons. Their numbers reinforced, they will seek out the other Storytellers with little resistance and a renewed vigor."

Hollis interjected. "It sounds like the prudent thing to do is not read the book."

The Keeper huffed. "In order to vanquish the inner world, you must face it." He scanned our group and the apes. "The book will show you the way, but understand, you may not like where it takes you. You must trust that the journey is a small price to pay for the destination."

I could see my troops giving the Keeper's remarks deep consideration. We all had survived the end of the world. Nothing seemed so awful to us to keep us from bringing it back.

Wes stepped forward. "Let's stop this yapping and get on with it."

Pepper raised his fist and let out an ear piercing war cry. The others, including the apes, followed suit.

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Lou sat in the middle of the stage surrounded by the gorillas and orangutans. She needed all the protection she could get. There was little to no chance the Takers could get

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to her. The book was face down on her lap. She sat anxiously, waiting for the defining moment.

Ajax paced in front of his band of simian brothers. He was as majestic and noble as any general I had ever seen in history books or on television surveying his troops. The apes were his to send into battle. They fought at his command. It was really a spectacular sight to see.

The rest of us huddled together on the opposite end of the theater. We were all well armed. Nate was in his sling around my shoulder. The Keeper approached.

“It is time you entrust the Storyteller to me,” he said.

I hesitated.

“The Takers will come en masse this time. If they find the Storyteller, they will open a new gate and others will come, a different race, more brutal than you have ever seen.”

I nodded. Opening the sling, I fought back tears. “Okay, little guy, we’ll see you when this thing’s all over with.” Nate’s eyes squinted in the late afternoon sun. He stuck his tongue out and cooed. I handed him to the Keeper before I began to bawl like a baby.

The white giant cupped Nate in his enormous left hand, and trudged to the entrance of the theater.

Pepper called out. “Hey, big guy, where you going? We could use your help.”

The Keeper paused. “This is not my war. I cannot help. I can only protect the Storyteller.”

He was about to exit when I shouted, “What’s your name?”

He stopped, and his eyes brightened. “I am Tarak, son of Zareh.”

“Well, Tarek, son of Zareh, if they harm one hair on that kid’s head, I’m holding you personally responsible.” I puffed out my chest in an effort to intimidate. It was a comical attempt.

The Keeper bowed its head and exited the theater.

Devlin cleared his throat. "You sure about this, Oz?"

"No," I said. "But what choice do we have?" Valerie and Tyrone were visibly shaken. Even though they wanted no part of the coming battle, they stood by us valiantly. I knelt down beside them. "I've got a special mission for you guys." They looked at me nervously. "I want you two to protect the elephant."

"But I want to stay here and fight," Tyrone said.

"Me, too." Valerie tried to stand tall and look brave.

"I know," I said, "but the elephant is very important to us. We can't afford to lose him. Do you understand?"

They both reluctantly nodded their heads.

"Good, now go back to the entrance and wait there until somebody comes and gets you."

They started to run out of the theater.

"Be sure to find a place to hide," I said standing.

When they were gone, Devlin asked, "What's so important about the elephant?"

Miles snickered. "Nothing, dufus. He's trying to get the kids out of the way for their own safety." Miles stuck out his hand. "You're alright, boss."

I shook his hand and nodded without comment.

"He's a coward," Reya said.

Wes peered at her. "This ain't the time. If we don't fight as one, we all die."

She glowered at Wes. "Unlike him, you can count on me."

"Enough," Pepper shouted. "Let's get this thing started."

Reya and I exchanged an awkward gaze. I turned to Lou and yelled. "It's time."

She closed her eyes, breathed deeply and turned the book

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over. Quickly she flipped through the pages to where she last left off. The apes' posture stiffened. Kimball began to pace in front of the stage. They were bracing for action.

We stood in a circle, our backs to each other. I held J.J. with both hands. Wes gripped his knife tightly. Pepper, Reya, Miles, and Devlin readied their crossbows. Each wore quivers filled with arrows. Hollis clumsily held onto the nozzle of the flamethrower. The small tank was strapped to his back. We had all stuffed our pockets with firecrackers.

A wind blew through the open-air auditorium. Thunder rolled and shook the ground. Lou read. She flipped through the pages. She was racing to the end, one page, two, three, four... The wind suddenly stopped. The air stood still as though we were in a vacuum.

