

Chapter 13

He would crush them all in time. His appearance was a trap. An innocent seeming facade put forth by a warrior seasoned in military tactics and strategy. Like a carnivorous plant, he would lure his prey to him before snapping the trap shut and undoing them completely. After all, he had not spent years of his life studying the ways of war to be taken so easily... Paul Knox's thoughts gurgled off at the same time his muttering did. Having a forearm shoved in your neck had a way of derailing your train of thought. His library book on WWII fell to the floor, pages bending as the bullies stomped on it. There was nothing worse than being taken out of your fantasies of possessing supreme fighting ability by having a group of teenage thugs rush up and go through your pockets.

"What the hell is this?" Guiermo demanded, holding up a single crumpled five dollar bill. "You always bring three times this much for lunch." The pressure against his throat let up enough for him to respond.

I'm surprised you could do that math in your head, Paul thought sarcastically. Aloud, he blubbered "My mom said I can't have more until I can start bringing her receipts that says I'm spending all of it!" Paul hated when they pushed their forearms into his neck. He could deal with the pain. It was the fact that it made his shirt ride up and exposed the bottom of his belly that made it unbearable. It made him feel like a beached whale.

"Check his back pack!" Guiermo ordered his friend. Paul watched as the entire contents of his back pack were thrown across the hallway like a bucketful of pig slop. He had to hold back tears. He hated when the pages of his books got bent.

"Hey what's this? 'The History of Nuclear Bombs?' What are you reading

this crap for?" Javier accentuated his question by throwing the hardcover book into Paul's stomach. Paul screamed in anticipation of the pain, although he had to admit, it didn't actually hurt when it struck.

"Pick up the books. We'll hold on to them till fatso here brings us the rest of our money. You hear me fatso?" Guiermo slapped both of Paul's puffer-fish like cheeks.

"Come on guys! Mrs. Krick is gonna kill me if anything happens to those!" Paul was regularly bullied by many people. The school librarian was no exception. But at least she couldn't hit him like Guiermo.

"Then I guess you'd better get my money for me. You got that chubby face?" Guiermo pinched Paul's cheeks like a grandmother and smiled cruelly. Paul spluttered in surprise at the contact, and spittle flew into Guiermo's face on accident. Paul flinched as Guiermo stepped back in shock.

I really wish I knew how to fight, Paul thought as he proceeded to flatten his body against the lockers behind him. Guiermo was frantically rubbing spittle from his eyes but that wouldn't last much longer.

Paul considered running but stayed put for two reasons. The first being that he was not fat due to a love of physical exercise, and if he made an attempt he would be caught and his beating would be worse for it. The second reason was fear. He tried to move... his feet just wouldn't listen. It was one of the many negative consequences of being a coward.

"You.... you son of a-" Paul shut his eyes in anticipation of being punched in the face. Although it was not exactly an uncommon occurrence in his life, Paul preferred not to meet it face to... face, as it were. The sound of the fire alarm surprised Paul so much he screamed like his skin was on fire, before realizing that it wasn't.

"Before you or your friends decide its time to kick my ass, I'm going to let

you in a couple of seconds. One, the fire department and the police are already on their way. Second, your finger prints are all over the alarm." Paul opened his eyes to see Guiermo still standing in front of him. Guiermo's arm was held by the forearm by a tall Spanish man with piercing blue eyes. *He must have grabbed his hand as he punched me and pulled it to the side*, Paul thought. Whoever the stranger was, he had to be lightning quick to do something like that.

Although Guiermo and his three friends could have easily beaten the stranger right there, they made no move to. The stranger's face held no fear, and he had thwarted them. He did not look like a man so much as he looked like a vengeful god. Guiermo stared at his hand as if still confused that it had somehow wound up on the fire alarm.

"Well?" Asked the stranger with piercing blue eyes. "Are you going to waste time fighting me or are you going to run for it?" Guiermo still seemed unable to grasp the idea that his own hand had been turned against him. Eventually, however he opened his mouth to say something. Something threatening and brave no doubt. People like Guiermo didn't take being beaten with grace. They took it while thrashing and rebelling against the idea that they could be beaten. The stranger spoke first. "Tick tock, Guiermo." His voice welcomed the idea of violence.

On hearing his own name spoken aloud by the stranger, Guiermo and his friends turned and ran. Paul could barely believe what he had seen.

Paul's astonishment grew even more as the stranger began stacking the library books in a pile at his feet. He could not hold in his gasp at the sight. It seemed wrong that such a mysterious human being could do something so mundane. "Are you..." Paul licked his lips. "Are you the ultimate fighting chu-champion?" Paul stuttered and blushed that it sounded so stupid.

He had read about warriors and battle his whole life, and felt now that he had beheld the stranger he had some idea what all those authors had talked about when they said a man had "a face like death." In the expression of the stranger there was something like rage, defiance, and wrath all rolled into one.

The stranger replied with a derisive snort, put the books in Paul's outstretched arms, and walked off.

