

Chapter 15

"This... is getting..." Homer panted as he sprinted, "ridiculous!" Using the full momentum of his run Homer threw his shoulder against the locked front door of the "Bean and Beatle," which was of course, now completely aflame. He regretted the move instantly. The pain that blossomed all across his already injured shoulder took him down to his knees. Homer gasped through clenched teeth, anger rising as tears streamed down his face. He had been hurt all too many times in the past few days. It took a long moment for him to regain his feet.

"How many buildings can burn down in three god damn days!" Homer punctuated each word with a kick against the front door. It rattled. Infuriated, Homer punched the door with a closed fist. To his disbelief, the door fell inward. Homer had felt the impact only barely.

Not pausing to appreciate the feat, Homer knocked the door the rest of the way off its hinges with his right foot. Heat and smoke poured out of the shop in great bellowing drafts. His eyes watered merely looking through the entrance. "Is anyone alive in there?" There was no sound. An engine revved from alley behind the shop.

Homer bent over double, the smoke saturating every pore of his body. There was still some good air close to the ground. He'd still have to hold his breath though. "Mr. Ali? Are you in there?" Deciding he couldn't risk the chance that Mr. Ali was still alive, Homer prepared to run into the building. "Don't do it! You'll die!" Paul shouted. They must have finally caught up with him. Paul sounded out of breath.

"That doesn't matter. I have to!" Homer screamed, and before he lost his courage, ran into the flames for the second time in his career as a Hero.

Had he not seen the transformation himself, Paul would have never believed it was Homer Goodstead who ran into the burning building. Paul would not even have willingly believed it was a human being, for the creature that ran into those flames with no regard to its safety seemed to hold not even the slightest trace fear. Rather it was as if a great hope been cast in flesh for the sole purpose of destroying fear. Paul watched, knees trembling, mouth quavering as he stood in wonder.

The building was a hellish nightmare, as if a piece of the underworld itself had been brought into the world of men. Paul's eyes watered as he contemplated the courage it must take to run into that scorching atmosphere where there was certain to be no air. A few tears slid down his cheeks.

It was the first time he had ever been awe-struck.

Homer felt the body with his feet, and almost stumbled over it. Blinded by the smoke, he knelt down and felt the edges of it with his hands. It was a stout body. He did not doubt it was Mr. Ali. Homer searched until he found both of its hands, then when he had them firmly began to tug. There was no time to check for a pulse.

He dared not breath. For though the air might have been smokeless where he was bent over, from the way he felt his face blister, a simple inhalation might burn his lungs to a cinder. Walking backwards, he shut his eyes tighter, hoping he would not walk into flame.

Beatrice shivered as she watched Homer drag the body out of the building. She was feverish again. She didn't know what was wrong with her,

or why it seemed to be worse every time she saw Homer, but she knew it was going to come out again. That awful wrongness. That voice.

Beatrice swallowed, as she approached the furious angel that was Homer Goodstead. She wanted to hate him as she had before... but somehow they had both moved beyond that petty bickering. Homer was not the boy she had yelled at a few minutes before, not was she offended as she had been.

Trying to hold the voice inside, she changed her focus to the man Homer was dragging and took one of the limp hands to help Homer pull the body to a safe distance from the building. Paul was already bent over the man checking for a pulse before either she or Homer had let go of him.

"Pulse is weak" Paul stammered. Beatrice noticed that Paul seemed to want to run right there, but against all his fears, was managing to stay and act. She smiled at him, choking on the voice in her throat. She wished she could be that brave.

Paul took off his jacket and put it under the man's head, at the same time tilting the head back and opening the mouth. Paul held his ear over the open mouth for the smallest moment before looking up and nodding at both she and Homer. "The breathing's good. Do you guys have anything we could use to elevate his feet?" Homer found a small crate near the alley entrance that he put under the unconscious man's feet. Beatrice started to choke. The voice wasn't going to wait any longer.

"Gruh-gruh-ray-*Homer!*" There had been another name the voice had wanted her to say. Another symbol it had shown her in her mind, but like a flower out of season, it was not yet ready to make its first appearance, so it had caught itself on her teeth. Beatrice felt like her body had been ripped open every so slightly.