Miles stepped out of the circle. "They chickened out."

With that, the theater bleachers to our left exploded into the air. A single Taker crawled out of the ground. Chattering, it grabbed Miles by his throat. I lunged at it with J.J. striking it on the arm. It screamed and dropped Miles. A second taker crawled out of the ground and then a third. Four more popped up in front of the stage. They came in bunches, dozens of them. The apes furiously assailed the Takers that advanced on Lou with little trouble.

Pepper, Reya, Miles, and Devlin fired their crossbows. Three hit their targets, one did not. They quickly reloaded. Wes rushed an oncoming Taker. The monster backhanded him and sent him crashing into the broken bleachers. Another Taker sprung on top of him. I hurried toward him, but a Taker behind me took hold of my shirt and yanked me backwards. It grinned, flashing its pointy teeth. I thrust J.J. into its chest and watched with euphoria as it dropped to the ground. I turned back to Wes and was pleased to now see him standing on top of the Taker, pulling his knife from its throat.

“These suckers ain’t so tough,” he screamed. He hooted and jumped on the back of another Taker. He frantically stabbed it in the head.

Pepper pulled another arrow from his quiver. Before he could load it, a Taker leapt from twenty feet away and landed on top of the former linebacker. Its claws ripped across his chest, and Pepper screamed in pain. He squirmed from under the Taker and rammed his thick muscled shoulder into the monster’s knee, knocking it to the ground. He quickly raised the arrow and drove it into the Taker’s chest.

A Taker stalked after Hollis. The sports psychologist hunched over and with shaky hands repeatedly tried to ignite the flamethrower. He could not get it to work. The Taker backed Hollis to the exit. The doctor gave one last useless try at the flamethrower, and then turned and ran out of the theater. Before the Taker could pursue him, Kimball tore into the Greasywhopper. The monster screeched in pain as the canine warrior ripped it apart.

Miles and Devlin were teaming up on a Taker near the theater entrance. They fired their crossbows simultaneously, hitting the creature in the eyes. It reeled backwards, screeching, groping at the arrows’ shafts.

I turned to strike at the nearest Taker and was surprised at the sight of an arrow pointing at my chest. Reya stood, hate in her eyes, finger on the trigger of her crossbow.

“Reya...”

“You killed my brother,” she said, applying pressure to the trigger. As she fired, she was jerked backwards by a nearby Taker. The arrow sailed over my head and struck a Taker sneaking up behind me. The creature fell to its knees, pulling the arrow from his temple. It struggled to stand and then collapsed lifelessly to the ground.

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The Taker that had grabbed Reya held her up by her throat and opened its mouth. Its teeth folded down. I ran as fast as I could and plunged J.J. into its groin. It wailed in pain and dropped Reya. I quickly helped her to her feet. Furious, she ripped her arm from my grasp and ran to the theater entrance.

Waiting for her there, I could see a single Délon. It held on to the reins of a familiar horse, Mr. Mobley. The Délon was Roy. It looked nothing like Roy, but by the way Reya greeted it warmly, with a familial fervor, I knew it was him. They hugged. The tentacles on the Délon's face began to pulse and thrash. They clasped onto the back of Reya's head. The pinchers shot out of the Délon's mouth and clamped down on her face.

I ran to the exit, but my legs were swept out from underneath me half way there. J.J. flew out of my hands. A battered Taker lifted me in the air, its mouth open and its teeth folded in. I squirmed and jerked about trying to release myself. Its grip was too tight. I dug through my pocket and pulled out an M-98. I pulled a pocket torch from my other pocket and frantically tried to light the firecracker. My hands were too shaky. Without warning, the Taker doubled over and dropped me. I fell hard to the ground.

Wes yelled in victory and pulled his knife out of the Taker's chest. "That's the way you do it, boy! That's the way you gut a Greasywhopper..."

He went down with a crash. A Taker pulled its massive fist back and sent it down on Wes again. I scrambled to get up and find J.J. The Taker hit Wes once more, knocking him unconscious. The evil monster smiled and held the inert Wes above its head. It opened its huge mouth.

"No!" I screamed. My foot kicked something across

the ground. It was J.J. I picked the sword up and ran at the Taker.

Before I could take two steps in its direction, it swallowed Wes.