"Great. Now I get to stand outside for an hour." Homer kicked a gum wrapper in the school parking lot. Students and teachers milled all around him, unsure what they were supposed to do if the fire alarm went off before first period even started. No one seemed to know where to line up for roll call.

Not only for this, Homer was beginning to regret helping Paul. It wasn't as if Guiermo wouldn't do the exact same thing the next time he saw Paul, and Homer wasn't always going to be there. In fact, Homer was certain that all he had accomplished was making sure that the next time Guiermo got Paul all by himself that Paul would be beaten much worse than he would have been had Homer done nothing. Homer sighed. Being a Hero didn't seem as rewarding as it should have been. In fact, it seemed to suck a lot.

"Hey Homer!" Paul shouted as he ran toward him, every bit of the boy's body trembling like wet cookie dough in a plastic sack. Homer realized that the only reason people ever left Paul alone was restraint. No one had to actively work up the motivation to pick on him. Paul practically had a neon sign positioned above his head that flashed "Pick On Me" in bright red letters.

Although Paul traveled less than fifty feet to get to Homer, he arrived red

faced and out of breath. Homer was grateful for Paul's slowness. Without it he would never have been able to run off and slip his glasses on without being noticed. Homer still hadn't worked out what he was going to do if he had to save someone who was faster than a sloth in molasses.

"It's okay. Take your time." Homer waited for Paul to catch his breath. The last thing he needed was for Paul to pass out. God only knew whose job it would be to carry him off, and his shoulder still hurt.

After several false starts, and a good deal more of Paul's breath than Homer had ever wanted to smell, Paul finally found the power of speech. "Did you see... the warrior... guy?" Even the breathy sentence seemed to put Paul on the verge of passing out.

"Nope." Homer replied. Warrior guy? It was better than when the girl had called him "harmless" the other day. Although Homer preferred not to be noticed at all.

"Really? I figured he would have run right by you..." Paul fidgeted anxiously. He looked like a man with a story to tell and no earthly idea how to tell it.

"Sorry." Homer was still reeling from his lack of morning coffee. He had been avoiding Mr. Ali's since the incident several days ago. As such he hadn't had coffee for days. It made for some rather curt mornings.

"Aw dude! You should've seen this guy! He was like seven feet tall! Had arms like pythons. He just beat up three guys all by himself!" Paul's exuberance seemed to hint at more elaborate lies if Homer would only ask for them.

"That's pretty awesome." Homer agreed. Of course he should have been flattered... but it was still eight in the morning. Homer tried not to feel any particularly powerful emotion before noon at the earliest.

Paul took stock of Homer's expression and decided against further elaboration. The chubby boy's shoulders fell in disappointment. He had obviously wanted someone to listen to him. "So... um... when do you think they'll let us back into the building?"

"Don't know." Homer replied. The sky was wide open and blue, and the morning was cool. "But its too nice to stand around out here. I'm going to the comic shop." Homer needed a nice jocular conversation with Papa Ross to unwind. The last few days had been too stressful.

"Can... can I come?" Paul asked, unsure of himself.

"It's a free country." Homer shrugged.

"So tell me..." Papa Ross began. "Do you intend to have a real job one day, or will you just become a professional gambler?" Paul shrunk around his pile of chips. He had figured it would be okay to win since it wasn't real money. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone's feelings.

"Well, I'm losing because I can't see the cards." Homer grabbed the ear pieces of his broken glasses by way of gesture. Although the two carried on the conversation at a level that excluded him, Paul was happy to simply sit at the same table as other human beings. "What's your excuse, Papa Ross?"

"I thought that should be obvious. I suck at poker." Papa Ross put all his chips in the middle of the card table. Homer chuckled into his hands. Paul had been concerned that the game would take away from Papa Ross' business, but Homer had allayed such fears. Papa Ross, Homer had promised, never made any money so he might as well have fun not doing it. Paul wasn't quite sure whether or not he was allowed to play along with the insulting conversation, so he stayed quiet.

"I call." Papa Ross said smiling.

"Screw it. All in." Homer pushed his own meager pile of chips to the center.

Paul laid down three aces as Homer and Papa Ross groaned. Each man looked at his cards for a moment, as if the glance could change their value, then threw them at the table in disgust.

"I give up, kid. Where did you learn to play Poker?" Papa Ross seemed genuinely interested.

"I read a book about it." Paul had read it because the math was interesting. Learning to play cards had only been a side effect.

"You're kidding!" Homer scoffed.

"No... I got it from the library." Paul demurred, suddenly embarrassed. He knew reading was uncool, so it was rather unfortunate it was the only kind of activity he enjoyed.

"I don't suppose you're going to make me feel better and buy some comics, are you?" Paul blushed and stared down at his chips, too ashamed to meet Papa Ross' polite gaze.

"I would... but some kids took my money at school." Paul wished his chips were stacked higher so he could hide his face behind them. It must have been burning red.