"I'm busy Beatrice," Homer replied curtly. Paul was looking at the

unconscious man's eyes. Homer looked like he was trying to help even though it was clear he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing.

"Homer!" She shouted, and there was no way she could be ignored. Her voice cut the atmosphere, echoed off the flames of the building, and ripped into the fabric of living minds. Homer and Paul slowly turned to stare at her. "*He's* here, Homer. In the alley. In the van. You have to run after him. You have to stop him." Beatrice fell to her knees, shuddering, her mouth open as if to heave. She looked up. Homer had not moved. "**Now!**" The voice commanded.

Homer ran.

Through the darkness, Homer ran. He welcomed the shadows that hid him, welcomed the dark unknowable ground as a challenge to be met and conquered by his echoing footsteps. He did not trip. His feet seemed to find purchase wherever they fell.

He knew he smelled like smoke and ash. He knew his face was burnt from being so near to the heat, but he didn't care. Homer felt greater than the sum of his parts. He felt like water forced through a channel, carried by his own weight to a predestined end. The weight of his destiny would crush all that came before him. Homer smiled as he saw the van pulling away from the rear entrance of the coffee shop. He should have been afraid, but he wasn't. In fact, he was itching for a fight.

He's here, Homer. Beatrice's words. True words. For some reason he knew she hadn't mean Hassan. She meant the man with the shadow face. The man that had made him afraid at the warehouse. Homer was not afraid now. He was angry. Angry at the fires that had nearly ended two lives. Angry at the men who had started them.

Homer closed the distance between himself and the van in less time than he would have thought possible, and jumped onto the rear fender just as the van began to pull away. His hands found purchase in the metal grating that covered the back windows. Instead of wondering what to do next, Homer surprised himself by striking the van's right rear window.

It seemed perfectly natural when the grating on the window bent inward and then clattered to the ground. Homer watched the grating clatter and spark on the road with no expression. The van was picking up speed. If he felt there was no telling how badly he would be hurt. Still, there was no fear. Only grim determination.

Homer struck again. Cracks spread like spider-webs across the window. At last, Homer could hear a commotion from inside. He struck again, driven by fury. How much would they destroy if he didn't stop them? Who would they have killed? The right window exploded into a rain of small glass pebbles. Homer cocked his hand for another blow. It was uncut.

The driver of the van began to swerve in an effort to knock him loose, but Homer's grip was strong. A gun appeared from the window he had busted out. Homer spared no time in grabbing its owner by the wrist and forcing the arm down to the edges of the window where jagged pieces of glass lingered. The gun clattered to pavement, and Homer was again reminded of how fast the van was moving. The hand retreated inside as several men cursed. Homer did not doubt that all of them were armed. Instead of feeling fear he roared like a lion defied.

To either side, the street lamps began to flicker. Homer gripped the grating on the left window until his fingers hurt. "Hero..." the voice was impossible to distinguish. It was the voice of all men, various and several in its tones and pitch. It was not the voice of a singular being, but of a vast

and nebulous entity. "You would face me, Hero?" Homer roared again, plunging his hand through the open window. He felt his hands grab hold of something like cloth, and he pulled. His fingers became numb.

Homer saw he had grabbed a man by the collar of his clothes. When the face exited the van, light died. Or rather, all light that might have fallen on the face. The lights in the van became as ink. The streetlights preserved the mystery of the unknowable features. No... Homer thought... it wasn't the light that died. It was as if a substantive shadow had moved the light aside, as if fighting the light for space and claiming victory. From that impenetrable mask of shadows, Homer intuited a grin. The shadow-man's ten fingers dug into Homer's forearm, tearing his hand. Still, Homer managed to hold his grip on the front of the shirt he had grabbed. The numbness was up to his wrist now.

"It is neither the time nor the place, Hero!" The voices shouted over the wind. The van swerved again. Homer closed his eyes and focused on his grip. He could not fall now. The fall would kill him. With the greatest exertion of his will, Homer held onto his courage by a hair's breadth.