“Ahhhhh,” I screamed, furious, inconsolable. I lifted J.J. above my head and wildly swung the sword at the huge beast. I brought the sharp blade down on the monster over and over again, until it dropped to the ground. Then I jumped on its back and repeatedly stabbed it in the neck. I shouted, “Wes!”

Pepper saw me, and rushed to my side. “Kid.”

I didn’t answer. I continued to pound the Taker with J.J.

“Kid!” Pepper repeated. He grabbed my wrist in mid swing. “He’s gone.”

I was starting to hyperventilate. “No, he’s not.” I bent down and tried to push the Taker over.

“What are you doing?” Pepper stood over me.

“Help me turn it over,” I said.

“Why?”

“Just help me!”

He bent down and helped me turn the slain Taker over. Another Taker rushed us. Pepper fired an arrow and hit it in the head. He reloaded. “We ain’t got time for this,” he said.

I ran J.J. across the dead Taker’s belly and sliced it open. Quickly, I pulled back the flaps of skin and stuck my arm in the open wound. Reaching past the thick layers of fat, I felt a hand. It grabbed onto my wrist. I pulled with all my might. I strained and grunted. Little by little I made progress. I stood and pulled harder. Eventually my hand emerged with Wes’s hand tightly gripping mine.

Pepper fired another arrow and then turned his attention back on me. “Good God almighty!” He ran to help. He grabbed hold of Wes’s now visible forearm and pulled.

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We were doing it. We were pulling Wes out of the belly of the beast. His shoulder came through and then his head. He gasped and struggled to breathe.

“Get me out of this thing,” he said, coughing and hacking. “It smells like rotten feet.”

Pepper and I stopped only for the briefest moment to gather our strength when Wes was yanked back inside the Taker. He could no longer hold tightly to my wrist. I slipped and tumbled backwards. Wes disappeared into the Taker’s belly. Pepper was pulled along with him. He was inside the monster’s stomach shoulder deep before he too lost his grip on Wes. He slowly pulled his arm free.

I didn’t have time to mourn the loss of Wes for very long. The sound of Devlin screaming caught our attention. I stood to see the stocky warrior pulling on Miles’s foot. The rest of Miles was inside a Taker’s mouth.

Pepper and I raced to their location. Three Takers greeted us as we approached. Kimball leapt over some dislodged bleachers and stood between the Takers and us. He growled and snapped at the towering beasts. They backed away, clearing a path for us to Devlin and Miles.

When we reached them, Devlin was still holding tight to his friend’s foot. He was losing the battle. Pepper fired an arrow into the Taker’s thigh, and I swung at the back of its knees. The monster dropped with a thud. Pepper grabbed Miles’s other leg and pulled him from the Taker’s mouth.

Miles struggled to breathe. He was covered in a thick pink mucus. He rested on his knees, spitting and coughing. “That was fun,” he said sarcastically.

I turned to the stage. The apes had disposed of a dozen or so Takers. Ajax beat his chest as he rushed another monster.

Lou continued to read. She showed incredible focus.

She was in the middle of the battle. Death and destruction happening all around her, but she kept her head down and read.

More Takers emerged from the ground. Pepper grabbed me by the shoulder. "We gotta do something about that hole kid. They just keep on coming."

I reached in my pocket and pulled out a handful of firecrackers. "This might slow them down." I ran to the hole, swinging J.J. at Takers as I passed. I stopped at the hole and started dropping lit firecrackers down it. A chorus of pops went off, and smoke rose from the ground. But still they came. I swung J.J. at an emerging Taker and struck it on the neck. The monster stopped and thrashed about, plugging up the hole. I lit a string of poppers and wedged them past the Taker's backside. A cacophony of explosions went off and the monster thrashed about even more. The onslaught of new Takers was stopped for the moment.

"Oz," I heard above the near deafening pop-pop-pop of the firecrackers. Lou stood from her chair. "The Queen..."

The Taker lodged in the hole let out a high-pitched scream, drowning out Lou's voice.

"What!"

"The Queen," she shouted. "You have to kill the Queen."

"The Queen?"

"The Taker Queen." She stepped outside of her protective circle of apes. "I know how to get everybody back. You have to kill the Queen."