"That's terrible!" Papa Ross exclaimed. "Didn't your teachers get it back for you?"

"No... but there was this guy who beat up all the kids who took it!" It was... awesome" Paul trailed off when he noticed Homer's obvious displeasure.

"Oh really?" Papa Ross was intrigued.

"Yeah." Paul hesitated to say more. Homer was obviously against the topic, and Paul didn't exactly have friends to lose. Not that Paul considered

Homer to be his friend.... Now that he thought about it, Homer seemed to hate pretty much everyone. Paul sighed behind his chip pile. He wished people made as much sense as math. He always knew what to do with math.

Since Homer hated him anyway, he might as well tell the story. "There are some guys that take my money every day, so my mom stopped giving me so much to take to school. They were going to kick my ass, until this guy showed up and... stopped them." Paul had to stop when he saw Homer, because it now looked like Homer was going to kick his ass if he didn't stop. Why such a simple story should make the boy so furious was beyond Paul.

"Well I'll be darned. Did you catch his name? Was it a fellow student?" Papa Ross asked.

"No I didn't, and I don't think he goes to school with us. I thought he might be a teacher, because he looked kind of old, but I'd never seen him before. Maybe he was a substitute." Homer stood up and Paul flinched as the boy began rapidly putting the chips away in a plastic bag. Homer worked with the kind of quick-handed fury that preceeded an outburst.

"What's your rush, Homer? The boy's got a story to tell! We're talking genuine heroism here." Papa Ross guffawed as Homer snatched the cards out of his hands. Paul didn't understand their relationship at all.

"All that guy did was make sure the next time Paul gets picked on, it'll be worse than it would have been today. If someone wants to be a hero, they should think before they act." Homer grabbed Paul's cards more roughly than necessary and put them back in the box with all the others.

"Well I still don't see why you're rushing. It's not like you have anywhere to be." Paul watched as Papa Ross stood to walk with Homer back behind the front desk of the shop. Apparently, that was where they kept the cards

and chips.

"I told you we came here because of the fire alarm this morning. They ought to have it all sorted out by now." Homer said, coldly. Paul glimpsed at Homer's back pack, which lay open on the floor. He could see the top half of a face on a comic book inside of it. Paul checked to make sure Papa Ross and Homer were absorbed in their own conversation before bending over to give it a tug. Something about the face intrigued him.

"What?" Papa Ross asked. Paul inhaled sharply, thinking he had been caught, although he hadn't really done anything wrong. Paul sometimes wondered if most of the problems he had in life didn't come from a false sense of guilt. "School's been canceled. There was a fire. I thought you knew that." Paul tugged on the comic book again. It came free in his hand. Paul stared at it in wonder.

From somewhere far away Homer shouted, "No! No! I said there was a fire *alarm*. I didn't say there was a *fire*!" Paul grabbed the comic book, made sure that he was still unnoticed and slipped it into his own back pack. He would return it later, after he had time to examine it. He would have to think of some excuse between now and then. *Say something, or they'll wonder what you're doing.*

"What are you guys talking about?" Paul asked, sweating and smiling at the same time. He hoped his face looked natural. That's what he wanted more than anything else: to look natural. His palms dripped sweat, remembering their contact with the comic book. It still didn't seem possible.

"There was a fire in your school cafeteria. School's been canceled until they can figure out what caused it. I thought both of you knew that." Papa Ross replied. Paul could not understand why Homer seemed so stunned, but all the blood seemed to rush out of the boy's face.

"When was this?" Homer asked.

"Obviously some time before you came here. Hey... you weren't cutting school and just making excuses were you? Because you know your mother would kill me if I was helping you play hookie, and.... Homer? What's wrong?" Homer ran over to a radio and turned the dial to a local news station. It didn't look like Homer could hear anyone.

"...the cause of the fire is as yet undetermined" the radio blared. Homer stared at it intensely as if he could see the words. Paul gulped at the intensity on the boy's face. "However, authorities are currently mystified as to the identity of the alarm sounder. According to preliminary inspection all alarms near the cafeteria were rendered inoperable some time before the fire began." The report cut to a male voice. It sounded like a fire chief.

"I don't know who sounded the alarm, but we're lucky they did. That hallway was shut down for maintenance this morning, so if we hadn't caught it when we did it would have spread out of control before anyone knew what was happening. Could have lost half the school easily." Paul watched as Homer's arms shook on either side of the radio. Homer had gripped the small black box so hard his knuckles were white.

"Investigators are continuing under the assumption of arson. If you have any information please contact authorities at..." Homer shut the radio off and slumped down into a nearby chair, quivering. Paul took advantage of the distraction to sneak another look at the comic book.

"The Adventures of Gray Bolt" the title proclaimed. The hero stood on the front cover, in a boxer's stance, as if ready to punch through the cover of the comic book. Paul wondered how it was possible for someone who had never existed to look so much like the person who had saved him in the hallway that morning. One thing was certain. He wouldn't give up until he

found out.