"You would have killed him... and the baby! You're a killer!" Although he shouted the words, Homer felt himself growing weak. Something was missing. Homer felt undone. Homer faced the shadow-man again. It was like his mind was being cut by the mystery of the face. *There's something I need... something I have to have before I can kill him. I'm not ready yet. I'm not finished.*

"There will be blood before I am done, youngling. Do you dare to face me?" The shadow seemed to swell from the face outward, crawling up Homer's arm. Homer felt his flesh become like ice wherever it grew. He did not know how long he could hold the man with one arm.

"I..." Homer floundered for the words. He was light-headed suddenly. His grip on the grating loosened. *What don't I have? What am I missing?* The shadow was halfway up his bicep now. Homer let go of the grating, and brought his left hand next to his right. He pulled on the shadow-man as if to drag him onto the pavement. "I will stop you!"

"Stop the van! Stop or we'll lose him!" Hassan shouted, panicking from inside the van. In his mind's eye he could see the several men in the van grabbing the shadow-men by the waist, trying to hold him in. Homer grinned in the face of the shadows. Both of his arms were now numb, and still the shadows grew.

"I know who you are now." Homer whispered. The van stopped more quickly than he would have ever expected. His numb fingers worked dumbly trying to find a better grip. He reached inside the unseeable folds of the shadow-man's clothes hoping to stop himself from falling. Homer felt something like paper, and grabbed it. The shadow-man chuckled and released Homer's hands.

"Take it, youngling! Take it and burn!" A lighter struck, Homer felt heat against his fingers. Then the van stopped and he was falling to the ground before he even had time to realize that he was holding a burning piece of paper in his hands. His jeans tore on the pavement, and he skinned both his knees in his fiery tumble. The van wasted no time in accelerating again.

"Come face me, youngling! Come and face me if you dare!" Homer stood up to hurriedly stomp on the burning piece of paper. When it was extinguished and the van was gone from sight, he bent over and picked it up. It was a map. Now... if only half of it wasn't burnt.

"Nice and easy now. Keep breathing. In an out." Paul coached the semi-conscious man. As long as he seemed happy to hear a human voice, Paul figured he might as well keep going.

"When's the ambulance getting here?" The stout man asked weakly.

Beatrice, her phone pressed against her ear, rolled her eyes and held up her hands as if to indicate it was any second now. Beatrice was laying on her back about ten feet away. His patient looked over to the shop, and turned back, tears in his eyes.

"Thirty years... that is how long it took me to save enough money for that shop. Thirty years. Now? I have nothing."

"I'm sorry... maybe you can get a better shop with the insurance?" Paul was very uncomfortable with so much happening around him. First, he had kissed a girl for the first time in his life only a few hours ago. Second, well... maybe it should be first.... he had found a comic book with a hero on it that his friend Homer could apparently turn into at will. And there was the burning building... and he had kissed a girl. Paul was proud of himself for not having passed out yet.

"I had just put in two ovens. I was going to make pastries and donuts... even cakes for special orders. So much work... I'll never get it back the way I had it." Paul politely bit his tongue as the man sobbed.

"Paul... when Ho-" Beatrice stopped herself for some reason. "When he gets back, give him his glasses." Beatrice threw Homer's glasses to Paul. Paul took a moment to examine them. They were completely spider-webbed. Paul didn't even know if they could properly be called corrective lenses anymore.

"Morgana... do you think he's alive?" Paul swallowed. They had both caught a brief vision of Homer on the back of the van, his fist pounding

against the glass window. Paul had no trouble imagining Homer, his body broken, laying in a gutter somewhere after having been thrown off.

"He's alive." Beatrice murmured, closing her eyes. "I'd know it if he died." Paul didn't think to ask how. Something very mysterious was going on here, and it was making him very uncomfortable.

"My first order was for this Saturday. Did I even tell you that? Never before have I ever missed a deadline." The man wailed. Paul wished the ambulance would get here sooner.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Paul said, wishing he could be home. His mother was going to pitch a fit when he told her about all of this... or all of it that he dared to. As a general principle Paul told his mother everything, but now.... he'd give her what he felt she could handle.

"The Summit... I was supposed to do part of the catering for the Tolerance Summit." Deep inside Paul's heads pieces of a puzzle began to fall together. The cafeteria. The coffee shop. Hadn't he read in the paper that a food kitchen had burned down a few days ago?

All of them made food. Paul licked his lips, contemplating.