I moved towards her. The battle raged on all around us. The influx of Takers had stopped. The apes were easily defeating the greasy monsters with little trouble. Miles, Devlin, and Pepper were holding their own with the help of Kimball. It appeared we would win this encounter with only two casualties. It was two too many.

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“How do I kill the Queen?”

“Find the Keeper...” A Taker’s huge hand swept her off of her feet. The monster held her like a banana.

“Lou!” I ran toward the Taker.

“The Keeper,” she shouted. “Find the Keeper.”

With that the Taker stuffed Lou in its mouth and swallowed her.

My heart felt as though it exploded in my chest. I felt a rage I had never felt before. I gritted my teeth and raised J.J. above my head. The Taker roared and swung its massive fist. The wind from it knocked me off my feet. My head slammed into a bleacher. Woozy, I sat up on my elbows. My vision was blurred. My head throbbed. I tried to stand but couldn’t. The Taker hovered over me. It raised its snout and bellowed wildly. It took great pride in what it was about to do to me, and I didn’t care. I wanted it to eat me. I had failed my friends. They were dead because of me. I deserved to die. I lay back down on the ground and waited to be eaten.

Through my blurred vision, I saw three apes leap through the air and land on the Taker’s back. Ajax’s leathery hand wrapped around my wrist, and he dragged me across the ground. I lost consciousness shortly thereafter.



## TEN

It was several hours later before I came to. The sun had long since disappeared over the horizon. I lay in a mental haze for a long time. Parts of the battle replayed in my mind. I saw Wes raise his fist in victory. I saw him come to my rescue. I saw him fall prey to one of the Takers. I saw Reya locked in the clutches of the Délon that was once her brother. Finally, I saw Lou snatched up by a Taker and swallowed.

I shot up when the last image played through my mind. My head felt like a lead weight. A sharp pain throbbed at the back of my skull. I leaned to my left and vomited. After resting a few more moments I tried to stand.

“You should stay down.”

I turned to the voice. The blurred face of Hollis looked back at me. “She didn’t scream.” In my mind my voice sounded clear and decisive, but Hollis cocked his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“What?”

“Lou...”

Hollis looked over his shoulder. “He’s mumbling something about Lou.”

Pepper’s face came into view. “You took a good wallop on the head, kid. Probably got a concussion. You shouldn’t try to move.”

“Lou,” I said. I wasn’t asking for her. I knew she was gone, but I thought somehow if I said her name out loud, it would erase the past, and she would reappear out of thin air.

“He’s out of it,” Pepper said. “The girl’s gone.”

“Listen to me, Oz, you suffered a pretty severe blow to the head. You should really stay still.” Hollis placed his hands on my shoulders.

“She didn’t scream.” My voice was clearer now. They could understand me.

Pepper’s face turned sullen. “No, Kid, she didn’t. She was brave until the end.”

“Don’t you understand?” The world around me began to spin. My stomach rolled. The urge to vomit hit me again suddenly. I worked myself up on my hands and knees, fighting my need to purge. I was shaky and weak.

“Kid...”

“She knew it was coming,” I said. I could hold it no longer. I vomited violently, my body convulsing.

“Son,” Hollis said, “lay back down.”

“No,” I said in between dry heaves. “We don’t have time...” I breathed deeply to gather myself.

“We won,” Pepper said. “They’re gone. Listen.” He stood, threw back his massive chest and yelled, “Come and get us, you friggin’ ugly Takers! You mutant freaks, c’mon!”

We waited. They would come soon. He had spoken their name. They craved to be noticed. They yearned to be feared. Terror was the air they breathed. The seconds turned into minutes. I stood on wobbly legs. I was sure they would come, but they didn’t.

Pepper smiled. “You see, nothing.”

“But they...” I lost my balance. Hollis caught me.

“I really think you should lay down...”

“Where’s Nate? Where’s the Keeper?”

“Gorilla habitat number three,” Pepper said.

“They’re alive? They weren’t taken?”

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“No,” Hollis said. “Why?”

“It doesn’t make sense.” I moved toward the habitat area, but had to quickly stop when I became nauseous.

“What doesn’t make sense?” Pepper asked.

“The Takers. They came for Nate... the Storyteller. If they didn’t get him, why don’t they come?”

Hollis and Pepper had no answer.

With my head pounding and my stomach turning, I headed toward the gorilla habitats.

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The Keeper was sitting on a boulder in the middle of gorilla habitat number three. His back was to the Willie B. Gorilla Conservation Center. Unable to shake the effects of the blow to my head, I approached gingerly.

“They wanted Lou,” I said. It was the only explanation I could come up with for the Takers sudden lack of interest in the rest of us.

The Keeper did not acknowledge me. He was hunched over, cradling Nate in his huge hand.

“Hey, Tarek, I’m talking to you. The Takers wanted Lou.”

“What they want doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.”

“You have done your part. You have delivered the Storyteller to me.”

The angrier I got the more my head hurt. I desperately tried to keep calm to save myself the agony. “Why do they want Lou?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does!” My head felt as if it would explode.

“Because they want you.”

I held my hand to my temple and tried to rub the pain away. I tried to process his answer. "Me?"

"And the Storyteller." Tarek looked at me for the first time. "They know you will come for her. But you must let it end here."

"Come for her?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I recalled the memory of trying to pull Wes from one of the Takers. "That means Wes... Everybody... They don't eat people..."

"They transport people."

"Where?"

He looked away from me.

"Where, Tarek?"

"To their Queen," He stood.

"Everybody's alive..." I tried to let the information soak through my throbbing skull. "Lou said to kill the Queen... That's how I get everybody back, isn't it? If I kill the Queen, everything will be back to normal..."

"It's not that simple," Tarek said. "The Délons are here now. Things won't be the same. They benefit if you kill the Taker Queen."

"Why?"

"Because it makes them stronger." The hulking Keeper circled me as he spoke. Nate lay content in his hand. "The Takers hold one Storyteller, the Délon creator. His capture brought the Délons into this world. Because of this, the Délons are subservient to the Takers. If you kill the Taker Queen, the Délons will rule. They will continue their hunt of the other Storytellers with the intent to hold dominion over all other races."

"Then we'll defeat the Délons just like we defeated the Takers," I said it with a dangerous naiveté. It was fool's logic.

## THE TAKERS

Just because we defeated the Takers didn't mean we could defeat the Délons. I knew that deep down inside, but my desire to see Lou and Wes and my parents again made me more than willing to take my chances with the Délons.

"They are more cunning. More than you can imagine..."

"How do I find the Queen?" My adrenaline began to build. My head hurt less and less as I thought about the mission now clearly laid out for me.

"Let it end here," Tarek said.

"I can't," my voice cracked as I felt urgency run through my veins. "I want my parents back. Now, how do I find the..."

"Don't ask me again." Tarek looked panicked.

"Why?"

Ajax appeared from the back of the habitat and stood on top of the nearby boulder. The moon hovered above his pointy head. He peered down at me and spoke. Not with his hands, but with a booming voice that shook the ground. "Because he must show you the way."

"You can talk?" My mouth was agape. My eyes felt as though they would pop from their sockets. "How?"

"Only because the one you call Stevie Dayton has made it so. This is still his story. It is not over." He held up his hand and tossed something to me. It was the comic book. "The Keeper must show you the way to the Taker Queen. As it is written."

I flipped through the book. Our entire journey was cataloged on the pages before we even took it. I reached the part about our final battle. I saw Wes slipping back into the Taker's belly. I saw the Taker's huge hand swoop down and pick up Lou, a strange look of contentment on her face. The words "Kill the Queen," were written above her head. I turned the page and saw myself coming to, Pepper and Hollis trying

to convince me to stay down. On the next page were Tarek and me having the conversation we just had. It was all so strange. Stevie had written what we said word for word.

The next page showed Ajax talking for the first time, and me reading the comic book as I was doing at that very moment. It was like looking into some strange comic book mirror.

I hesitated before turning the next page. Instead of rehashing the journey behind me, I was about to see the journey ahead. I considered the possibility that perhaps Stevie had not written a happy ending. Maybe this whole mess was his way of paying me back for the torment I had put him through.

I turned the page and read. The way to the Queen was not easy. I read the page over and over again making sure I was reading it right. This was Stevie's payback. He had planned to torment me. I did not know if I could do what was asked of me.

"This is the only way?" I asked Ajax.

"As it is written." He said.

My head began to ache again. It was too much. How could I possibly work up the courage to do what was written? I turned the page and was horrified to find the words "End of Book One," written in big bold letters.

"Wait a minute... Wait a minute, this doesn't tell me if I kill the Queen or not."

Tarek smiled. "The outcome is uncertain. You must not pursue it. Let it end here."

"The outcome has never been certain," Ajax said. "Only predicted."

I looked up at Ajax still perched on top of the boulder. "Why do they want me?"

Tarek chimed in before Ajax could answer. "You can destroy them."

## THE TAKERS

“Me? I’m just a kid.”

“The one called Stevie Dayton has written it this way,” Ajax said. “You are the warrior. The one they fear. The Storytellers can give them life, but you can take it away.”

“I don’t understand why he wrote it this way,” I said in frustration. “I was mean to him. I made fun of him... made him do things...”

“He saw the magic in you,” Tarek said.

The words hung in the air. It was what Lou had said her grandmother used to say. Look for the magic in people. As long as I knew Stevie, I always thought he was dumb, that I was better than he was because I had a superior command of the English language, or because I was more athletic, or because I looked normal and he didn’t. But the truth is, I didn’t look hard enough at Stevie. I didn’t try to see what he was really all about. He was a sweet kid that loved to tell stories about fantastic worlds where the good guys always won. I didn’t look for the magic in him.

I looked at Tarek. “Show me the way to the Taker Queen.”

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Everyone who was left had gathered around gorilla habitat number three. They assumed we had come together for a celebration. We had beaten the Takers. We deserved a little slap on the back, but I had really brought them together to say goodbye.

I stood in silence in front of them with Nate’s sling around my shoulder. They were all truly heroic, but I couldn’t think of the proper words to convey my real feelings. I had no idea what waited for me when Tarek showed me the way to the Taker Queen. The chances were that I wouldn’t succeed. The Takers

were waiting for me after all. And if I did succeed, Tarek may be right; the Délons would become a bigger problem. I sighed and spoke very softly. "Nobody will ever know what we did here today. Nobody's going to give us medals. They aren't going to throw us a parade. Nobody will ever read about this in the history books. You didn't fight for the glory. You fought because it was the right thing to do..."

"No, we didn't, kid," Pepper said. "We fought for you."

I looked at him stunned by his assertion. The others nodded.

"Warriors win battles. Leaders win wars. We won this battle so you could win the war." He stepped forward and shook my hand. "It ain't over yet. We all know that. You do what you have to do. We're your army. We wait for your command."

I swallowed hard and looked past him into the faces of all the others. They smiled and nodded in agreement. "I might be doing the wrong thing," I said.

"Yeah," Pepper said. "But you might be doing the right thing, too."

I stepped back, gave them all one last smile and turned to Tarek. "I'm ready."

"I don't want to do this," Tarek said.

"I asked. It is written you must show me the way."

"Very well," he said annoyed. "But it will not be a pleasant journey."

"I know." I stepped toward him, but stopped when I heard a high-pitched whine to my left. I turned to see Kimball, ears down, paw up. I knelt down beside him and rubbed his head. "You can't go, boy." He whined louder. "I wish you could. You've been with me the whole way." He licked my face. "You've got a bunch of puppies to take care of, and I've got to get Mom and Pop back." I stood and looked at Tarek. "Ready."

## THE TAKERS

With that, Tarek picked me up in his gigantic hand and lifted me to his mouth. His jaws unhinged as he shoved me past his slimy tongue and down his throat. I started to suffocate as I was pushed through his narrow gullet. I couldn't breathe. I was caked in mucus. I gasped for air, but there was none to be had. I started to kick and flay about. I had made a mistake. I was dying. The Keeper wasn't transporting me, he was eating me. This was Stevie's revenge. I would rot in the belly of a monster he created.

As I struggled one last time, I felt the constricted passageway expand. I felt a breeze. Air! I breathed in, choking on mucus, but still feeling the sensation of breathing again. There was darkness all around me as I felt the sensation of falling. I landed with a thud on a brittle, charred surface. I lay on the ground, coughing and spitting up fluid from my lungs.

I rolled over on my hands and knees. My lungs cleared, I breathed deeply and attempted to take in my surroundings. My eyes slowly began to adjust, and the darkness gave way to an increasing influx of light. I stood, Nate's sling still around my shoulder.

Shapes started to form in front of me. Hundreds... thousands of trees surrounded me. More light. They weren't trees. They were Takers. They were lined up as far as the eye could see, all of them peering at me, slobbering, seething. They wanted to tear me apart, but they didn't. They kept their distance, laying out a path for me to follow.

I slowly walked along the twisting lane, my eyes shifting from the pathway to the Takers that outlined it. They breathed heavily and flashed their teeth as I passed. They wanted to smash me, but something held them back. It was clear to me now. I was about to die.

Ahead, the path widened. The Takers diverted their gaze from me to the direction in which I was walking. I rounded a sharp corner and caught a glimpse at what held their interest. Sitting on a mound of burnt dirt was the biggest Taker I had ever seen. If it were standing, it would probably be thirty feet high, and it looked to be as big around as it was tall. Chubby legs gushed out from under its oversized belly. It was the Queen.

I held tight to Nate's sling. The Takers sniffed the air as I passed. The scent of a Storyteller was nearby. It was giving them fits.

Ten yards from the Taker Queen, I saw Lou standing by the massive creature's side. "Lou."

"Oz," she smiled. "I knew you'd come."

I looked at the Queen. "Where's Wes?"

The Taker Queen groaned and motioned to a Taker to my left. The Taker stepped forward. I backed away, guarded and unsure. The creature's teeth began to chatter. It convulsed wildly and fell to its hands and knees. Its mouth opened and its entire body began to contract and expand. I watched in horror as it regurgitated a large slimy pink mass. A hand extended out of the blob. It was Wes. I ran over and pulled him free of the plump ball of goo.

Wes spat and snorted. "Good goose crap almighty. That is 'bout the foulest experience of my whole life." He stood and wiped the pink slime from his face. He froze when he saw the legion of Takers. "What in tarnation? Where are we?"

"Almost home," I said. I turned to the Taker Queen. "Now what?"

"You have to give huh the sto-weetella."

Stepping out from behind a group of Takers to my right was Stevie Spangler.

## THE TAKERS

“Stevie?”

“She can’t take it.”

“You know this guy?” Wes asked.

“Yeah, I do.” I walked over to Stevie. “What are you doing here?”

“They need me to talk,” Stevie said. “I’m da only one who undastands.”

I nodded. “What do you mean by ‘she can’t take it’?”

“She can’t take it. It has to be given to huh.” He leaned in close. “I want to go home.”

“So do I,” I said. “So do I.” I turned to the Queen. “You can have him.”

Lou stomped her feet. “Oz, what are you doing?”

The massive beast reached for Nate’s sling. I backed away. The Taker Queen roared her displeasure.

“Not so fast,” I said. “Send my friends back.”

“Don’t do it, Oz,” Wes said. “You can’t let them have Nate.”

“I got it under control, Wes.” I looked up at the Taker Queen. “Wes, Lou, and Stevie back to my world, now!”

The Queen nodded. Three Takers broke from the group and rounded up Wes, Lou, and Stevie. Lou kicked her Taker. Wes struggled briefly but quickly gave in. Stevie went willingly. They began to march back up the path.

“Wait a minute,” I said.

They stopped.

“Lou, what’s your real name?”

She turned to me, tears in her eyes. “Emily,” she said. “Emily Bristol.”

“We’ll see you around, Emily Bristol.”

The Takers continued to escort them up the path. I turned back to the Queen. “How will I know you’ve really taken them back?”

The Taker Queen picked me up. Her hand covered me from neck to toe. She held me to her eye. The image of the zoo appeared in her black eyes. I saw Ajax sitting with Pepper and Hollis. They were a somber bunch. Suddenly their mood brightened. Wes, Lou, and Stevie walked into the scene. There were hugs all around. The Taker Queen held me out and reached over with its other hand. She was asking for me to give her Nate.

I shook my head. "He's not going alone. Take both of us."

The Taker Queen groaned and roared. She did not like this arrangement. She tried to coax Nate from me again, but I refused again. The greasy monster opened its mouth and shoved me inside with Nate's sling around my neck. I had a sudden sense of *dèjà vu*.

I quickly moved into action once I was inside the monster's mouth. I didn't think I would be able to do what needed to be done once the Taker Queen started to swallow me. I flopped onto my back on the beast's slippery tongue and pulled Pepper's homemade flamethrower from it. It was wrapped in baby's clothes to make it smell like Nate. I fumbled with the lighting mechanism and tried to activate it once, twice, and a third time. It wouldn't work. As the monster's mouth closed, I tried it a fourth time and was almost giddy when I saw a small blue flame pop out from the end of the nozzle. I felt the sensation of being forced into the Taker Queen's throat. I pulled the trigger on the flamethrower's nozzle. Flames filled the beast's gullet. She lifted her head and thrashed it back and forth. I bounced about like a rubber ball in a small room. I pulled the trigger again and aimed it down the Taker Queen's craw. I reached back in Nate's sling and pulled out a hunting knife. As I shot flames to and fro, I jammed the knife into the

## THE TAKERS

roof of the monster's mouth. This time she let out a blood-curdling scream that caused her to open her mouth. As her head whipped about, I could see the Takers on the ground below in a panic over their Queen's distress. This emboldened me. I jammed the knife upward again, driving it into the roof of the mouth and making a deep hole. I rammed the nozzle of the flamethrower into the oozing hole and pulled the trigger.

The Taker Queen screeched. She tried to stand on her chubby legs, but her weight was too much for the underused appendages to take. She tumbled over and fell face first into the blackened soil. I crawled from her mouth, knife in one hand, the flamethrower in the other. The other Takers converged on me. I held them at bay with the flamethrower. I had to deliver the fatal blow to the Queen. If I didn't she would survive and continue her hunt for Nate and the other Storytellers. She was wounded, but not fatally. She screamed again. The other Takers hesitated at the sound of their Queen in pain. I took the opportunity to quickly climb on top of the Queen's head. I had one last surprise in Nate's sling, a string of M-98s.

Below the monster's ear, I rammed the knife deeply. The mighty beast twitched and struggled to push herself up, but her great weight kept her immobilized.

I grabbed the M-98s and shoved them into the hole. It was gushing a greasy deposit. With the flamethrower, I lit the single fuse and jumped from the monster's head. I heard them go off. Bang! Bang! Bang! I put my hands over my head, closed my eyes tightly, and waited for the other Takers to pounce on me and tear me apart. I waited, and I waited, and I waited.

I opened my eyes and lifted my head. A bright light blinded me. I shielded my eyes from the intensity of it. I rolled on my back. The hard ground had turned soft.

"Osmond, what are you doing?"

R.W. RIDLEY

The voice. I couldn't believe my ears. The light began to dim. I wasn't on the charred ground of the Taker's lair. I was in my room in Tullahoma.

"Osmond, get out of bed."

I sat up. I was in my pajamas lying in my bed. "Mom?"

## ELEVEN

The figure of my mother stepped into view. She was beautiful, more beautiful than I remember ever seeing her. Her short red hair was held back with a black hair clip. Her face was perfectly pale and Irish. It was really my mother. I sprung from my bed and ran to her as fast as I could.

“Mom!” I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed her tight.

“What has gotten into you, Osmond Franklin Griffin?”

I started crying. I couldn't help myself. I was back home. I was in my bedroom. I was hugging my mom. This was the greatest day in the history of the planet.

She bent down and lifted my chin up with her finger. “Hey, hey, hey, what's this?”

“You're alive.” It's all I could manage to say before I choked on a gush of emotion.

She hugged me. “Of course, I am, sweetie. What's wrong with you? Did you have a bad dream?”

I sniffed and pulled myself away. I was beginning to feel embarrassed. I didn't know what was going on. Maybe it all was just a dream. I nodded not knowing what else to do.

“Well, don't you worry about it. Everything's going to be all right. Except that you're late for school...”

“School? But I can't go to school, I'm sick.”

“Sick?” She felt my forehead. “Honey, don't you feel well?”

“Mom, I’ve got mono, remember?”

“Mono?” She raised an eyebrow. “Oz, what are you talking about?”

I stood there dumbfounded. Had I dreamt of having mono, too? “Nothing.”

She lightly slapped me on the butt as she stood. “Good, now get dressed. If you’re sick and can’t make it to school today, I’m afraid you won’t be able to make it to the Titans game this weekend.”

My ears perked up. “The Titans?”

“Yep, your Pop got tickets last night.”

“Alright!” I shouted.

“The games at 1:00.” She moved to the door to my room and smiled. “In Délon City.” With that she walked out of the room and pulled the door shut behind her.

My mouth went dry. “Délon City?”

The End  
of  
Book One



